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Irish Republicanism, workers unity and anarchism

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a talk by Gregor Kerr to WSM Open Meeting 24/8/94

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THE 25th anniversary of the re-deployment of British troops on the streets of the 6-Counties sees the Republican movement at a watershed. Having been condemned and ostracised by establishment and media sources for most of that 25 years, they now find themselves at the centre of what they refer to as the Irish Peace Process. Gerry Adams's statements are reported extensively in the Irish Times and elsewhere and the recent Sinn Fein conference in Letterkenny attracted huge media attention - both national and international. Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness have moved - as far as the media is concerned - from being 'godfathers of violence' for whom the English language did not contain sufficient condemnatory terms to being central players in a project aimed at " a total cessation of violence" - even if it is only IRA violence that is being talked about.

While the prospect of an end to political violence would doubtless be welcomed by the vast majority of people living on this island and especially by the population of the 6-Counties, it is important for all of us to realise where the so-called "peace

process" is leading. It is especially important for those of us interested in building a free, open and democratic society to analyse the politics of the Republican movement and their potential for leading us to the 32-County Socialist Republic which Sinn Fein claims as its objective.

Certainly the failure of Sinn Fein leaders to outrightly reject the Downing Street Declaration and their calls for an alliance with John Hume and Albert Reynolds in an "Irish peace initiative" has left many Republican supporters floundering. Indeed Bernadette McAliskey has recently gone so far as to say that the Sinn Fein leaders themselves are floundering.

"They are playing a very dangerous game - they're talking in riddles... they are lost. They are floundering so far out of their depth, and my problem is, how do we stop them taking the whole ship down with them. My main problem is the effect of what's happening, what is the effect on people who are trying to do things?"

The principal objective of Irish Republicanism is, and always has been, in the words of Robert Emmett to see Ireland "take her place among the nations of the earth." This was the driving force behind the 1916 rising and is the same force which today sees Gerry Adams calling on the Dublin government and the SDLP to "stand up" to the British. At Sinn Fein's Wolfe Tone commemoration in June 1991, Adams stated:-

"While Dublin and the SDLP refuse to stand up to the British government it will continue to think it can do exactly what it wants in Ireland."

In the same speech he went on to ask the question "What should Dublin be doing?" and in answering it gave a clear enunciation of Sinn Fein policy towards the Southern ruling class.

"Dublin should seek a change in Britain's current policy of maintaining the union to one of ending it and handing over sovereignty to an all-Ireland government, democratically elected and accountable to the Irish nation. Dublin should use the opportunity of these talks [Brooke talks] to persuade the unionists that their future lies in this context and to persuade the British to accept that they have a responsibility to influence unionist positions.

To secure a national and international consensus on this the Dublin government needs a strategy for unity and independence. Such a strategy would involve winning international support for the demand for Irish Independence and would require the full use of Irish diplomatic skills and resources."

So the same "diplomatic skills and resources" which have brought us record unemployment, poverty and emigration for the working-class and tax bonanzas and golden circles for the rich are going to persuade the unionist population of the 6-Counties that their future lies in painting the post boxes green! Representatives of the same state - and indeed political party - which executed Republicans in the 1940's, interned them in the 1950's and extradited them in the 1980's and '90's are now going to re-discover their long lost republican roots and "persuade" the British that the last 800 years was one big mistake and that now it's time to go! Surely even Gerry Adams doesn't believe his own rhetoric.

Or maybe he does. Because Provisional Sinn Fein/IRA has always believed in the stages theory - where stage one is the creation of a united Ireland and only after that has been won can the struggle for socialism begin. In the first phase of the struggle - the fight for a united Ireland - all thoughts of socialism are to be left aside - "Labour must wait" and alliances formed

with sections of the "nationalist" ruling class in the fight for a green Ireland.

When the provisionals were first formed, following the split in January 1970, their first public statements were vehemently anti-communist. Speaking of their former colleagues who had gone on to form Official Sinn Fein, the caretaker executive of Provisional Sinn Fein said:-

"There is no doubt that an extreme form of socialism was being pushed on the movement...it seems certain that the ultimate objective of the leadership...is nothing but a totalitarian dictatorship of the left."

In its Easter statement of the same year, the Provisional army council of the IRA stated:-

"Irish freedom will not be won by involvement with an international movement of extreme socialism."

And while the Provos continued to describe their eventual objective as being the creation of a Socialist Republic they were very specific about the type of socialism they had in mind. In February 1970, the caretaker executive of Provisional Sinn Fein described it thus:-

"Ours is a socialism based on the native Irish tradition of Comhar na gComharsan (Neighbourly Co-operation) which is founded on the right of worker-ownership and in our Irish and Christian values."

And while the Provos have gone through many changes since, their position today on the core issues remains unchanged. Labour must still wait and the programme of the

arms of the Irish Republic. Now isn't that worth fighting for?"

The same is true today except that it can also be applied to the patriot who won't touch socialism "just yet", but there is an alternative. That alternative is to appeal to protestant workers on the basis of their class interests, to appeal to them to join in a fight for more of the good things in life, to join in a fight to replace both rotten statelets on this island with a workers republic. This is more than just a simple slogan. It is a challenge to all of us who are interested in building a new society. It will be a hard uphill struggle but it is possible. The starting-point must be where workers can be united in action on bread-and-butter issues. It is through struggle and activity that the sectarian barriers are smashed. It will be through struggle that workers will realise that the sectarian forces exist only to divide and conquer.

The building of such bonds between workers in struggle does not mean sacrificing anti-imperialist principles. It means in fact rejecting "Irish Ireland" nationalism and strengthening our anti-imperialism - an anti-imperialism rooted in the class struggle. We oppose partition because it divides workers and helps to sustain the rule of the bosses.

We want to build a movement which will replace both states on this island with a workers republic - a movement which will challenge orange bigotry and the power of the catholic church, a movement which shows by its actions that it is committed to a better life for all working-class people, a movement which will unite the working-class north and south in fighting for true democracy, freedom and socialism. Our goal is an anarchist Ireland in an anarchist world. It is the only goal worth fighting for.

April '93 Ballymena DHSS workers walked out over threats by the UFF to shoot catholic employees. In June of this year, 2,000 mainly protestant shipyard workers walked out of Harland&Wolff in protest at the murder of their catholic workmate Maurice O'Kane by the UVF.

As Anarchists we do not simply celebrate this solidarity among workers as proof that sectarianism can be overcome. We point to it as the only way forward. It is certainly true to say that protestant workers enjoy marginal advantages over their catholic counterparts but these are far outweighed by the disadvantages caused by the division of the working class as a result of partition. This division has led to a situation where in terms of unemployment, housing and wages the northern working-class as a whole are worse off than any comparable sized area in England. Some thanks for loyalty to the crown! It is therefore in the interests of protestant workers to break with their orange bosses and join the fight for a 32-County Workers Republic.

And here Republicanism singularly fails to deliver. If the first step is the creation of a united capitalist Ireland, it means that there can be no concerted challenge to the existing set-up in the 26-Counties. What we are talking about instead is its extension to the 32 Counties and a "fairer" distribution of unemployment, low pay, emigration and poverty, a lick of green paint for the postboxes and a harp to replace the crown on the policemen's hats.

AS far back as 1899, James Connolly wrote:-

"After Ireland is free, says the patriot who won't touch socialism, we will protect all classes, and if you won't pay your rent you will be evicted same as now. But the evicting party, under the command of the sheriff, will wear green uniforms and the harp without the crown, and the warrant turning you out on the roadside will be stamped with the

anti-imperialist movement should be, in the words of Gerry Adams (from "The Politics of Irish Freedom") to build a campaign"...of national regeneration - an Irish Ireland movement to offset, especially in the 26-Counties, the neo-colonial and anti-national mentality that exists there." In delivering the Bobby Sands Memorial Lecture 1991, Jake Jackson the 6-County editor of the Sinn Fein newspaper "An Phoblacht/Republican News" put this even more succinctly:-"We must work to re-awaken the national spirit and to assert our pride at being Irish and our determination to be free."

So instead of appealing to people on a class base - mobilising working class people because it is in our class interest to get rid of the border, they appeal instead to our "Irishness". As if it feels any better to be ripped off by Irish capitalists than by British capitalists!

It is certainly not an appeal likely to fall very favourably on the ears of Northern protestants but can the stages theory work? Is it actually possible to build - even as an interim step - a united capitalist Ireland? Could large parts of Fianna Fail, the SDLP, the Catholic Church hierarchy, the Southern business class be brought into a campaign to "persuade" the British to go? (I am not dealing here with whether this is desirable - just is it possible?). The answer has to be a resounding No. The Southern ruling class - having resigned themselves to settling for 26-Counties after the War of Independence - quickly got down to the business of running the state in their interests. Even when - especially when - events in the North became especially emotive (Civil Rights Marches, Bloody Sunday, Hunger Strikes), the necessity to maintain the greatest possible stability in order to maximise profits was paramount. Fianna Fail became especially adept at paying just enough lip service to the "fourth green field" but, as junior partners in the western capitalist system, Southern bosses have no fundamental disagreement with their British counterparts and are not going to become involved in such a movement for Irish unity.

Given the dependence of Southern capitalists on foreign multinational investment, it is important for them to portray what is happening "up there" as being confined to the 6-Counties. And of course it does them no harm with the American multinationals to be seen to be contributing to the "peace process" not by persuading the Brits to leave but by persuading - and harassing - the Republicans to surrender. And have no doubt that is what they are up to right now. The involvement of the Irish and British governments in the so-called "peace process" is designed not to find a way for British withdrawal but to find a way to end the violence and allow "normal politics" to take place - this in a state in which for 60 years "normal politics" meant systematic discrimination against its catholic minority.

Of course the real problem with the stages theory is that not alone is it naive to expect significant sections of the Southern ruling class to become involved in the struggle for re-unification but it gives an effective veto to those tiny sections of that class which are brought into a temporary coalition with Sinn Fein. Thus in the anti-extradition campaign in the late 1980's appeal after appeal was made to the "grassroots" of Fianna Fail and attempts were made, to quote a motion from the National Committee to one of its first Conferences "...to play on the inherent contradictions within the party [FF], between the old Dev'ites and the newer monetarists."

And because this remained a key focus of the campaign, event after event was scaled down or cancelled entirely for fear of alienating the couple of backbench FF TDs who it was hoped would issue a statement against extradition. Thus when the January 1988 Conference of the Irish Anti-Extradition Committee took a decision to stage a large demonstration outside the Fianna Fail Ard Fheis, this decision was countermanded by SF and only a tiny picket took place.

Indeed this situation reached farcical heights following the extradition of Robert Russell in August 1988. At the first Na-

"Over the previous nine months, 3 million working days have been lost in Northern Ireland owing to strike action ... The working class are a disgrace to Britain and the Empire."

Proof that the protestant working class at the time put class loyalty before loyalty to "Britain and the Empire" came especially from the Mackie's Engineering and Shortt and Harland's Aircraft strikes in 1942, strikes by trolley-bus operators, dockers and carters in 1943 and the engineers strike of 1944. This strike began on 25th February and by March 22nd 22,000 engineering workers were on strike throughout Belfast. When 5 shop-stewards were imprisoned on Monday 3rd April, a further 20,000 workers walked off the job.

The jailed shop-stewards were prevailed upon by a combination of the bosses, union officials, the Communist Party and the Northern Ireland Labour Party to appeal their sentences and thereby be released on bail and the situation was defused, but the shop stewards' movement had again shown that it could unite all workers regardless of religion and that even at a time when the British state was involved in the Second World War, protestant workers displayed tremendous class loyalty.

Recent years have also seen many examples of Northern workers uniting in common struggle. On several occasions throughout the early 1980's the mainly catholic workforce of the Royal Victoria Hospital was joined by the mainly protestant workforces of Harland&Wolff and Shortts in protest against health cuts.

In May 1990 members of the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) in Belfast's Andersonstown Social Security office took strike action in response to threats to their members from paramilitaries. In February 1992, 20,000 catholic and protestant workers took part in an ICTU-organised march against sectarianism in Belfast. February 1993 saw a strike by Belfast busdrivers against threats from the UVF, while in

"On the Shankill Road crowds of growling men lounged around waiting... Suddenly a big red faced woman with a black shawl thrown over her shoulders, wisps of hair hanging from her eyes, appeared almost from nowhere... She ran to crowds of men and in quick, terse language told them that the unemployed and the police were in conflict on the Falls Road. "Are you going to let them down?" she almost shrieked. "No, by heavens, we are not", they roared back, and in almost a twinkling a veritable orgy of destruction began."

It was significant that although rioting took place throughout the city it was only in catholic areas that the RUC used their guns. The government's strategy was to divide and conquer with Sir Dawson Bates, Stormont Minister for Home Affairs, claiming that the IRA were using the strike as a cover to overthrow "protestant rights" - again the sectarian monster was being re-awakened.

Using sectarianism, violence, minor concessions and - as usual - trade union officials, the Unionist government were able to regain control of the situation but again workers had shown that they were more than willing to stand together to defend their class interests.

During the Northern railway workers strike in January 1933, the Belfast to Dublin train was derailed in County Louth, killing two scabs and a Great Northern Railways bus was burnt in Dublin by a crowd sympathetic to the mainly protestant strikers.

During the Second World War, 10,000 workers of all religions marched against conscription in Belfast and there was a wave of industrial militancy. In April 1943 the "Sunday Pictorial" newspaper complained:-

tional Committee meeting of the IAEC following Russell's extradition, Norah Comiskey, Richard Greene and Jim Doyle (all FF members) with the support of SF were still talking about organising meetings of FF members against extradition and even seriously discussed holding a press conference to call for the removal of Haughey as leader of FF and his replacement by a true republican!

It certainly proved the old maxim that any attempted alliance with bosses - even if in this case the alliance was only illusory - is one dominated politically by bosses.

Another huge problem inherent in the Republican stages theory is that it does absolutely nothing to appeal to protestant workers and indeed has the effect of driving them further and further into the arms of the orange bigots. As far back as 1912, British Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald was quoted as saying:-

"In Belfast you get labour conditions the like of which you get in no other town, no other city of equal commercial prosperity from John O' Groats to Land's End or from the Atlantic to the North Sea. It is maintained by an exceedingly simple device... Whenever there is an attempt to root out sweating in Belfast the Orange big drum is beaten."

Within nine years of this statement the Northern state was founded as a 'protestant state for a protestant people'. And on any occasion since when working-class unity seemed possible, the Orange drum has been banged and the sectarian fires stoked. Following the Outdoor Relief Strike of 1932, the Ulster Protestant League were quoted as saying that they

"...deplored that these unfortunate conditions were used as a cloak by the communist Sinn Fein element to attempt to start a revolution in our

province. We also greatly deplore that some few of our loyal protestant unemployed were misled to such an extent that they associated themselves with the enemies of their faith and principles."

While there was never any shortage of orange bigotry aimed at keeping the working-class of the 6-Counties divided, unfortunately the politics of the Republican movement have done nothing to challenge this and to attempt to break working-class protestants from sectarianism. The logic of the Republican position is that there can be no common interest between catholic and protestant workers until the border has been gotten rid of. Given that the history of the Northern state has been one of continued discrimination against catholics who are under-represented in the workforce by 5-6% and who are two and a half times more likely to be unemployed than their protestant counterparts, this is a position which could be argued with some justification. But it is a blinkered view of history and one which ignores not alone many day to day struggles which take place at workplace level but several momentous trade union battles which have shown the possibility of breaking down the sectarian barriers.

In 1907, tens of thousands of catholic and protestant workers fought together in Belfast for the right to join a union. The strike - led by Jim Larkin - had such a deep impact that even the police came out on strike and on Saturday 26th July 200,000 workers marched throughout the city including along both the Falls and Shankill Roads. It took a combination of the Unionist bosses, the Orange Order, the Catholic Church hierarchy and - of course - trade union officials, backed up by over 10,000 British troops to defeat the strike but the fact that even before partition workers of all religions had combined to fight to improve their lot proved that the bigotry could be overcome.

In early 1919, a massive engineering strike for a reduction in working hours brought Belfast industry to a halt for four weeks.

Despite the fact that the majority of the strikers were protestant, they elected a strike committee with a catholic majority. At the height of the strike, it involved nearly 40,000 workers with another 20,000 laid off as a result of it. Unfortunately, the strike committee's failure to call out the dockers, carters and railway workers - all of whom had promised their support - allied with the crushing of a similar strike in Glasgow meant that the strikers were forced back to work after 4 weeks on strike. The situation in Belfast at the time was described by Willie Gallacher, a Scottish socialist who visited the city during the strike: _

"Belfast was a ferment of working class revolt. Every rotten agency of reaction, religious, political and reformist trade union official was used in an attempt to disrupt the forces, but for the weeks of the strike the mass unity of all Belfast workers, Catholic and Protestant, Nationalist and Ulsterman was maintained..."

And the solidarity between workers did not disappear in the immediate aftermath of the strike. That year's May Day march was the biggest ever in Belfast with over 100,000 participants.

In October 1932, the Outdoor Relief strike again united catholic and protestant workers. Despite calls from Unionist M.P.s for "Protestants, rich and poor to stand together" and for protestant workers "not to be duped by those who have no love for the Union Jack", class unity proved strong enough to withstand imposed sectarianism. The strike was 100% solid and on the first evening a crowd of 30,000 marched through the streets of Belfast demanding "work, wages not charity". There was rioting throughout the city and fierce hand to hand battles took place on the Falls and the Shankill with the RUC. James Kelly, an "Irish Independent" reporter, described one scene:-