

Militarism vs. Mass Action—Which Road for Irish Struggle?

[The following article appeared in the March issue of *Unfree Citizen*, the newspaper of the People's Democracy group in Northern Ireland. The footnotes have been supplied by *Intercontinental Press*, which has also corrected a few obvious typographical errors.]

After eight years of agitation and struggle the situation is grim for the Anti-Imperialist movement in Ireland. The initiative lies with the British and their Loyalist and Free State allies. They are confident and aggressive and the Anti-Imperialist movement seems powerless to halt the steady and inexorable drift towards the restoration of Loyalist rule in the North.

Once we, the Anti-Imperialist movement as a whole, had the initiative. We could make or break Prime Ministers and Governments and the hammerblows of the mass resistance in 1971-72 brought down the Stormont regime which had lasted for fifty years. For a time even the bourgeois press regarded a united Ireland as inevitable and talked only of its timing and structure. Now the only argument is over whether a few token Catholics should be used as window dressing for a restored Stormont regime.

Only the wilfully blind can fail to see that we are in retreat. What has happened, what has gone wrong? The most important factor is that the mass movement has disintegrated and popular support for the struggle here is on the wane.

What do we mean when we say the mass movement has disintegrated? In 1968-69 and 1971-72 there were real mass movements in the North; the Civil Rights movement and the Resistance movement. There was little need to advertise and organise marches and demonstrations in those days, thousands came of their own accord often travelling long distances. The whole minority population was in ferment. Civil Rights committees and later Resistance Committees sprang up in every area. The people were self-confident and

determined, they mounted their own protests without prompting, they stood up and often drove out the RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary] and the British Army. In Derry they controlled their own No Go area for almost a year. The best example is the Rent and Rates strike; the people in the ghettos started it spontaneously before there were any calls from the politicians. The enthusiasm and determination of the people was so great that they forced even the Parliamentary politicians into the streets and forced hostile political groups to co-operate around common demands. It was this spectacle of a whole people in revolt, not just the Provos' military campaign, which brought down Stormont and wrung a whole series of concessions from the British.

Compare that with the situation today. The Anti-Imperialist movement is deeply divided, the bulk of the minority population are apathetic if not hostile. Let any organisation, including Sinn Féin, call a demonstration now around some political demands, and how many will turn up? Hardly any except their own members and a handful of dedicated activists. The recent protests over Frank Stagg don't alter that at all.

Hardly anyone turned out for demonstrations about Frank Stagg until the very end—if there had been even the support there was for the Price sisters the British would probably have given in.

Unfortunately the massive crowd at the funeral doesn't mean much. The death of a hunger striker is a very emotive issue and the ghoulish behaviour of the Dublin Government made it more emotive still. The emotion doesn't necessarily carry over into active political support.

4. The suspension of the Northern Irish parliament came after the mass movement reached its height, following the shooting of thirteen civil-rights demonstrators in Derry at the end of January 1972. Since the Unionist authorities were the most outspokenly opposed to civil rights for Catholics, the suspension of their parliament was regarded as a concession by most of the nationalist minority.

5. The political wings of both the "Official" and Provisional republican organizations are called Sinn Féin. The article is evidently referring to Provisional Sinn Féin, since the "Official" groups in Northern Ireland are called "Republican Clubs," in view of the formal ban on Sinn Féin.

6. A Provisional republican who died on a hunger strike in a British prison in February. He was demanding to be transferred to a prison in Ireland.

7. Two young women from a well-known republican family who were convicted of involvement in a bombing in London. They also demanded transfer to a prison in Ireland.

Where once the majority of the Unionist population distrusted and despised the opportunist politicians of the SDLP now they reluctantly support them and the SDLP's boasts that they will defeat Sinn Féin in an election are beginning to ring true.

Now only a minority of the minority supports the Anti-Imperialist struggle and even their support is a passive rather than an active one. And all the time the enemy are strengthening their position. British troops move freely round the ghettos, the RUC and UDR [Ulster Defence Regiment, the Northern Irish militia] are being expanded and given more arms and a more active role; the Free State Government collaborates more and more openly with the British.

What can we do about this serious situation? Where do we go from here? When revolutionaries find the people don't support them anymore they can either blame the people and attempt to carry on without them, substituting themselves for the masses, or they can go back to where the people are and try to bring them forward with the revolutionary movement. That is the difference between military elitism and Marxism.

Republicans have always tended towards elitism. A good example was the statement ending the 1956-62 campaign which blamed the people for not supporting them. It said "foremost among the factors motivating this course of action [ending the campaign] has been the attitude of the general public whose minds have been deliberately distracted from the supreme issue facing the Irish people—the unity and freedom of Ireland." And there have always been those who argued that previous IRA campaigns failed either because they hadn't enough arms or ammunition or because they didn't use them ruthlessly enough.

Faced with dwindling mass support in this campaign, elements on the fringes of the Republican movement have turned to isolated and sometimes very callous military actions totally divorced from any political work. Let's take three examples: the Birmingham bombing, the Heron kidnapping [of the manager of a Daily

8. Social Democratic and Labour party. This is essentially a revived and refurbished version of the traditional Nationalist party, whose credibility was shaken by the rise of the mass civil rights movement outside its control. The SDLP brought in some of the "modernist" procedural elements in the civil-rights movement and demagogic Catholic politicians who based themselves on the labor movement in the nationalist areas.

9. The IRA launched an unsuccessful guerrilla warfare campaign in 1956, which was called off in 1962.

1. The Northern Irish parliament, historically the instrument of the proimperialist Protestant majority in the British-ruled enclave. It was suspended in March 1972, to make way for formal direct rule from London.

2. After the introduction of internment in August 1971, PD believed that the mass movement of the oppressed Catholic population had moved into a new and higher stage, which it designated by this name.

3. The Protestants originally settled in Northern Ireland as a loyal colony and maintain about a 60 percent majority. The higher Catholic birth-rate is compensated for by higher emigration.

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company in Limerick] and the South Armagh killings.

In November 1974 faced with the lack of any serious opposition to British policy in Ireland by the British working class and frustrated and bitter at the anti-Irish attitudes of British workers, some Republican element—though not the men who were convicted for it; they were framed—set up two pubs in Birmingham killing twenty-one civilians. That was sheer military terror. Rather than work hard to convince the British working class to support the Irish struggle, a few men with guns and bombs would terrorise them into submission. It didn't work of course, it only created in Britain sympathy for the Loyalists.

The Herrema kidnapping was a classic case of a handful of revolutionaries substituting for the masses. In the South there is a great deal of Republican feeling and sympathy with the Northern minority just below the surface and there is massive discontent with the Government on social and economic issues—120,000 unemployed, etc. The discontent remains below the surface because hardly anyone has done the hard political work to mobilise it and organise opposition to the growing police state there. The kidnapers were too frustrated and impatient to work politically through the ICRA [Irish Civil Rights Association] or some other body to build up mass resistance. The result was that workers in Limerick actually marched in support of Herrema, and the Government, secure in the knowledge that the kidnapers had no support, were able to win easily.

The Kingsmills killing was sheer military terror again. The killers simply adopted the logic of the Loyalists' murder groups—if you kill enough Catholic civilians then the Catholic community will force the IRA to stop. They killed Protestant civilians. It may or may not have stopped assassinations in South Armagh but it didn't stop them elsewhere—and the rat killing of Protestants hasn't stopped them in Belfast. What it did do was disillusion and alienate hundreds of Republican supporters in the North who believed that our morals were superior to those of the Loyalists, and thousands of sympathisers in the South.

The problem of assassinations is an extremely difficult one but probably the only effective solution is to rebuild enough active mass support to enable vigilante groups to patrol all Catholic areas and workplaces and to demand and take the fight for all Catholics to carry arms.)

These were some of the clearest examples of elitist and militarist actions in the last eighteen months. We must make clear at this point that we do not equate the violence of the oppressed with the violence of their oppressors; the violence of a people in revolt, fighting with the only weapons they know, with the violence of the state

The People's Democracy Group

In the March issue of its newspaper, the People's Democracy group in Northern Ireland announced:

"A serious division has arisen in the People's Democracy over the past few months. The division was resolved by rediscussion and redefinition of our policies at a conference of the organisation. As a result a number of members resigned from the organisation."

The People's Democracy emerged from the Belfast student movement at the end of the 1960s. A few of its leaders served an apprenticeship in small groups that claimed to be Trotskyist but were outside the Fourth International. There was also an anarchist tendency. Internationally, the group tended to form alliances with centrist tendencies inclined in one aspect or another of their politics to be ultraleft, such as Lotta Continua in Italy or the International Socialists in Britain.

At the start of the mass civil-rights movement in 1969, the PD was organized more or less on the lines of a broad radical student activist movement, similar in a general way to the American or West German SDS. It played a leading role in the civil-rights movement, expanding its influence very rapidly during the rise of the mass movement.

In the Northern Ireland and British parliamentary elections in 1969, it ran a large number of candidates and cut deeply into the traditional nationalist vote. Bernadette Devlin, the symbol and best-known representative of the radical youth in the civil-rights movement, ran first as a candidate of People's Democracy.

Very quickly, however, PD's lack of a transitional program, its student radical organizational forms, and its lack of political homogeneity led to splits, disorientation, and the loss of most of

the group's influence.

During the mass civil-rights movement, PD held a sectarian position toward nationalism; it followed a policy designed to drive the "Catholic capitalists" out of the movement. After the introduction of internment in August 1971, the remaining nucleus of PD shifted toward all-out support for revolutionary nationalism.

However, this turn was not carried out in a balanced way; the organization lacked a consistent critique of Provisional republicanism or any alternative policy. In its attempt to become a radical spearhead of the republican movement, it often carried the weaknesses of the republicans themselves to an extreme.

For example, in early 1975 it became clear that it was experimenting with forming its own armed wing. Moreover, the attempts of PD to differentiate itself from the Provisionals tended to be erratic, and did not produce much political clarification.

Now, with the decline of the Provisional military campaign, PD has evidently decided to make a new reorientation. This development is worth noting inasmuch as it may reflect an example of the thinking going on in the Irish left. Although only a small nucleus of PD remains, the group is well known and has some serious experience in mass work.

Although the accompanying article setting forth PD's new position still suffers from some exaggerations and one-sided statements, it is a serious effort to appraise what has gone wrong in the Irish struggle and to work out a consistent Marxist approach. It seems likely to have a certain impact, and can perhaps make a contribution to the process of rethinking in the militant Irish left.

machine and its hired killers. Our criticism of elitism and militarism is made from the anti-imperialist side of the barricades.

However as the situation gets worse there is a serious danger that the whole Republican movement will turn more and more in that direction. Marie Drumm provided another example of elitism at the Dunville Park rally after Frank Stagg's death when she told the crowd not to "take anything into their own hands" as Frank Stagg's death would be avenged by the IRA. In other words the people are only to be passive spectators at their own liberation. In fact hardly any of the rioting after Stagg's death was spontaneous popular action: it was organised and its isolation

from the people was shown by the senseless nature of much of the hijacking and burning, which only inconvenienced and endangered the people of the ghettos.

That was elitism but there is also an element who out of sheer frustration at their inability to stop the drift to Loyalist rule are arguing for provoking a civil war in the desperate hope that it would force the Northern minority and the Southern population to support them. That is really the politics of despair—gambling everything on a desperate adventure and trying to blackmail the people into supporting you. It is also doomed to failure.

There is another road, the road of mass action. Marxists have always believed that only the masses can liberate themselves,

A small group of armed men can do it for them. The imperialists will always have more men, more guns, etc., than the revolutionaries; in a purely military context they will always win. But what the imperialists really fear is a whole people in revolt like in 1972. They decided to abolish Stormont when, after they'd murdered 13 people in Derry on Bloody Sunday, there were ten or twenty times as many marching in Newry the next Sunday. They couldn't kill them all. As a British Lieutenant Colonel said in a recently leaked report arguing the case for more emphasis on political work: "The military means of winning this campaign is only one-fifth of the whole spectrum."

The mass movement is all important; physical force, though certainly necessary, is only one of its weapons in the battle and we believe that armed struggle which is not backed by the masses cannot make a revolution. So when mass support is dwindling as it is to-day and when the mass movement has disintegrated, the first priority is to win back that mass support and rebuild the mass movement. Without it any renewed military campaign will fail and any further turn to militarism or talk of provoking civil war will only lead to disaster.

To rebuild the movement the people

must be approached where they are, on the level they are on. To build the Civil Rights movement took years of slow, patient work making the people conscious of their oppression and that they could do something about it. If the people now need to be reminded of the facts of discrimination and what it was like to live under the old Stormont regime—and the people in the South need to be told about it for the first time—we must go back and explain it all to them. And this time it shouldn't take so long because their level of consciousness has already been raised by the eight years of struggle.

Lenin, the leader of the Russian Revolution, spelt it out very clearly in 1917:

"Crises cannot be overcome by the violence of individuals against other individuals, by partial risings of small groups of armed people, by Blanquist attempts to seize power, to arrest the Provisional Government etc.

The slogan of the day is: Explain more carefully, more clearly, more broadly the proletarian policy. . . ."

We the People's Democracy believe that absolute priority must be given to rebuilding the Anti-Imperialist movement. And as Marxist socialists we also believe that it must be based on a class-conscious working-class base. When this struggle

began in 1968-69 and in 1970-72 it was many-sided. People who fought for Civil Rights or against internment also fought on class issues, against economic and social exploitation and against the bosses. Class consciousness was strong and Catholic capitalists were just as frightened as the Stormont Unionists. That has all disappeared and to-day there is an almost total divorce between the national question and social and economic struggles. The link must be forged again.

The People's Democracy will strive to rebuild the anti-imperialist mass movement with clear working-class policies and we also believe in the absolute necessity for a disciplined revolutionary party as the vanguard and leadership of the revolutionary struggle.

Footnote

Lenin often said that Terrorism (elitist military action) put the masses to sleep. Because it gave them no role in the struggle, it led them to sit back and wait for a few revolutionary heroes to free them. Inactivity quickly leads to apathy and can easily turn into active hostility if the ruling classes make the people suffer for the actions of the guerrillas. □

IRSP Denounces Brutal 'Interrogation' by Irish Police

[The following statement was issued by the Ard Chomhairle (National Executive) of the Irish Republican Socialist party *Pairti Poblachtach Soisialach na h-Eireann* (IRSP) following the arrest and beating of a number of members and supporters of this organization by Irish Free State police in early April.]

During the period from Monday April 5 to Friday April 9 a total of 26 people were arrested under Section 30 of the Offences Against the State Act. Of the 26 people arrested, 20 were either members or supporters of the IRSP. One is a member of Sinn Fein Kevin Street [the Provisionals] and a brother of an IRSP member. One is a member of the RMG [Revolutionary Marxist Group, now Movement for a Socialist Republic, the Irish section of the Fourth International] and a sister of an IRSP member. The other 4 people have no connections with any party. Twenty arrests took place in the Dublin and Wicklow area, one in Co. Monaghan and 4 in Co. Limerick.

In most cases the homes of those arrested were raided and searched by armed groups of Special Branch men [the political police]. Nothing of an illegal or incriminating nature was found in any of the raids, however a large quantity of IRSP documents and personal effects were seized. The property seized included two

motor cars, a large quantity of clothing, personal documents and photographs, etc. In some cases, the homes concerned were left in a state of total disorder, with furniture and property thrown about the floor. No receipts were given for any of the property seized and some of it has not yet been returned to its rightful owners.

Our office at 34 Upper Gardiner Street, Dublin 1, was also raided on Monday, April 5, by a group of Special Branch men who had seized the keys of the office from one of our members. The raid was carried out in the absence of any party member and during the course of it a quantity of clothing was seized. Documents and party files were also interfered with and we are still attempting to compile a list of any documents which were seized. No search warrant was ever produced for this raid and no receipts were issued for the property taken. The Special Branch remained in the office all day and arrested the editor of the *Starry Plough* at the office when he arrived for work.

All of the people arrested were subjected to very severe psychological pressure in an attempt to obtain admissions of guilt in connection with the recent train robbery in Co. Kildare. Three of the people who were subjected to this pressure are in fact defence witnesses in the forthcoming trial.

The following pressures were applied to the arrested:

1. The police refused to notify people of which specific offence they were allegedly involved in.
2. They refused to notify families, friends or solicitors that the arrests had taken place.
3. People were refused visits from their families and legal advisors when they eventually discovered the various places of detention.
4. People were constantly moved from one detention centre to another in a deliberate attempt to isolate the detainees from their legal advisors.
5. They were threatened with repeated arrests under Section 30 of the Offences Against the State Act if they refused to "confess" or if they took legal action as a result of the torture inflicted.
6. In some cases they were told that their wives would be also arrested and their children put into an institution.
7. In one case a girl was told that she would be detained until her boy friend was arrested, and was, in fact, detained in her flat for about two hours.
8. Prisoners were told that they would be committed to Dundrum mental hospital and certified as insane.
9. They were also told that members of their families had heart attacks as a result of the arrest of family members.
10. One man was told that his grandmother had a heart attack as a result of a

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