

*Eoin O'Murchu*

## **THE WORKERS' PARTY~ ITS EVOLUTION AND IT'S FUTURE**

### **A CRITIQUE BY EOIN O'MURCHU**

#### **ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION**

Speaking at the annual Wolfe Tone commemoration at Bodenstown in 1967, Cathal Goulding, then reputed to be chief of staff of the IRA, declared "We decided..... to make an all out attack on the take over of Irish assets by foreign interests..... This movement has only room for revolutionaries, for radicals, for men with a sense of urgent purpose, who are aware of realities, who are not afraid to meet hard work, men who will not be defeated and who will not be deceived"

And the following year, at the same commemoration Sean Garland, now general secretary of Sinn Fein, The Workers' Party further elaborated the point: "This changes drastically our traditional line of tactics. There are no longer two different types of republicans: physical force men and politicians. We in the Republican Movement must be politically aware of our objectives and must also be prepared to take the appropriate educational, economic, political and finally military action to achieve them."

These statements mark the first real public acknowledgement of a shift in orientation in the Republican Movement from a secret army, with only the most superficial of political understandings, to a serious, and constitutional political party, with Dail representation and a clear influence on the politics of the country.

It is an evolution that took place increasingly against a background of political crisis and inevitably ambiguities and differences of direction disrupted the process, it is an evolution, too, that perhaps marks the last stage in the development of the old movement for national independence out of Which Fine Gael and Fianna Fail were also born.

Sinn Fein The Workers Party, then, goes back in continuity to the original capitalist Sinn Fein party of Arthur Griffith, to the revolutionary nationalist alliance led by Eamon de Valera during the War of Independence and subsequent years to the irredentist republicans of the post Fianna Fail era. But, in truth, as the opening quotations make clear, SFWP's roots lie more in the physical force tradition, in the IRA which rejected first the treaty, and then the deValera reform of that Treaty which is the real bunchloch of this state. It is through understanding the IRA that we can begin to understand Sinn Fein, The Workers Party has evolved.

The post Treaty IRA was always riven by suspicion of 'politicians' by the physical force men, by fear of the corrupting impact of participation in the new state's institutions by the remoteness and sterility of the rather legalistic way it defined its objectives and, essentially, by a basic division between left and right. The right had only one strategy: to resume the armed struggle, and-the political purposes of that, armed struggle became less and less significant comparison to the principle of armed struggle itself. The left, through Saor Eire, through Peadar O'Donnell's use of An Phoblacht, the IRA paper of the Thirties as a vehicle for social agitation, though

ultimately the attempt to develop the Republican Congress sought to redefine the aim of the Republic in terms of social change, of social as well as national revolution.

The leadership of SFWP identified themselves with this Left position from the very start of the New Departure - as It was called -in the Republican Movement in the Sixties. But, of course the Left position had been internally defeated in thirties. The IRA of the forties had degenerated into a mindless bombing campaign with only the vaguest of objectives, and with Fianna Fail victorious in the secret war in the prisons of those dreadful years.

After the war, the IRA returned to prepare for yet 'another round.' It stood aside from the political struggles of that time, and indeed drew some solace from the ultimate disintegration of Clann na Poblachta. In 1956, the other round began again. The military campaign of 1956-62 was in itself a total disaster. It provided a new crop of martyrs, Sean South, the most notable, but had no military or political effect whatever. It was the crucial turning point however, for it marked the utter discrediting of the new Right Republicans and their strategy. The young men whose commitment to their ideal was cemented by a shared experience of prison, of being on the run, of being in action, were forced to reassess their lives, their hopes and their future activities. The decisive influence in this, without any doubt, was Cathal Goulding.

For most of the '56-'62 period, Goulding had been in prison in England, where he had politically educated himself by voracious reading of revolutionary texts - an international and not specifically Irish pedagogical method - and was unsullied by the mutual recriminations that always affect defeated guerrilla groups. Goulding initiated a very self-critical examination of the whole development, and experience of defeat - in which it was particularly rich - this critical examination of the whole development of the Republican Movement. The results were embodied in a document "In the 70s The IRA Speaks." published in 1971.

The main conclusions of this self-examination were that the IRA had no solid 'political base' amongst the people, and that its concentration on military struggle had ignored the political aspects of Britain's presence in the North and the changing nature of the relationship between Britain and Ireland as a whole. The document summarised their experience "The Irish Republican Army had become remote from the people. The people respected the stand, which they were taking and indeed they cheered on from the sidelines. But they were spectators and not participants in the Republican struggle against British Imperialism". This analysis is, perhaps, a bit too optimistic as to the degree of sympathy which the 56-62 campaign generated, but there was certainly no denying the lack of popular support. The overwhelming conclusion was that there should be no repetition of such campaigns, that the Republican cause had to be understood in terms of the social and economic needs of the Irish people, that the struggle was not one about abstract definitions of freedom, but about changing the conditions of life and the ownership of wealth on which those conditions depended.

The IRA declared: "Our objective was to be the Reconquest of Ireland, not simply to place an Irish government in political control of the geographical entity of Ireland, but to place the mass of the people in actual control of the wealth and resources of the Irish Nation and to give them a cultural identity." The means to achieve this objective

were seen to be by organising economic and cultural resistance, by political action to defend rights and win reforms, and by military action “to back up the people’s demands, to defend ‘the people’s gains and eventually to carry through a successful national liberation struggle”. There was thus no sharp break with the assertion of the legitimacy of armed struggle, but limits were placed on the context of such legitimacy whose ultimate direction had to be - as in fact it has been - a rejection of armed struggle as a relevant concept, at least in the existing conditions of the 26 counties.

Ideologically, there was a bitter struggle to define these new objectives as socialist. The Army Convention of 1965 redefined the IRA’s objective as the establishment of a “democratic socialist republic”. It is to be noted that the word ‘democratic’ was included to contrast with ‘totalitarian’, for anti-communist ideology was still dominant and rampant; and in more backward areas, occasional efforts were made to give effect to Army Order No. 4 which banned volunteers from reading communist literature

But these were concessions only, to those whose political development lagged behind. Goulding at all times operated with the desire to bring the entire movement with him to win every member over to the new line. But, even so, the pace was too fast for some Daithi O’Connail, now a prominent Provisional, resigned in protest at the declaration of a socialist objective, and others in the leadership, like Sean MacStiofain and Ruairi Bradaigh were noticeably unenthusiastic about the New Departure. But the young were. Tralee-man, Denis Foley, who stood as an independent in the recent general election, turned the United Irishman the IRA newspaper, into a social agitator, a role developed by subsequent editors, Tony Meade, and, most dramatically Seamus O’Tuathail.

The active membership of the Republican Movement flung itself into housing agitations, fish-ins, ground rent protests, Vietnam solidarity demonstrations and sit-ins. This was politics with a vengeance, and many of the Old Guard resented it. This resentment came to the fore at the re-interment in ‘69 of Barnes and McCormick, two IRA volunteers executed in England for their part in the Forties bombing campaign. Jimmy Steele of Belfast delivered a traditionalist oration which attacked everything connected to the New Departure, and especially, the co-operation with communists and socialists that was an inevitable part of social agitations. Though Steele was expelled for this speech the grounds of the later Provisional split had been laid. The North, too, of course, was not immune from the New Departure. But the IRA in the North, especially in Belfast, had always functioned partly as a Catholic defence force, and was extremely cautious about revolutionary politics. Nevertheless, many units there, too, threw themselves into social agitations, especially on the housing question. But this issue ultimately raised more serious questions about the North: the question of civil rights. For the Republican Movement, however, activity on social and economic matters went hand in hand with internal political analysis, and particularly political education. Goulding went out of his way to seek experts that could assist in this area. He was able to persuade Dr Roy Johnston to help, despite the latter’s often expressed reservations about the armed wing in the shadows.

Nevertheless, Johnston’s role was considerable. While in retrospect much of his theorising was abstract, he undoubtedly gave a thrust to serious political analysis, forced members to reconsider old prejudices and played a major part in the real

politicisation of the movement. But, it should be emphasised too that it was a politicisation which Goulding was working for and for which he had won the support of the majority of the leadership. Of course, the occasional gesture was made to make the military elements feel happy. German owned farms were burned as part of a land agitation. The buses which carried strike-breakers to EL at Shannon were destroyed. And these were not purely gestures to recalcitrant elements, but reflected a genuine ambiguity in people who were in the transition of moving from one form of struggle to another.

But, the Republican Movement did not develop in isolation. Because of its activities in social struggles, the Republican Movement became aware of other political strategies, particularly that of the Communist Party (at that time, in the South, the Irish Workers' Party). The communist strategy was to fight for "progressive governments, North and South" as a prelude to unity. In the South, this meant a government committed genuinely to defending economic independence and expanding industrial development. And in the North, it placed a premium on the struggle for equality and democracy, for civil rights.

Communist Party members, like the late Betty Sinclair, were very much to the fore pressing the trade union movement in the North to take action in relation to civil rights. And, indeed, it was on the initiative of the Belfast and District Trades Council that the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was established. The history of the NICRA is reasonably well known but the Republicans did play a crucial part in it especially in stewarding and, paradoxically, in controlling wilder elements.

But despite the Republican protestations that their support for civil rights was on its own terms and not as a prelude to another military round, the unionists, and even many Republican sympathisers, were unconvinced. What complicated the issue was the Republican faithful could only be brought along the new path if they were convinced that the Army was not being abandoned or run down. So, at the very time that the emphasis North and South was shifted to social agitation and mass demonstrations, ironically there was a renewed demand for arms training. The reality, however was that the IRA had few arms left. Little remained after 1962, and resources after that were put into propaganda and educational literature rather than into guns. But the public perception was that the IRA was back in business, and, in the Northern context, able, if needed, to defend the people as Garland had stated at the 1968 Bodinstown commemoration (quoted above) and as spelt out in sundry internal documents.

In 1969, the pace of events began to develop a momentum of its own. The Stormont administration lost credibility as more and more civil rights demonstrations emphasised the existing inequality and the demand for change. In the South, too, Republican involvement in struggles was particularly worrying to government leaders. In February 1969, the Fianna Fail government, under the special direction of Charlie Haughey began sounding out dissident elements of the Republican Movement, with a view to developing a split. These activities were carried out by the state's army intelligence units. The essence, of the Flánna Fail approach was that the social agitations in the South were being carried out at the expense of proper preparations for defence of the Northern minority, and that Republicans were being used as tools in a communist conspiracy. As the North careered down the road of

political crisis political manoeuvring, personal jockeying for power, subversion of the IRA, conflicts between IRA and Sinn Fein personnel grew to frenetic levels.

### AMBIGUITIES AND CRISIS

In August 1969 Ulster Unionism, unable to adapt itself to the demand for democracy and civil rights, launched an all out attack against the Catholic population. This effort to make the “croppies lie down” was to shatter the unionist state and to send shock waves of crisis through every political institution in Ireland. It brought Britain face to face with its responsibility for the situation in Northern Ireland but divided the political parties in Ireland in confusion and bitterness. The attack began with the RUC assault on the Bogside but the Bogside's resistance and the solidarity of other Catholic towns throughout the North blunted this assault. In frustration, a pogrom was launched in Belfast, with the RUC and the B-Specials leading Orange mobs in a spree of burning and killing against the Catholic ghettos. At this supreme moment of crisis, it was discovered that the IRA did not really exist as an army. It had no weapons to defend the people. This is not to deny the courage of those who faced the mobs unarmed, pretending that they had guns, nor that the mobs themselves never realised how unprotected the people were. But Belfast Catholics reacted with bitterness and contempt ‘I Ran Away’ was a common jeer at the IRA, but in all fairness there was little justification for it.

It would have been impossible for the Republican Movement to have simultaneously rebuilt its army structure and developed a political strategy, and in any case, how could funds have been found to buy arms for rebuilding the army when the political situation created no base for support or interest? But the victims of Belfast's pogrom were not impressed by excuses. This was the crisis for which the state army's intelligence forces had been waiting. The Provisionals were born, but mainly from those who had stood aside from the New Departure and even from the civil rights struggle itself. For the Republican Movement itself what was at issue was the continuance of the new policy. And in particular, two key questions that would give more coherence to the new policy and which were scheduled to be resolved at the 1969 Army Convention and subsequent Sinn Fein Ard-Fheis. These were the dropping of abstentionism and a commitment to build a national liberation front type of alliance.

Abstentionism was always a contentious issue, and was not entirely a matter of left-right differences. The original legalistic position; of course, was that both Stormont and Leinster House were creations of the British Parliament and not the Republican institutions established in 1919. Indeed, the abstentionist attitude was at one time shared by Eamon deValera, and even when Fianna Fail broke away from Sinn Fein in 1926 on the issue of abstention it still refused initially to enter the Dail while the oath to a foreign king was required. As time passed and Fianna Fail in the Forties proved worse and more deadly enemies to the Republican Movement than the Free State before them the abstentionist principle increased in importance. In addition one of the underlying justifications of an army was the illegitimacy of the parliamentary institutions. There were many on the Left during the New Departure who mistakenly equated abstentionism with a Leninist critique of parliamentarianism. But in general, it was clear that if the Republican Movement were to concentrate on political struggles, building mass movements on social issues and so on, the electoral process could not just be ignored. Indeed, it was widely felt that abstentionism cost

Republicans the chance of building on their prestige won by involvement in such struggles and cleared the way for others to climb to power on their backs. This was particularly the case in the North, where the Republicans had to stand aside and allow a new generation to come to the fore, including John Hume, Bernadette Devlin, Ivan Cooper and others,

Bernadette Devlin's situation in fact epitomised the problem. The original Republican nominee was Kevin Agnew, but inevitably an abstentionist candidate would have meant giving the seat to Unionists. The only logical choice was that Agnew should run on a participationist platform - a breach of General Army orders - or he should withdraw in favour of a broadly acceptable anti-unionist candidate. The latter choice was made, but many activists bitterly resented the lost opportunity.

But for the Belfast IRA the issue was somewhat artificial. While Tyrone Republicans resigned in opposition to abstentionism - including, incidentally, Kevin Mellon, now a prominent Provisional - the Belfast IRA was increasingly worried by the growing dangers. It wanted guns, and some of its leadership - like Leo Martin - did not particularly care what agreements had to be made to get them. People like Martin, and the expelled Jimmy Steele, certainly felt that if the price of Fianna Fail's giving weapons was the dropping of the socialist objective and the ending of Republican involvement in social agitations, it was a price worth paying.

But the New Departure could not survive such a price, and Goulding could not even contemplate paying it. It was decided that the issue of abstention should be pushed for resolution at the Army Convention, scheduled for December 1969. There was to be no turning back, no compromise was felt possible. Some sympathetic observers, in fact, have criticised Goulding for pushing this issue at such a time and in such circumstances. But realistically, what was at stake was the New Departure itself, and to that extent he had no choice. When the Convention met, it voted 39 votes to twelve to end the policy of abstention, though it must be noted that an internal struggle of allegiance in Belfast meant that that major IRA Brigade was not represented at the Convention. But, any case, it would not have affected the decision. Those opposed to the New Departure saw this as the final straw. They withdrew from the Convention and, though a minority established their own Provisional Army Council. The split was now a fact.

But all was not over yet. While the IRA had agreed to a new policy, Sinn Fein had yet to discuss it. And contrary to ill-informed and prejudiced opinion such a discussion would never have been a formality. In particular, abstention was enshrined in the Constitution it required a two thirds majority to remove it. In the event, the resolution failed by 19 votes out of 247 to gain the required majority. But the split could not be denied. Dennis Cashin from Armagh took the microphone and proposed a traditional motion that the Ard-Fheis recognise the Army Council as the legitimate authority of the state. This was now as unacceptable to the Provisionals as to Fianna Fail, and there was an immediate walk-out by a quarter of the delegates. But if the debate on abstentionism had ended in anti-climax, a more immediately relevant motion had settled the issue for most of the Provisionals-to-be. This was the proposal that the movement should commit itself to a national liberation front type of revolutionary strategy. To be honest, this was rather abstract theoretic. But it was clearly inspired by the Vietnamese example, and was understood by all sides in the debate to be a

clear identification of the movement's objective of socialism with revolutionary socialism. Its practical effect could only be to bring the Republican Movement into a closer working relationship with the communist parties North and South. The right savaged the idea. And, indeed, after the split, Provisional spokesmen insisted on calling the IRA which accepted the legitimacy of the convention decision the NLF. They denounced the whole scheme, at home and abroad, as a communist plot, and fervently assured their supporters in the United States that, by contrast, the Provisionals Republic Would be one "untainted by communistic or socialistic ideas."

Again some sympathetic to the official standpoint have argued that this was another provocative move in the circumstances. But Goulding and McGiolla were both determined that their political orientation would not be diverted by the August '69 and indeed felt that it was more essential than ever that the movement keep its political head to prevent the vacuum of leadership being taken over by those who wanted to limit and restrict the scope of political developments. But while these ideological issues were of great concern to those who organised the Provisional split - and certainly of great concern to the Fianna Fail government, both Haughey and Lynch wings, which helped finance it - the, main slogan by which the new organisation grew was a promise that the people would be defended. Daithi O'Conall, returned to membership after a four year lapse expressed this clearly at the Provisional Bodenstown Commemoration when he declared that never again would crown forces be allowed to run through an Irish town.

The Provisionals, however, took few members of the movement with them, and ironically given their emphasis on the military issues, a higher proportion of Sinn Fein members than of the IRA men. Its leadership were all old and tired names and many of the younger members actually welcomed their departure on the grounds that the brakes on the movement a political development were now removed. But while the Provisionals could not take the majority of the IRA with them even in Belfast, they were able to draw new recruits totally untainted by the political education of the previous year. The bulk of the membership of the two organisations had little knowledge of each other. The split at the Sinn Fein Ard Fheis gave the Provisionals another opportunity to present publicly their criticisms. Of course the old canards were resurrected: the guns not available when needed in Belfast had been sold to the Free Wales Army to raise funds for the United Irishman Goulding was obviously anti-Catholic because he hadn't been seen at mass for years, and that was why he was more interested in revolution in the South than in freedom for the North!

It mattered little to those who pushed these stories that the Free Wales Army was only marginally less mythical than the guns allegedly sold to it. In reality, the contact with the Welsh had once been optimistically looked at to as a source of explosives, all Welshmen, as is well-known, being miners and explosives experts! And Goulding's supposed anti-Catholicism reflected more the prejudices against non-Catholics of his accusers.

More formally, the Caretaker Executive, as the Provisional sympathisers styled their break-away leadership in Sinn Fein, listed the main specific reasons for their break, apart from the issues of abstention and the national liberation front: the leadership's support of extreme socialism leading to 'totalitarian dictatorship' the failure to protect the people of the North in August 1969; the suggestion that Stormont be abolished and

the North brought under direct rule from Westminster; and the internal methods by which Provisional sympathisers had been squeezed out or expelled. Most of these charges were empty or founded on prejudice. The third item was manifestly untrue. The Barricade Bulletins and Radio Belfast, controlled by the IRA in August 1969, all expressly disagreed with such a viewpoint, and indeed, emissaries were regularly sent from GHQ in Dublin to the Belfast leadership to impress this point. But given central charge that the Officials had failed the people militarily, the Provisionals obviously needed to demonstrate their competence in this field.

The immediate consequence, of course, was that the Republican's energy was diverted to the needs of their internal struggle at a time when major political developments were occurring in the big wide world. Jim Sullivan, Official leader in the Lower Falls, in Billy MacMillan's enforced absence, might be photographed with General Freeland or British Home Secretary, Callaghan, but the Republicans were easily manoeuvred to the side by the church, the green nationalists and the Fianna Fail agents. And important events were occurring. In the immediate aftermath of the August crisis, with the direct use of British troops and a degree of British political attention that the Unionists found most unwelcome, the Downing Street Declaration, which went some way to meeting the demands of the civil rights demonstrators, was issued. But British policy was not so united. There were strongly entrenched elements within the British establishment, the civil service, the Army and the political parties at Westminster who were concerned at the direction of British policy the Downing Street Declaration implied, and the British Army itself was soon at work to undermine it.

But first a gesture of reassurance. Militant loyalists on the Shankill Road, demonstrating in October 1969 against the declaration, and the abolition of the B Specials in particular, were given a rude lesson by the British Army to the real meaning of the slogan 'We are the people.' But after October there was little change. The RUC were manifestly not co-operating into inquiries into their misconduct. The murderers of Sam Devenney, indeed, remain protected to this day. The Catholics, living still in fear of another pogrom, wanted real advance. They wanted the spirit of the Downing Street Declaration implemented. And gradually they began to take to the streets again.

For the Officials, they were now called by the media; this was a straightforward commitment, except that this time they were especially conscious of the public jeers concerning August and of the Provisional menace. For the Provisionals, it posed a difficulty. They could not allow crown violence against the people to go unanswered. It is reasonably clear that the British Army deliberately provoked confrontation. In January 1970, a demonstration in Ballymurphy was harshly put down, and when in the ensuing riot, token petrol bombs were thrown, General Freeland determinedly gave the order to shoot to kill. As young Danny O'Hagan lay dying the British Army were no longer the defenders of the people of a few months before - and the question was put up to the Provisionals in a blunt and stark way. The Officials asserted then, and have consistently asserted since, that this provocation should have been ignored (militarily). Political action on a mass basis for civil rights, they argued, would emphasise Britain's international isolation. They could be forced back to concessions. Instead the military die was cast.

## SINN FEIN AND THE IRA

The assumption of this analysis is that the major developments influencing the evolution of SFWP as a significant Dail political party concern, in fact, developments within the IRA itself. This is a delicate issue for SFWP leaders, and one which they have never handled forthrightly. In fact, they have nothing to be ashamed about in their development for the processes have been genuine ones, but hostile forces have regularly been willing to propagandise in a distorted way over the question. So what exactly was the connection between Sinn Fein and the IRA and how did the development of a new political approach affect it?

The IRA activist who rejected the Treaty of 1921 as a betrayal of the Republic tended to blame the political processes of British administration and negotiation for the "corruption" of formerly loyal Irishmen. While totally lacking in theoretical sophistication, their instincts lay generally in favour of direct rather than representative democracy though this was rarely coherently expressed. In fact, an explanation of the anti-Treaty side in the Civil War reveals an incredible confusion of purpose and objective. The wonder is not that they were beaten, for they had no real political programme, but that they survived at all.

For our purpose here, however, it is worth noting that this suspicion of political manoeuvrings and rhetoric extended to their own side., Sinn Fein did not lay down the guidelines of Republican policy in the Civil War, and Eamon deValera, formerly president of the Republic, had no higher function than assistant to the Director of Munitions. The Right Republicans resisted throughout the Twenties and Thirties the efforts of Saor Eire, O'Donnell and Gilmore the Republican Congress et al; to embroil them in the dreaded politics, and inevitably Sinn Fein declined to a narrow purist and irrelevant rump. But, given the illegality of the IRA there were obvious restrictions on its scope for public political activity, and in the build up to the '56 campaign the IRA favoured a revitalisation of Sinn Fein. However, Sinn Fein' was always a separate organisation, and while a majority of its members might in specific areas be also members of the IRA, especially among the younger contingents, membership was by no means synonymous and there were occasional conflicts inevitable given the purist and backward nature of Sinn Fein.

But, of course, during the Fifties campaign, Sinn Fein's role of propagandising for the Republic, of support for the IRA campaign; for defence of prisoners and victims of discrimination was in exact accord with what the IRA needed. After the collapse of the campaign and its formal calling-off in 1962, it was in the IRA that the process of reassessment and reorientation began. Indeed, how could Sinn Fein as such decide on such matters when organisationally it had nothing to do with the direction of the campaign or even its calling-off.

Thus it was the IRA volunteers who engaged in fierce political discussion over the meaning of 'revolution', 'imperialism' and the rest of the vocabulary of an increasingly socialistic youth. Sinn Fein tended by and large to be the preserve of those who had seen better days. When the IRA was won to the idea of political action, its members naturally paid, greater attention to Sinn Fein, but long before the split occurred there were tensions and conflicts, as much to do with the brashness of youth and the caution of the old, with the energy of activists and the passivity of staid

conservatives, as any thing else. In fact, it was a frequent complaint at IRA section meetings that long-established members of Sinn Fein cumainn obstructed the new approach and certainly the old guard had a higher proportion of support in Sinn Fein than they did in the IRA

This certainly ironic given the Provisionals emphasis on the military aspect. But in the first year after the split, Cathal Goulding had a high public profile as the reputed chief of staff of the IRA, while many volunteers complained that MacGiolla had not similarly stamped a title of possession on the name Sinn Fein. Within a few years, the public perception was reversed, as indeed the Provisionals military campaign came to dominate the headlines.

The IRA necessarily was more attractive to the more active young men, and cautiously, women too, who believed in supporting the right to fight for freedom, would naturally want to play a direct part in it. While there were some young activists who were not members of the IRA, and while this number increased, especially in Dublin, as the policies of the New Departure came to the fore, most gravitated to the IRA itself. This contradiction was keenly appreciated by the leadership. One of the Provisionals complaints was that in some areas would-be volunteers were discouraged and advised to join Sinn Fein instead, and this was to an extent true. But it shouldn't be exaggerated. However, much the IRA wished to enhance the role and authority of Sinn Fein, the needs of organisational unity required the army be assured of its ultimate function. After the split there was a curious contradiction in policy. On one hand, the insistence on pushing the motions concerning abstentionism and, the national liberation front had ensured that there would be a split but, on the other, every (private) effort was made to reassure the wavering that the army was not being run down, that its significance was not being demoted, that the traditional aims and objectives remained unaltered.

While the commitment to policy implied in the controversial motions was explicit, practice on the ground tended to be more ambiguous, the lines of distinction blurred. The Officials refrained not just from public criticism of the Provisionals, but even from publicly answering the attacks on them. This indeed, was a disastrous error of judgement. It implied, to many, that the Provisional charges were true and suggested certain duplicity on the Official side. In addition, it was obviously not enough to assert that the IRA was not being run down; physical proof had to be given. Thus the Officials were caught in a trap of emulating a Provisional policy they disagreed with.

The contradictions of this were to become more and more acute in the following years and their resolution very difficult and bitter to achieve. But it is in the process of struggle, against the background of the political events of the early seventies, that SFWP in its present form evolved.

## **HALF ARMED STRUGGLE**

After the killing of Danny O'Hagan in the New Lodge Road in January 1970, the Provisionals increasingly replied to British violence with their own, though it was not until February 1971 that the first British soldier died. Though it must be noted that the British policy was more to turn a blind eye to Loyalist violence, as in the Short Strand in June 1970, this inevitably increased pressure on the Officials as much as the

Provisionals to hit back. Matters certainly got worse when the British Conservatives won the 1970 election. The British Army was given carte blanche to pursue its own policy. But it is interesting to note that the area they chose to attack first was an Official stronghold, the Lower Falls, despite the difficult efforts made by Official leaders to head off demands for a more aggressive military policy. The Lower Falls Curfew of July 1970 was resisted in arms, and while the Officials leadership was disturbed at the threat to their political programme posed by such defence, the bulk of the volunteers were delighted that their honour had been restored. The IRA had not run away.

The leadership nevertheless insisted that there was no question of a military campaign. Their internal propaganda increasingly emphasised the socialist political objective they had developed, and conceded a role for military action only in terms of external attack, whether from Loyalists or British Army. Of course, a certain ironic pleasure was taken in that the Provisionals, who boasted so loudly, of their military determination, had stood aside when the British attacked the Lower Falls despite O'Connell's Bodenstown rhetoric that crown forces would never again be allowed to run riot. But the Officials were constantly aware of how Provisional pressure was diverting the political impetus. Civil rights demonstrations increasingly ended up in riots. There was a reckless willingness to respond to British provocations, and where the Provisionals led, the Officials half-heartedly felt obliged to follow. . .

Despite the Officials public silence, relations between the two were exceedingly bitter. The Provisionals established sole rights of organisation in many areas of Belfast and attempted to enforce it by violence against Officials. Beatings-up and pistol-whippings were frequent, but still the Official leadership would give no sanction for retaliation or for public criticism. By early 1971, with the 'spiral of violence well-established, the Officials' own commitment to the civil rights strategy confused by their parallel commitment to military defence, the damage of the Provisionals to the Officials strategy was becoming clearer.

Matters reached a head when an attempt was made to wipe out the entire Belfast Brigade staff, including local battalion leaders, who were meeting in the Lower Falls. In the ensuing battle, however, it was the Provisionals who suffered the only fatality, Charlie Hughes, one of the few Lower Falls members of the Provisionals. After this, the Officials went on a propaganda offensive that they have never since refrained from. Those misguided individuals who continued to plead for unity were themselves criticised, and Garland wrote a major article on this point in the *United Irishman* of June and July 1971, in answer to a unity plea by Sean Cronin, published by Seamus O'Tuathail in the May issue. This coincided with the appointment of Eoin O'Murchu as editor. It is a statement that still sees a central role for armed struggle, but; insistently, only as the last stage of a political struggle and only as part of a revolution of the people themselves. It is a statement too that emphasised internal democracy as a prerequisite for the movement's struggle for socialism

But perhaps a more important aspect central to Garland's analysis was that the South was as important a battlefield against British imperialism. "We maintain", he said, "that the fight against British imperialism is a 32 County fight. The North is not the only battleground. The fight is also to be fought in the South, and in waging this fight the South can also contribute to the struggle in the North." This was no empty

verbalising. Republican involvement in housing struggles, in fish-ins and land agitations was not ended by the Northern crisis, though that obviously dominated the movement's deliberations and an increased 'attention' began to be paid to trade union and industrial matters. But the Republicans were largely apart even from the very issues they wished to be involved in. The IRA blew up construction equipment in Oughterard, County Galway as part of its support for a local land agitation. Military action was taken to support industrial strikers. But the reality was that these actions had the effect of supplanting the people's own struggles which had been spoken of as the only road to socialism. Tragedy affected them too. Martin O'Leary, a young Cork Republican, was killed blowing up a transformer at the Mogul Mine County Tipperary, in support of a miners strike. But, while the ineffectiveness of these events was to lead to a more radical break with such actions they were at that time still central to the Republicans concept of revolutionary struggle.

Cathal Goulding was quoted in the *United Irishman* of August 1971 of saying in a graveside oration at O'Leary's funeral: "When their answer to the just demands of the people are the lock-out, strike-breaking, evictions, prison cells, intimidations or the gallows, then our duty is to reply, as he replied, in the language that brings vultures to their senses most effectively, the language of the bomb and the bullet." This was, of course, graveside rhetoric, but it is not really that far removed from the speech attributed to Danny Morrison at the Provisional Sinn Fein Ard-Fhèis last year about taking power with the armalite in one hand and the ballot paper in the other. However, it nearly removed Goulding from the scene for a while as he was charged with incitement to violence. However, when an RTE tape of the oration was finally handed over to the police it was inexplicably found to be blank, and the charge failed.

It was as well. The increasing violence in the North was getting out of hand. And while the Republicans commitment to NICRA and the civil rights struggle remained firm, the lure of the gun was getting stronger. Goulding was an important stabilising influence at this time. Internment made everything much worse. For while the Officials continued to oppose a military campaign, and to denounce the Provisionals, particularly for the bombings, their members too were interned. Even civil rights activists as for example NICRA organiser, Kevin Mc Corry, were picked up, and Official Republicans were in the most vulnerable situation. The leadership's advice that the northern membership should put its head down and ride the storm was easier given than done, and pressure again mounted to play a distinctive role in armed resistance Seamus Costello came more and more to articulate the demands of this kind, though 'socialism' was kept as the objective and the point of differentiation from the Provisionals.

Army Council meetings were presented with new lists of targets allowable as part of the policy of defence. As British military pressure increased, defence became impossible, and retaliation was the order of the day. Since retaliation could not always be directly related to the original aggression, this became, as MacGiolla complained, creeping military campaigning. But it was a half-hearted effort at best. The majority of the leadership wanted to restrict the scope of such actions, and was strengthened in this resolve by several disastrous incidents. MacGiolla rushed in, for example, to condemn the killing of Unionist Senator Barnhill, only to discover that a Derry unit of the Official IRA had carried it out. Following Bloody Sunday in Derry, a retaliation against the Paratroopers headquarters at Aldershot went disastrously wrong and more

squirming had to be done to defend a policy that was not only indefensible, but was not their chosen policy.

In the South, a massive effort was put into the EEC referendum campaign, but to no avail. The Officials were at a point of crisis. And their politics seemed less and less likely to achieve results. In the North, Joe McCann was killed, one of the most romantic figures of the Official IRA. But just as the push to militarism seemed in the ascent, a killing in Derry was to force a total reassessment of where the Officials stood.

## **RETRENCHMENT AND THE SECOND SPLIT**

The killing of Ranger Best in Derry was one of those totally useless deaths that have been so much part of the Northern tragedy. It was the classic soft target, a local youth who had joined the British Army and was home on leave, and who was even said to have taken part in a riot against British troops earlier on the day he was killed.

His death provoked a reaction of revulsion among local people, and indeed throughout the country. But what is not so understood is that reactions within the Official leadership were equally hostile. There was a vociferous demand that disciplinary action be taken against those responsible, and, while this was headed off, the demand that an end be put to such cowboyism was unstoppable. Within Sinn Fein, especially in the South but also in the North, there was particular outrage. The demand grew that the IRA should declare a truce. An extended meeting of the Army Council decided on this very policy, and the United Irishman published a detailed defence of the civil rights strategy. "The main Issue at the moment in the North is still, as it has been for the last few years, the civil rights issue. We have finally and repeatedly stated over the years that the achievement of civil rights and basic democracy is necessary if we are to make real progress towards winning our aim of a united, independent, socialist, democratic republic.

"We understand that such a republic can only be built upon the combined efforts of all Irish workers.... To achieve this unity of workers, it is essential to overcome the vicious devisions which have been carefully fostered by the alien British regime."

But even given the IRA's ceasefire, such a commitment to civil rights and to NICRA was not universally popular. There was a growing feeling among many of the rank and file that there was a third way - neither militarist nor alliancist, but an individual, and indeed, exclusivist, political republicanism. This searching for a 'third way' was partly inspired by lingering confusion over the National Liberation front strategy which was part of the split. The Provisionals had attacked it as communist, and many Official Republicans were anti-communist as well, deep down. In addition there was resentment against the Communist Party which had escaped the rigours of internment, and the frustrations of the politically inexperienced against a well-educated and politically conscious party membership.

And there was another factor, slightly harder to define. Sinn Fein, Ourselves Alone, is more than just a name; it is also a description. The Republican Movement has never found it easy to work in co-operation with other political elements. There has been a large element of the one true faith about it, and little sympathy for the theoretical

agonising of heretics. Indeed, it was only the total prolapse of the movement after 1962 that brought many members to swallow the bitter pill of working with other parties and worst of all, occasionally accepting their political leadership.

And to complicate matters even further there was the continued pressure from within the Northern Catholic community of the Provisional competition. If military action was to be eschewed it was even more important that the specifically Republican aspect of the movement's policy be emphasised. Of course, those who did support an Official military campaign were also critical of the policy of working with other political parties that entailed non-commitment to militarism and a counter commitment to, for example, civil rights. Thus, Seamus Costello, who had been the main proposer of the NLF motion at the split Ard-Fheis of 1970, became a main critic of alliance with the communists

From June until October 1972, an organised campaign, of criticism was launched against the "excessive" emphasis on civil rights which ultimately culminated in the dismissal of the United Irishman's editor, Eoin O'Murchu. There were some other factors involved, so that it would not be entirely true to say that all who voted for his dismissal disagreed with the civil rights strategy. Rather it was a feeling that his particular style of work placed him on a limb which could not be defended.

Nevertheless, it appeared that criticisms of the civil rights strategy would have little support at the forthcoming Army Convention in October 1972. Nor did they. But Liam MacMillen, the OC of the Official IRA in Belfast was most concerned to speak for Belfast itself. Hearing members of his own brigade disputing what position they should take, he pushed a motion through that the issue be referred back to the units so that the delegates could be mandated. Too late, the leadership's majority found itself outflanked though it must be said that MacMillen himself tended to support the civil rights strategy personally.

Within the debate that followed, both within the IRA and in Sinn Fein, the main protagonists emerged as Goulding and MacGiolla, for the existing position and Costello and Garland, for the opposition. It was not, however, a matter which divided Sinn Fein from the IRA, since the differences of opinion existed in both organisations, though members of Sinn Fein tended to support the existing position.

Costello and Garland indeed made strange and uneasy allies because Garland's personal friendships lay overwhelmingly on the other side and because he was one of the most abrasive critics of Costelloe's somewhat opportunist method of political intrigue. Costelloe in fact, saw clearly that the affirmation of a separate Republican Strategy to Republican support for civil rights led logically and inexorably to a military campaign strategy. Garland, however, rejected this logic, though Goulding and MacGiolla were obviously concerned that it did. Costelloe was in a supreme position to organise. As Director of Operations of the Official IRA he travelled the country widely, meeting local operations activists - or rather, would-be activists since the ceasefire curbed all such activities. In addition, Garland had considerable standing in the movement. While his personality was abrasive and blunt, he was trusted as a totally straightforward and honest Republican and Costelloe had the good sense to leave it to Garland to draft the document for change. In the light of more recent developments within the Officials, with which Garland has been identified it is ironic

that he appealed away from the drab confines of dour political reality to “the high road to the Republic.” It was an appeal that accorded with the desire of rank and file Republicans to assert their Republican identity while differentiating themselves from the Provisionals. In the event, once Belfast mandated all its delegates to vote for a change, the result was clear cut, and the resumed convention adopted the new position. While the matter was more closely contested within Sinn Fein, the Ard-Fheis vote was also comfortable for change... But Garland certainly carried more sway there than Costelloe. For Costelloe, however, it was the chance to reverse the decision of the previous May for a ceasefire. His attempt to seize that chance paved the way for a second split, and this time, a final rejection of militarism. At the resumed Army Convention, in fact, Costelloe proposed a detailed policy for a military campaign, but this got only very marginal support and was overwhelmingly rejected. However, he applied himself vigorously to the task of winning a majority for his views, and if that could not be done by converting the incumbent leadership then he would work to replace the leadership itself.

While he had a strong organisational position within the Army for this he was on much weaker ground in Sinn Fein. Only three people on the Ard-Comhairle out of a membership of over twenty could be expected to support his views. Outsiders might wonder why such tolerance was shown to Costelloe while he factionalised with such abandon. It must be remembered that the leadership were all veterans of the 1956-62 campaign. They had suffered together, then gone through years of indifference together, had rebuilt the movement together, experienced the split together. Whatever their personal antipathies, there was a close bond of personal loyalty. Costelloe really had to go some distance to snap that bond.

But he was very single-minded, he believed, correctly, that the ‘third way’ policy was contradictory: in so far as it meant a rejection of the previous line, it logically called for acceptance of his. And he played on the obvious floundering that the change of policy induced. But he went too far. He was less than cautious in whom he organised his secret lists with, and was suspended for a technical breach of party rules. This posed a problem for him because of the general election of 1973. Despite his suspension, he stood as an Independent Sinn Fein candidate, and was subsequently expelled for this breach of discipline. Within the IRA too, his efforts to organise a palace revolution led to his court martial and dismissal. But Costelloe was right when he complained that these technical charges concealed political issues. What was at stake was whether or not the movement would develop down the road of becoming a revolutionary party or just another terroristic paramilitary group.

The Split was particularly bitter. The Officials felt that their reticence at the time of the Provo Split had helped to establish the latter as a serious organisation with all the damage that that involved to the movement’s strategy. They were determined not to repeat the mistake. When units defected to the new breakaway the arms they took with them were peremptorily demanded back. The clubs they controlled were claimed as movement property. It was not long before such claims were forcibly backed up and very forcibly resisted. Soon, fights led to feuding pistol whippings to shooting and then to killing.

The Officials suffered most, both in terms of their political credibility and in terms of casualties. Garland was seriously wounded in a shooting incident in Dublin and Billy

MacMillan, the Wee Man whose significance for the Officials in Belfast cannot be overestimated; was shot lead only hours after a truce had been agreed. Reluctantly and bitterly, the Officials cast aside further thoughts of retaliation and revenge and got back to their political programme. Costelloe's subsequent killing, some years later, is thought not to have been an official Official action. But this second split had two main effects on the Officials: A residue of deep bitterness towards the Provisionals and IRSP and the whole paramilitary concept, and the final break with militarism in its own ranks.

## **THE REVOLUTIONARY PARTY**

These dramatic developments took place against a background of important theoretical discussion, in which the practical issues of day-to-day policy overlapped serious reappraisal of the movement's future and its direction. The roots of SFWP's present position lie in what I have described as the 'third way' whose chief protagonist was Sean Garland. Garland launched his theoretical position with a major speech at the 1972 Bodinstown Commemoration. Garland proclaimed the task of building a revolutionary party of the Irish working class. Inherent in this position was the assumption that no such party already existed. It is quite clear from his contributions to the Sinn Fein Ard.Fheis later in the year that he was contemptuous of the communist slogan, 'Progressive Government North and South' which he derided as meaning capitalist governments with one or two communist ministers.

This was implicit. Quite explicit was a round denunciation of the Labour Party, both for the lack of real effort by its leadership in the anti-Common Market campaign and for its decision to go into coalition with Fine Gael. At this time Garland was very much under the influence of Gerry Foley, an American Trotskyist who would certainly have denounced the communist position as 'Stalinism' a redolent phrase with, unfortunately little real meaning. The Revolutionary Party speech was inspired by an identification of republicanism with socialism. A teleological approach to history was adopted, such that Tone was seen as a socialist, and Lalor The commitment to socialism emerged as a discovery of the true essence of republicanism.

These are to some extent matters for theoretical debate, but the thrust of Garland's position was unequivocally national. He saw the national revolution, the winning of unity as being socialism, and not just as a step in that direction. Curiously the seeds were being sown of an economist approach that would ultimately elevate the bread and butter issues of the working class as the sole issues of the national question (!), and even to the denunciation of the national question as "mythical" (See Irish Industrial Revolution)

Garland rooted, however at that time, his revolutionary party concept in the Irish tradition. "We choose from the past... that which is appropriate to our time. We weld it to the experience of working people today. We make no apology to anyone who is disturbed by this recognition of reality and the historic role of the Republican Movement.

He emphasised rejection of sectarianism and asserted the need for a different approach to Protestant resistance "We do not wish to bomb one million Protestants

into a united Ireland. The revolutionary party of the people recognises only the unity of the working class and will not now engage in any campaign which could only have the effect of helping the miserable rulers of the working people to survive” But, there was no rejection of the principle of armed struggle. On the contrary, there was a lengthy defence of its role in revolutionary theory, which was, however, to be sharply challenged by the Costelloe spilt. Garland declared: “Let no one take from this...repudiation of terrorism any suggestion.....that the army of the people will not be used to defend the interests of the working people. We make this condition: that all other means have failed before such action is taken and that the people are threatened with - the mercenary force of the agents of capitalism.” “No movement of the people, no revolutionary party, has the right to demand of the people that they should set aside the weapon that is viciously used by the gangsters who act in the name of the law and in the name of continuing capitalist order. We will not do it.”

Of course only a movement with an existing heritage of armed struggle would be so obsessed with defining its attitude to it so precisely. Garland felt even then that a large element of romantic cowboyism was involved in the whole mystique of armies of officers, of training camps and drill parades. That was not real politics, and his somewhat obscure formulation of the revolutionary party was a definite attempt to move away decisively from structures and concepts of struggle that belonged to a different era.

To give effect to the revolutionary party, there were two key questions: the Republican Movement had to establish itself within the working class, and it had to develop the structure of organisation relevant to this aim. Difficult and controversial issues within the Republican Movement are invariably settled by the establishment of a Commission. The Structure Commission produced its documents in August 1973, and examined the relationship between the IRA and Sinn Fein. There were three positions. One, that the IRA should be abolished forthwith. While this had extensive private support, it was felt too blunt, too likely to provoke the split which subsequently happened with Costelloe’s breakaway anyway. Two, that the IRA an authority as the prime revolutionary force be reasserted. Three, that the IRA be removed entirely from political affairs and Sinn Fein developed as the sole Republican political voice, with the implied understanding on the part of those who drafted this idea that the IRA would in fact wither away and disappear without formal abolition. No formal position in fact seems to have been taken on the Commission documents, because the events of the Costelloe split intervened. Divisive matters should be left to a later stage. But it is reasonable to assume that the third strategy was adopted.

At the Ard-Fheis of 1976 which adopted the name Workers’ Party, MacGiolla made an important declaration that there was no room in the organisation any longer for militarists or those who favoured terrorism. And the Official IRA has never since had any public existence at all. However, despite the strong protestations that all military activity had been ended, there have been a number of disturbing incidents. Guns have been produced on several occasions in Belfast, usually as part of the almost permanent rows over control of the lucrative drinking clubs. Another incident ended in the death of a young man beaten mercilessly with hurley sticks. The culprits were forced to return to face trial in Belfast, where they pleaded guilty to his manslaughter.

And it wasn't all in the North. A serious raid took place in a pub in Dublin's dockland when guns, iron bars and hatchets were used against a number of former members. And of course, the permanent question mark hangs over where the funds are found for such extensive organisational activities. There can be no definitive answer to this, but former members of the organisation have been arrested on bank robberies. There can be no definitive answer to this but, certainly, the possibility of substantial funds coming from sympathisers abroad cannot be discounted, though rumours of Russian gold are more wishful thinking than factual. Nevertheless, remnants of military activities, the occasional aberration are to be expected in an organisation with such a history. And none of it should obscure the real shift of ideology and organisational practice that has actually taken place.

But what is not so tolerable is the vagueness with which SFWP discuss this aspect of their past. MacGiolla does not need to make "extensive inquiries in the North". He has acted consistently to remove militarists from the organisation and need not be ashamed of it. The second key aspect of the revolutionary party development was how to bring the Republican Movement to the working class, how to make Sinn Fein a workers' party. The first point is that despite Sinn Fein's established commitment to socialism, it had little connection to the organised working class, especially to the Trade Unions.

In 1972, none of the leadership had histories of trade union activity, and few even had membership. The United Irishman developed an increased coverage of trade union and industrial affairs throughout 1971 and 1972, and a regular industrial column had been established by the middle of 1972. It was not, it should be emphasised, a question of infiltration. This is a convenient slogan for right wing labourites for whom non-revolutionary politics are quite proper and tolerable, but not for other kinds. Infiltration, properly speaking, would imply sending members in to join covertly. The real practice was quite different. There was firstly, and most importantly, a determined effort to win trade union activists to join Sinn Fein; and secondly, members were encouraged to be active in their unions where membership was appropriate.

It is quite legitimate for industrial work to be organised, so long as the rules of individual unions are fully respected. Industrial policies are a matter of concern to all politically active workers, and Sinn Fein was only following in the footsteps of the Communist Party - though it is interesting that they, too, have been accused of infiltration-ism.

Early efforts to organise this work foundered, however. The Republican Industrial Development (which gave rise to the popular slogan Get rid of RID) was quite hostile to Sinn Fein efforts to control it. The IRA, however, following Garland's Bodinstown speech, was refusing to control it, and for a time it existed in a sort of organisational limbo. There were, however, genuine difficulties. Trade Union activists, especially if they were officials, could not realistically be expected to involve themselves in the day-to-day drudgery of political existence: paper sales, posterings, public meetings, and citizen advice bureaus. Sinn Fein itself, of course, had its fair share of the narrow-minded who considered their own limited spheres of activity the most Important, or indeed the sole legitimate ones. The cult of activism led often to the instant picket and the sort of rent-a-crowd politics that had really seen their day. It was increasingly

clear that the leadership was out of its depth. Men with no trade union experience could not organise trade union work; and, indeed, it also became clear - though not to themselves - that men without theoretical grounding and a good political education in Marxism could not develop the theory or the policy underpinnings, for a revolutionary party. The problem of this was that it meant recognising in practice a leading role for the Communist Party in their common work together, a willingness to listen to communist suggestions. But the Republican Movement did not just have a larger membership; it also had a larger ego.

It spurned offers of help from the communists in the industrial field. The return of Eamonn Smullen from jail in England gave an opportunity to overcome their problems. Smullen had been a shop steward on a building site in England, and a trade union activist and British Communist Party member for several years. It is perhaps a mark of the naiveté of the leadership in industrial affairs that his experience as one of many shop stewards should be taken as qualifications to organise the entire work in this area.

Goulding was able to reassure a group of Dublin activists, who were becoming increasingly disillusioned - and in some cases contemplating joining the Communist Party - that Smullen was the messiah the Movement was waiting for. When he did come back, he was not particularly impressive. But such is the power of wishful thinking that it was assumed for many months that he was just pretending to be stupid. It was some time before it was realised that behind that bland exterior there was a bland interior. Smullen became a straightforward conduit for the transmission to the leadership of the research results and theoretical idea of a talented but extremely secretive group of industrial activists, known as the RTE set. Their secretiveness is really farcical since their association with SFWP is conveyed to all by nod and wink, but it is part of the game by which grown men express their immaturity.

The industrial section was thus reorganised. It is not, apart from the childish exceptions mentioned, secret, though obviously there are some members of SFWP who would lose their jobs or possibilities for promotion if their membership were a public fact, and such people must, of course, operate with discretion. Though not secret, it is separate. Cumainn organised on an industrial basis, e.g. for a factory or a particular union, are not under control of the local comhairle ceantair, but of the industrial division itself. This accounts not just for the aloofness of the industrial section towards the Sinn Fein tradition - the industrial section was the most vociferous in seeking the addition of the words 'Workers' Party' to the party name, and in 1982, the Sinn Fein bit was dropped altogether - but also for the relatively separate ideological development of members in the industrial cumainn.

Given the leadership's total inexperience of trade Union work referred to above, it was inevitable that it should develop autonomously. But its influence did not stop at the trade union frontier. Despite their commitment to socialism, to the working class, to building a new revolutionary party, the leadership were ill-equipped to develop the policies they needed in terms of economic detail and integrated strategy. Their solution was to turn, as Goulding had turned in the Sixties, to the experts. How 'expert' these experts are is a matter of subjective judgement, and for a long time Garland, for example, never considered them actual members even though they were drafting policies; and there is still some tension concerning them. This, in fact, had

grown more acute as the implications of new policy positions begin to sink in on the rank and file, the more established members, and a leadership that needs the experts but resents their arrogance. These ideological conflicts, which involve a de-republican-ising of Official republicanism, have their roots in the work of the Research Section of the Industrial Section or of the Department of Economic Affairs as they grandiosely describe themselves.

## NEW LAMPS FOR OLD

It can be seen that there are certain clear threads of development running through the evolution of SFWP despite all the contradictions and ambiguities, for while the present structure and position is not exactly the goal set out in the middle sixties it has developed through the crises the movement has gone through. Modern SFWP is very much shaped by the Provisional tragedy, and the ultra-leftist imitations of it, and this has sometimes blinded them to objective analysis but never totally subsumed the movement either. These threads centre on two points: a rejection of elitism and a rejection of sectarianism, but even these conditioned by the Republican inheritance that the Army Council of the IRA was the only legitimate government of Ireland. Elitism was the word coined to explain the willingness to tolerate isolation from the masses of the people, and yet carry on with the armed struggle. In the reassessment period (1962 - 1965), particular emphasis was laid on the fact that the IRA did not have popular support. To try to act without that support was elitist and of course this was a charge that could be precisely laid against the Provisionals. The second question is sectarianism. The Republican Movement was never sectarian, though given the fact of sectarianism in the North, its membership was overwhelmingly from the Catholic side and inevitably aspects of Catholic ideology as well as the oppressed Catholics dislike of Protestant triumphalism permeated it to a limited extent.

But, both internally and externally, the Movement never tired of pointing to its Protestant roots, and there was a solid belief that one day Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter would come together again. The civil rights strategy - originally the promotion of the Communist Party, itself mainly drawn from the Protestant community as far as its northern membership went - seemed to hold out the hope of this coming true. Paisleyism merely inspired the Officials to greater non-sectarianism. This led partly to an equation of Catholic and Protestant sectarianism, and even to an equation of the southern and northern states, though the real motivation for Republican hatred of the southern state was the Treaty betrayal and the prison deaths of the Forties.

Further, as the Provisionals recklessly bombed civilian targets and shot individual Protestants, and as Protestant sectarians replied both to Provisionalism and to legitimate demands for Catholics rights with killings and terror, the bright optimism of the early civil rights days gave way to a sordid orgy of death and destruction in which rabid sectarianism made the ideal of people's unity seem a distant dream.

Among the Officials, there developed a feeling that they would have to reach out to the Protestant workers at all costs, though Seamus Costelloe did dismiss them succinctly as "pro-British elements." This desire to reach out was an honest and good emotion, but the Movement proved incapable of placing it strategically within its analysis of the national question or the issue of armed struggle. It has been pointed out

how poorly trained the Republican leadership were for theoretical debate and argument, and nowhere was this more apparent than in relation to the national question Costelloe spoke for a considerable number when he tended to equate the national question with armed struggle. Certainly, the Provisionals did. For them, if you were not involved in the military campaign you were not against the British presence. And this equation was reinforced by the long years of silent collaboration of the three main political parties in southern politics, Fine Gael, Fianna Fail and Labour, in practise all of them stood idly by.

The civil rights demands in themselves, of course, were not national demands. But implicit in the strategy of concentrating on them was the belief that only patronage and privilege enabled Britain to divide Catholic and Protestant and so uphold partition and the denial of full nationhood to the Irish people. This was something that Costelloe could not grasp He tended to see civil rights as having been an issue which cleared the decks, which stirred the Catholics into action, and that now had been superseded, with the stage set for an armed struggle. Garland's view, as expressed in the 1972 documents, was different but related. He did not see civil rights as a central issue from which all other political factors would flow, rather he saw it as one of a number of broad issues with which Republicans should be involved. He argued passionately that specific Republican political activities be undertaken - campaigns for jobs, for better wages, for housing — as well as support for civil rights issues, though these, had clearly lost for him their strategic significance, and their importance for the North as compared to the South was one of quantity rather than quality.

The defeat at the 1972 Army Convention and the later Ard-Fheis of the policy of central commitment to the civil rights strategy fed inevitably to much confusion within the movement as to where they stood and what they should do notwithstanding MacGiolla's important Carrickmore speech in July 1972 to which we shall refer later.

Costelloe, as has been said, argued that it cleared the way for armed struggle, but he had no supporters at all for this view in the top leadership. A major discussion was then organised on the national question, with documents from Costelloe, Garland and Eoin O'Murchu. Costelloe argued for a new NLF idea, involving co-operation with the Provos in armed struggle, and he even professed to believe that the Communists could be won to agree! Whether this latter point was caused by naiveté or duplicity, it found little echo. Garlands paper was defensive. He did not accept the logic of Costelloe's argument, but he was at pains to justify the position he had taken at the previous Ard Fheis and to reject the charges that the leadership was ignoring the underlying spirit of the new policies.

O Murchu's paper, while also strongly anti-Two Nationist was slightly economist, in that there was an over-identification of the national question with imperialism's economic policies. Its political weakness stemmed from the need to resist the Costelloe thrust in new circumstances which had cast aside the policy positions he adhered to. Nevertheless, his paper reiterated that democracy and national sovereignty were the key issues on the immediate agenda. The issue was not resolved there, but the expulsion of Costelloe after the following Ard-Fheis resolved things in its own way. But one bad consequence was a theoretical confusion about the national question, and a dogmatic inflexibility on the concepts of civil rights, class struggle

and national liberation. This is understandable given the fact that lives were lost on these questions, but it remains a major weakness in SFWP's existing policy.

With the appointment of Eamonn Smullen as Director of Economic Affairs in November 1973, the Research Section was given a line in to the centre, and a voice to transmit their views to a leadership increasingly bankrupt of original ideas. It is my main contention that this bankruptcy stems from the leadership's inability to define theoretically the national question and to differentiate that principle from the tactic of armed struggle. The drawing together of the anti-sectarian position and a new line on the national question was tentatively done in a discussion document from the Research Section after the Sunningdale agreement and the setting up of the power sharing executive in the North

This document *From Civil Rights to Class Politics*, argued that Sunningdale for all its institutionalising of the sectarian divisions, amounted to the achievement of civil rights. The writer specifically claimed that Catholic and Protestant enjoyed equality, equality of power for the bosses and equality of exploitation for the workers. In fact reports of the Fair Employment Agency have shown that the patterns of discrimination in employment have barely changed at all, and that Catholics are still at a massive disadvantage, in terms of getting a job at all as well as in terms of the kinds of jobs they might get. This analysis, incorrect in its own terms anyway, completely ignored the political aspects of civil rights demands: an end to repression, a reform of the police force, a guaranteed right of political activity for Irish unity. It implied a rejection of the national question because it argued solely in terms of the existing state structures and poured scorn on those who raised national slogans. This argument could be sold only because of the bitterness with which the Provisionals were regarded and with them Costelloe and his breakaway group.

And because it ignored the political aspect of civil rights and the actual British presence, it overemphasised the importance of economic facts. The increase in non-British investment throughout Ireland was taken to prove that North and South followed identical economic and political patterns and, most significantly that British Imperialism was only an empty slogan; that a new Anglo American imperialism dominated the economy, and that the political complaints about Britain had to be fig leaves or sectarian nationalism. The document was formally anti-Two Nationist, but in practise it lead to the acceptance of the structures of Northern Ireland as achieved.

This economist position dominated all the economic documents published by Sinn Fein. One even went so far as to talk of "Southern Ireland", a phrase previously the preserve of Unionists and West Britons. And since it was argued that civil rights had been all but achieved, it was also clear that there was no longer any need to oppose the RUC as an institution. And how could there be political prisoners, if the political struggle was over? It took some time for these ideas to percolate into, the Ard Fheis resolutions, but come they did. And the result has been the near extinction of the old Officials in the North and border counties. For the slogan, Peace and Class Politics is theoretically underpinned by an acceptance of the Northern state. Anti-Provisionalism was as damaging as Provisionalism to Republican purity and the revolutionary party.

The northern question was not the only aspect of traditional republicanism to undergo change. The Republican Movement had always had its main base in the small farmers

and workers of the small towns, but this base had in fact been becoming less revolutionary over the years as it was decimated by economic pressures. Further, the industrial line - as we may call it to distinguish it from what remained of the traditional position - proceeded on the basis of one tenet central to Garland's revolutionary speech: that there was no existing revolutionary party. The new Sinn Fein was setting out to expropriate both the Communist Party and Labour. The industrial section saw Sinn Fein achieving a hegemony on the left only by championing in an extreme way a "workers position" rejecting absolutely all the ideas of revolutionary class alliance between workers and working farmers that was central to Leninism and Russian communism.

It would be wrong, however, to overstate their own theoretical competence. Their leading theoretician actually argued that since Lenin had described monopoly capitalism — the stage of capitalism when bank capital and industrial capital are linked together, internationally as well, in huge conglomerates — as the last state of capitalism before socialism, therefore the road to socialism in Ireland lay in first of all supporting the monopolies who would crush the local capitalist forces, industrialising the country in a substantial way in the process, create a proletariat free of peasant prejudices and connections and thus sow the seeds of socialism.

Nor was this nonsense allowed to remain theory. From 1976, it has dominated every economic policy statement of Sinn Fein The Workers' Party. Within the trade unions, SFWP members are to the fore in defending the activities in Ireland of foreign multinationals. And when the Telesis report exposed the bankruptcy of existing industrial development policy, SFWP members were again to the fore in defending the IDA.

It need not be said that such a policy runs counter to the entire Republican position held at least until 1975. It is useful to compare the position adopted by Tomas Mac Giolla in his famous Carrickmore speech of 1972 to the propositions of the Irish Industrial Revolution document produced by the Research Section in 1977. Speaking to the Republican Clubs convention in 1972, MacGiolla said: "Preference will be given to those who have a stake in the country rather than fly-by-night international junketeers..... We would break the bonds that tie us to Britain as a controlling market and single, dominant partner, and we will continue to fight North and South the effects of the decision to join the EEC, as these effects bear in upon the workers and small farmers of this country."

By contrast, the Irish industrial Revolution declared: "Foreign industry means a progressive (sic) industrial base, explicit imperialist control and a vast work force which in times of crisis is open instantly to the argument for state socialism rather than feudal and reactionary appeals of the "Buy Irish" nature."

So much for those with a stake in the county! - The IIR further said: "This party strongly opposed EEC entry. Now it intends to equally strongly campaign for maximum advantage from the EEC. We do not envisage withdrawal from the EEC as a prerequisite of our economic plan The longer term commitment to free trade....we fully accept" So much for fighting the effects of joining the EEC. And of course, the farmers, all farmers, came in for special vituperation. The IIR spoke only of "the farming classes." The IIR however, was the last straw as far as the communists were

concerned. They had viewed with some disquiet these new policy developments but had refrained from commenting so as not to exacerbate the situation. But the IIR called for detailed reply. This was published in two issues of the Irish Socialist in March and April 1977. Its effect was devastating. SFWP made only one or two small efforts to reply in the Irish Socialist, and never then defended it publicly elsewhere. Members of SFWP, when challenged about it, replied that it was merely a discussion document, and not party policy. Party policy or not, it was the policy which SFWP was pushing in the trade union movement and in its influential base inside RTE. But the reviews, however unwelcome - for SFWP's leadership do not like having their incompetence exposed - awoke small numbers of SFWP members to an awareness of what policies they were beginning to commit themselves to.

Since then there has emerged the first signs of a tentative Republican wing in opposition to the previous dominance of the industrial section. And with SFWP's new importance on the parliamentary scene, the question of which wing will eventually dominate becomes one of great public importance.

### HOW DO THEY STAND?

Given the fact that the Research Section writes the economic policy documents and that Eamonn Smullen's role is no more than the messenger who conducts their views to the party centre and given the very important part that trade union activity has had for SFWP, it is inevitable that the industrial section, with its strange ideology, should be seen to dominate. This domination has involved a thorough and complete abandonment of republicanism and its replacement by an opportunist mish-mash of Labourite social-democracy and watered down, carefully distilled 'communism.' The main positions of this wing can be summarized as follows. The proposition that "the economic question and not the 'national' question offers the most durable foundation on which to unite the Irish working class" is in reality a rejection of the national question itself, and is only a worker-ist version of Fine Gaels position.

The advancement of the idea that the working class, on one side, is confronted by the united forces of Irish business, the farmers (undifferentiated and undifferentiable) and the self employed, on the other, has led to accepting foreign capital as an ally against local capital, has led to welcoming the multinationals the IDA policy and the whole economic orthodoxy which, in fact, now proving to have been wrong. This leads to acceptance of the EEC, a denigration of all things Irish - including the Irish language - a reckless hostility to the agricultural sector, and a cultural cosmopolitanism to match the new sound mid-Atlantic economics.

It is a far cry from Garland's 1972 appeal to the High Road to the Republic and a far cry too, from MacGiolla's Carrickmore speech. That speech has particular importance because MacGiolla and Garland have both very recently referred to it as the proof of the continuity of the Republican position. Indeed, when MacGiolla was asked on radio about dropping Sinn Fein from the party's name he was insistent that whatever name they had should indicate their roots and continuity. Nor is it just a question of indicating origins. The Carrickmore speech was based on a completely different concept of republicanism to that of the industrial section. MacGiolla's speech, published under the title "Where We Stand: The Republican Position", emphasised

firstly the civil rights struggle, but did so clearly in the context that it was part of a process that would ultimately allow a united people to struggle for national liberation.

Secondly, the blame for violence was placed unequivocally on the British government and its policies of repression. The Provisionals were condemned for having responded to this British provocation, and for the killings and bombings which had exacerbated sectarianism, but Britain was quite clearly the main enemy. This position should be contrasted with a recent SFWP international newsletter, which accuses the Communist Party of pro-Provisionalism because it asserts exactly the same thing with regard to Britain's guilt today as MacGiolla did in 1972. His speech too, reflected the frustrations of the Officials at that time that the media gave prominence to every provisional action. We should remember that this is the same media, and the same journalists who now sneer at the Provisionals and laud the new style SFWP.

But MacGiolla also emphasised one point that is often forgotten in the talk about armed struggle. It was not and is not an issue of pacifist morality. After all, Conor Cruise O'Brien, one of the loudest in condemnation of the Provisional campaign, was willing to use force and violence in the Congo -and many a socialist republican would say he was right. No its not a moral issue, but a political one. And MacGiolla understood that an armed campaign could not win, could not because the people themselves were not involved; and its political aims and purposes did not go to the root of Ireland's national oppression.

And prophetically MacGiolla said "Without political guidance, without a leadership that articulates their demands, the people will blindly opt for peace at any price. And the paper hero will become a paper monster overnight, isolated and remote. He pointedly attacked Eire Nua and the ideas of regional parliaments and federalism in terms not too dissimilar from those used by Owen Carron, Danny Morrison and Gerry Adams at a recent Provisional Ard-Fheis. Dealing with how unity was to be achieved, MacGiolla insisted that Orange sectarian power over the Protestant workers had had to be destroyed, but his position conceded that a localised parliament, democratised by civil rights, would be acceptable until their fears were overcome. This is the only point in that speech with which the policies of the industrial section really agree. And that is why it is significant that the speech has again been referred to by leaders of SFWP.

The most important thing, then, about the recent election of three WP members is their approach to these contraversial questions, and what element holds the balance within the ard chomairle that will determine how they vote. All three TDs can be said, to be on the Republican wing. Joe Sherlock, for example, after his first election in June 1981, expressly defended the constitutional claim, embedded in articles two and three, to national re-unification - a rebuff to Jim Kemmy and to the crypto Two Nationists within the industrial section.

At the last elections, Paddy Gallagher, easily the most articulate and politically astute of the three, attacked the Two Nations theory by name, and asserted ringingly that SFWP stood for a 32 county socialist republic and had no apology to make to Jim Kemmy or anyone else for this.

Gallagher went further. In attacking Bruton, he did not use the new jargon of the Industrial Research Section, by calling a spokesman for the farmers, but described him as a spokesman for the ranchers. This is a word which implies social and economic differentiation among the farmers, and of course is a throwback to the 1972 position. And it is not just an isolated gesture, for during the Cork East by-election of 1979 both MacGiolla and Sherlock stressed the rights of the small farmers and how they fitted into SFWP's revolutionary concept

While anti-Provisionalism is strong in both elements, as Joe Sherlock's repeated attacks on Tony Gregory indicate there are clearly differences of quite basic ideology within SFWP, and the election of three republicans is a set-back for the industrial section. However, it would be quite wrong to imagine that SFWP has reverted to its 1972 position. The Research Section still control their activities in the industrial sphere the majority of Dublin members accept the new line and what is left of Belfast does too. Some of these tensions come out in the internal deliberations in, SFWP after the election. The industrial section favoured keeping Haughey out of power. Firstly they were the most opposed to any raising of the question of Irish unity, and really accepted a unionist attitude on this. But secondly, they saw the future of SFWP being made at the expense of Labour and of voter disillusion with Coalition. Ideally, they wanted Labour to go back into Coalition, with SFWP on the outside, but even they recognised the problems of voting for the Coalition Government and its anti-working class budget.

MacGiolla, however, had from the start ruled out the question of abstention. It was Haughey or Fitzgerald. Here, he clearly saw that Haughey was closer to the economic recovery programme which SFWP favour. Monetarism has few adherents in the ranks of those for whom bank borrowing presents no problem. Haughey, however, was the bete noire blamed personally and directly for directing the fomenting of the Spilt in 1969 and while SFWP were strangely reticent on the question of neutrality there is no doubt that it was a factor in the back of their minds. MacGiolla pushed hard for a joint approach With Labour even though this would probably have meant voting for a minority Fine Gael Government. But O'Leary insisted in his own cabinet seat and not abstract questions like the future of socialism.

In the event SFWP decided on their own, and decided for Haughey. It was not a unanimous decision. Two thirds of the ard-chomhaide are believed to have voted for while O'Hagan and the Belfast men, Smullen and the industrial supporters along with Irish People editor, Pdraig'Yeates, (the one survivor of Costelloe's illegal list at the 1975 Ard Fheis) are believed to have voted against. SFWP has come a long and difficult road. It has earned its place as a significant political party, but it is by no means resolved what final shape its political approach will take.

(N.B. SFWP is used for convenience throughout the article which was written before the name Workers' Party was adopted at the 1982 Ard - Fheis)

**Title:** The Workers' Party: Its Evolution and Its future:  
A Critique

**Organisation:** Communist Party of Ireland

**Author:** Eoin Ó Murchú

**Date:** 1982

Downloaded from the Irish Left Archive.  
Visit [www.leftarchive.ie](http://www.leftarchive.ie)

*The Irish Left Archive is provided as a non-commercial historical resource, open to all, and has reproduced this document as an accessible digital reference. Copyright remains with its original authors. If used on other sites, we would appreciate a link back and reference to the Irish Left Archive, in addition to the original creators. For re-publication, commercial, or other uses, please contact the original owners. If documents provided to the Irish Left Archive have been created for or added to other online archives, please inform us so sources can be credited.*