

Performing Artists on a Flying Trapeze

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Intercontinental Press

June 4, 1973

II

If the leaders of the Official republican movement are to fulfill their aspiration of building a "revolutionary party of the Irish people," two elements are essential: (1) a consistent revolutionary program; (2) a strategy enabling the revolutionary political nucleus to reach out to broader and broader layers of the Irish population and working class and involve them in effective united action against British imperialism and the dependent capitalist system in Ireland.

On both key questions, although they have not been slow to offer advice, the various British sectarian groups have proved unable to point the way forward. One such group, however—the Socialist Labour League (SLL), led by Thomas Gerard Healy—has provided examples of major pitfalls to avoid. In particular, the SLL's apparent attempt to influence the sectarian fringe of the Official republican movement offers some useful lessons.

In the first place, the methods and arguments used reveal a great deal about the SLL and its claims to be a Trotskyist organization. For a group that purports to have maintained intact all of the principles and experience of revolutionary Marxism, the development of an acute crisis almost next door, in the neighboring island, should have been an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the relevance and usefulness of this heritage.

In a situation dominated by a number of groups with vague and unfinished political programs, an organization that claimed to have all of the answers should have been able at least to lay out a consistent strategy for the fighters and show by example some of the techniques of revolutionary organization. It could be expected, moreover, that a principled revolutionary ally in Britain would have been much appreciated by the Irish fighters, who have not seen a great deal of helpful solidarity from the British left and labor movement.

Moreover, one of the main forces in the situation was a recently radicalized and, in many respects, strikingly

capable and seasoned leadership—the leaders of the Irish Republican Army and later the Official republican movement. Despite heavy doses of Stalinist influence from various sources, the minds of the key republican leaders were still generally open and receptive to revolutionary ideas. They were eager to make a start toward overcoming the poverty of ideas that had long afflicted the Irish revolutionary movement. Nor was the republican movement the only promising factor in the situation. A whole generation of fighters was displaying high revolutionary qualities in a series of groups and actions.

Thus, if the SLL were really the sole heir of uncorrupted living Marxism—Trotskyism—as claimed, it now had an exceptional opportunity to educate some of the best revolutionary material that has appeared in recent decades.

An Important Resolution

The history of the SLL's twists and turns on the Irish question in the four years that have passed since the start of the mass civil-rights movement is complicated. The only constant has been the SLL's abstract, propagandistic attitude. Nonetheless, the SLL's approach was presented rather well in Ian Yeats's article in the March 22 issue of *Workers Press*, "Marxist Phrases Hide Backing for Nationalists." The "Marxist phrases" were attributed to my articles on the December 15-16, 1972, Official republican convention.

In the first place, it is interesting to see how Yeats reacted to the signs of a political discussion taking place in the Official republican movement. His approach was indicative of the SLL's method. For example, he wrote: "Foley quotes at length and approvingly from the preamble to a resolution on the north not on the Clar (agenda) but which he claims was circulating among delegates.

"A spokesman for Gardner [sic] Place confirmed that no such resolution was on the Clar or put to the Ard Fheis."

In view of an apparent attempt by Yeats to provoke a split in the Derry republican group (see Part I of this article. *Intercontinental Press*, May 28, p. 637), Yeats's

discussion with a "spokesman for Gardner [sic] place" is likely to have been a short one. But he could have read the newspapers. The resolution he was referring to was clearly identified. In my January 22 article I referred to it as the "resolution redefining policy on the Northern question." In the February 5 article I wrote:

"At the *ard fheis* a major resolution on the civil-rights movement was introduced which clarified the policy of the Official republican movement on some issues: 'The Republican Movement could not under any circumstances call for the reestablishment of a 6 County parliament. To do so would mean total recognition of Britain's right to impose a Partitionist assembly on the Irish people, and would be in complete conflict with the Republican and Separatist tradition.' This resolution made it clear that although the Official republican movement favored demanding democratic rights from the British government and Northern Irish authorities, it did not accept the context of a Northern statelet. In effect, this resolution rejected the 'stages' concept earlier held on one level or another by some of the republican leadership, a concept that envisaged 'democratization' of the Six-County state as a precondition for struggling for national liberation.

"In particular, the preamble to this resolution represented a major step forward in republican thinking toward a consistent revolutionary perspective. Unfortunately this document was not distributed; but many of those present seemed to be familiar with its contents. The main objection to making it public seemed to be that it contained a characterization of the Communist party as reformist, which was repeated in the open debate by the resolution's sponsor, Seamus Costello."

What Were Yeats's Sources?

The debate over this resolution was the most important political discussion at the convention and was referred to in all the press reports. Furthermore, there have been publications and statements of the Official republican movement since the *ard fheis* that reflect this change in policy, which was also expressed by Malachy McGurran in his December 26 interview: "Our movement both nationally and locally is going through a period of coming to realize the need for reorganization and reeducation, of developing a clearer perspective of its role in relation to the national question and the social question, of how to combine these two main issues and achieve a oneness of the struggle." ("Under the British Occupation," *Intercontinental Press*, January 15, 1973, p. 25.)

Furthermore, Yeats himself, later on in his March 22 article, refers to the very same supposedly "mysterious" resolution.

"The resolution put to the *Ard Fheis* by right-wing Bray delegate Seamus Costello, which more than any other summed up the Officials' new course, laid down that in future civil rights was to be seen as part of the overall programme and struggle of the revolutionary party."

Is it possible that the Healyite reporter was not sure what resolution I was referring to? But later on he writes:

"Foley argues that the Officials are in danger of abandoning civil rights altogether and that the reason for this is their failure to analyse where the role of the Communist Party helped the movement go wrong.

"But as the preamble to Costello's resolution, in which he took the CP to task for their reformism, clearly showed,

this analysis had been made."

This preamble, however, was not only not distributed; no report of it, to my knowledge, has appeared in the Irish press. There are only two ways Yeats could have known about it. He either saw a copy or based himself on what I wrote in my article. The indications are that the latter is the case.

Yeats writes that I quoted "at length" from the preamble. In fact, I only quoted a short paragraph or two to indicate its main political point. Virtually all this is requoted in the Healyite reporter's article. I did not, however, directly quote the most politically sensitive section, the part attacking the Communist party. It is notable that Yeats does not quote this passage either, although it would seem to be the most important from his point of view. He really should have quoted it, for example, to prove his contention that the Officials have analyzed "where the role of the Communist Party helped the movement go wrong."

Unfortunately, this claim was grossly overoptimistic, as shown most notably by the parasitic "role" the Officials still allow the tiny Communist party of Ireland to play in the civil-rights movement. The preamble to Costello's resolution was only a first step toward developing a critique of the reformist position on the relationship between the civil-rights struggle and the fight for national independence. This same reformist position, by the way, is not only put forward by the Communist party of Ireland but by some Maoist-tinged and presumably independent Stalinists and Stalinoids, who are not altogether without influence in the Official movement.

Moreover, so far, the new line seems to have had only the most minimal effect on the practical activity of the movement. One of the ways this has been shown is by the Bloody Sunday commemoration fiasco in Derry (see Part I of this article), where the timid reformist policy of the NICRA leadership resulted in a stinging defeat for its major component, the Official republicans.

The Communist party is so small that it has little to lose if the civil-rights movement stagnates. It can even hope to recruit from a narrowing but more committed circle of "democratic" activists. But the decline of the civil-rights movement is a matter of life and death for the Officials, because it leaves them without a mass alternative to the Provisional guerrilla campaign. They would not accept such defeats if they were not to some extent still under the influence of Stalinist reformism.

What was the reason then for all Yeats's pretense about the "mysterious" preamble to a resolution on the north not on the Clar (agenda), but which he [Foley] claims was circulating among delegates."

The reason is all too obvious, especially after Yeats's Derry operation. He was trying to create a scandal over the document, to arouse fears that its authors represented a trend toward conciliation with the Provisionals. His objective was to stampede a few insecure dogmatists toward the safe harbor of the SLL, where there would never be a thought of "conciliation" with anybody.

The Official leaders did make a mistake, in my opinion, in not distributing the document in question. Failing to inform the membership fully of important discussions among the leadership encourages intrigue of all kinds. Still, to the credit of the republicans, it must be said that this document has now been rather widely circulated.

Rank-and-filers who had not gotten copies in December had them in February. And it was evident that the republican leaders intended to distribute it, since the various persons who gave me copies did not regard it as secret but only wanted to restrict distribution in order to avoid arousing untimely speculation in the capitalist press, which does pay a fair amount of attention to rumors about the internal life of the movement.

But producing this document was to the credit of the republican movement in a far deeper and more important sense. It showed that the Officials were still a living political movement able to discuss the political situation in the country objectively and to reevaluate their positions. Is there any such evidence of internal political life in the SLL? In ten years at least there has not been a whiff of real discussion in that organization.

If the SLL were a Trotskyist organization, its reaction to the development of a political discussion in one of the major Irish organizations would have been completely different from Yeats's small-time political skulduggery.

The Voice of Chairman Mao

In the first place, one of the most important principles of Leninism is the need for collective democratic discussion of elaborate effective tactics and strategy. Even the Stalinist parties pay lip service to this concept. In an article on building the revolutionary party that appeared in issue No. 3 of the Official theoretical magazine *Teoiric*, an anonymous author was able to cite Chairman Mao as the advocate of internal democracy:

"It is through its internal work that a party evolves its theory, applies that theory to decide its practice, learns from its practice to test its theory—evolving better theory for better practice. Correct ideas are not to be found on trees, but are the result of clear, logical thinking and scientific analysis of actual events. Correct ideas cannot be worked out in isolation and then presented to an astounded populace. They must be tested in the crucible of practice. Mao Tse Tung, in his essay 'Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?', expresses this perfectly when he says: '*Where do correct ideas come from? Do they drop from the skies? No. Are they innate in the mind? No. They come from social practice and from it alone; they come from three kinds of social practice: the struggle for production, the class struggle and scientific experiment.*' In other words theory begets practice which begets theory which begets more practice. For it is experience which teaches lessons, and rationality and logic which puts them into a pattern. The first aspect of internal work, therefore, and the first task of those who wish to build a revolutionary party, is to ensure that the organization is geared for discussion. This depends on the principle of criticism—self-criticism.

"Criticism—self-criticism is the principle by which correct theory is evolved. Correct theory is essential for any revolutionary party for otherwise it can never give correct leadership and smash the power of the capitalist and imperialist state. Only conscious action can do that. As Marx said: 'Man determines history on the basis of pre-existing conditions.' In other words if a situation is correctly analyzed, a balance of forces can be developed favourable to progressive advance. This phrase of Marx is often distorted. . . . For Marx did not say, as the ultra-left imagine, that it is man's actions alone which determine

history regardless of the objective conditions in the situation. It is this type of woolly thinking which leads many sincere people to argue that *socialism* should be the slogan at this stage of our struggle, despite the fact that the working class is viciously divided and overwhelmingly under reactionary influence both in the south, where Fianna Fail is more secure than ever, and amongst the Northern Protestant workers, who still support fascist-type Unionism."

The author goes on to say that the opposite of voluntarism is the "Economist approach to 'revolution,'" whose advocates "argue that Marx meant that objective conditions change the world regardless of man's actual participation." He calls for overcoming these two deviations "through the interaction of practice and theory; and this interaction cannot be achieved unless there is open discussion."

Any reader not dazzled by the wisdom of these Little Red Book aphorisms could legitimately ask what the results of "self-criticism" and "open discussion" have been in the Great Helmsman's own country. Hasn't one previously infallible leader after another been suddenly exposed as a "secret enemy"? Hasn't one disastrous bureaucratic fantasy after another, from the Great Leap Forward to the cultural revolution, prevailed without the slightest voice of criticism being raised against it—that is, not until the worst damage was done and all the blame was suddenly loaded onto one individual bureaucrat or group of bureaucrats? How does this differ from the 180-degree shifts in line that became typical of the Communist International as internal democracy and open discussion were crushed by the Stalinist bureaucratic machine? No matter what the line was, it was always justified by the same sort of ponderous pronouncements indulged in by the author or authors of the *Teoiric* article, which could be given a different concrete meaning to fit each situation.

The Role of Leadership

The fact that this type of thinking apparently passes for good coin in at least some quarters in the Official movement is, of course, an indication that there may be possibilities there for the SLL, which also supported the Red Guards in the "cultural revolution" on the basis of the abstract rhetoric and "red revolutionary" generalities of Chairman Mao. But this fact also indicates that in order to foster a leftward development in the Official movement, revolutionists must encourage concrete discussions of the fundamental problems the republicans are facing. This involves not only helping to clarify the issues and enrich the debate but explaining how to organize and conduct discussions in a constructive way.

Part of this, too, is making clear the role of leaders in a revolutionary party. Policy is not formulated through some anonymous process. The ranks do not make decisions in a vacuum. Leaders have to take clear and consistent stands and assume responsibility for them. Persons who accept a wrong policy or concept without fighting against it disqualify themselves for leadership.

These principles are crucial for the Official republicans at this point in their development. They cannot go forward unless a leadership emerges that has a consistent revolutionary program and unless the ranks are educated in clear and democratic discussions.

Instead of trying to encourage political discussion in the

Official movement, however, Yeats tries, by his pretense about "mysterious" preambles, to turn the very existence of such a debate into a petty scandal. Moreover, he crudely distorts the actual political points of the document in question (see Part I of this article). Instead of commending the leaders who came forward with relatively clear political positions, he tries to rouse unsubstantiated suspicions about them. What is it, for example, that makes Seamus Costello "right wing," and who precisely qualifies as being to the "left" of him and why?

In short, Yeats shows either no understanding or no interest in the process of political development going on in the republican movement. His attitude is basically that of a political parasite.

Yeats, of course, has already written off the possibility of any positive development in the Official movement. In his March 22 article he said:

"A new, 'democratic centralist' structure is to be given the party to make sure that in future the leadership's writ runs in unchallenged uniformity."

It is, in fact, not unlikely that there are some in the Official movement who look toward a tighter structure as a means of clamping down on various political elements. It is obvious that there are a number of Stalinist-trained activists who conceive a revolutionary party as being a kind of mystical "Marxist" mandarin, or church. They seem to have more traditionalist conservative allies. However, Yeats apparently does not take into consideration the effect of the actual experience of the republican leaders in trying to lead a politically heterogeneous formation in a situation characterized by the sharpest tensions. In such conditions, responsible and sincerely revolutionary figures have naturally come to look to the Bolshevik example as an answer to their difficulties.

Why is Yeats so quick to assume that there can be nothing positive in the aspiration of the Official leaders to build a democratic centralist organization? Ordinary sectarianism is one obvious answer. But there also seems to be something more subtle. For the SLL, concrete experience apparently never leads in the direction of revolutionary consciousness but only to "reformism" and "impressionism." The only thing you can learn from experience is that you must renounce your sins and join the true church of Healyism.

One result of this concept is that the SLL tends to recruit individuals disillusioned with all concrete struggles, who are basically looking for the reassurance of routinist activity and airtight ideological certainties. In fact, the SLL's sudden interest in a polemic on Ireland seems to be related to the fact that the struggle has reached a fairly low ebb and there is a considerable amount of demoralization in and around the main Irish organizations. This would appear to be one reason the SLL decided to open up an attack on *Intercontinental Press* at this particular time.

They Can Turn It On or Turn It Off

There is, of course, a fundamental difference between the revolutionary-Marxists and the Healyites on the revolutionary dynamic of the national struggle in Ireland. This difference has been clear from the very start of the recent crisis. In article after article over the past four years, I have analyzed the dynamic of Irish national aspirations. In the October 27, 1969, issue of *Interconti-*

mental Press, for instance, I took up the Healyite position in some detail. None of this provoked any response from the SLL.

It was notable, in fact, that by late 1970, when it was apparent that the crisis in Ireland would be quite prolonged and would have a major impact on the British left, the SLL seemed to lose its taste for polemics somewhat, concentrating more on less ambitious articles exposing the evils to be found in the Six Counties.

As the struggle declined beginning about April 1972 the urge to do political battle on the question seems paradoxically to have revived in the *Workers Press* offices. But the predictions of final betrayal by the major Irish groups have so far at least proved premature. And it can be expected that new flareups and turns will soon discredit the SLL's dogmatic generalities, as they have so often in the past.

At various times since the start of the mass civil-rights movement in Ireland, the SLL has argued, of course, in favor of three correct and vitally important principles: the need for arming the masses, distrust of the British army, and opposition to terrorism as a method. But these arguments have always been raised in a way calculated to maintain the SLL's image of unassailable "revolutionary" and "Marxist" virtue without committing the organization to involvement in any real struggle.

The Healyite Call to Arms

When the first civil-rights marches were being organized, the tactic used by the leaders was to defend the participants politically by stressing the nonviolent and legal character of the actions. The support of international public opinion prevented the fanatical Orange groups and the special police of the imperialist fortress state in the North from immediately suppressing these protests as they had previous ones.

The Healyites were critical. When a student march was attacked in the middle of an Orange area, the *Newsletter*, the predecessor of *Workers Press*, wrote in its January 14, 1969, issue: "Farrell and the other leaders thus led their marchers, including many young girls, into a conflict with Bunting's thugs bereft of any weapons save their undeniable courage. . . ."

"*Workers' defence guards should be formed in every area, and there must be no more unarmed marches. Fight for the repeal of the Special Powers Act and against all bans on marches.*" (Emphasis in original.)

The Healyites did not have to worry about the result of "armed marches" in those days because there was no danger of any one taking their call seriously.

When massive fighting and real "workers' defence guards" sprang up in August 1969, the Healyites quickly changed their tune. At first they call for "pure" workers defense guards made up of both Protestant and Catholic workers, a safely unachievable demand.

In the September 20, 1969, *Newsletter*, the "dialectician" in charge, Cliff Slaughter, wrote: "The *Newsletter* has called for the *labour movement* to organize workers' defence guards as the only guarantee against the armed right-wing thugs and has denounced the armed intervention as well as Callaghan's visit as a cover for Paisleyism. . . ."

"It does not occur to Treacy [the Irish expert of the International Socialists] that insofar as Catholic workers

ion are dominated in their politics by the Catholic hierarchy, their consciousness is reactionary and must be fought against and that those who proceed to support them as 'more progressive' are helping precisely the efforts of the Irish capitalists to prevent working-class unity at all costs."

This pious rejoinder came only a month after Catholics in the ghettos of Belfast and Derry were being attacked, shot at, and burned out in the name of their religion.

Then, in the *Workers Press* of October 3, 1969, Slaughter wrote:

"After many months of a disastrous reliance on the middle-class civil rights leadership, the Catholic workers find themselves isolated from their Protestant brothers in the barricaded slum areas.

"Whatever the problems of 'law and order' for the capitalists, this situation is *politically* a good one for them. . . . [Emphasis in the original.]

"All the talk about arms is adventurist rubbish at this stage." (My emphasis.)

This line had several advantages for an opportunist sect like the SLL. By a neat left feint, it enabled the Healyites to avoid the pressure on them to help defend the embattled Catholics against the regular and irregular repressive forces of British imperialism. Invoking working-class unity that was unachievable in the concrete circumstances sounded much more "Marxist" than defending the "prisoners of a reactionary ideology" in the Catholic ghettos. It also corresponded to the tendency of British left and liberal opinion to dismiss the Irish fighters as "hopelessly backward," and not worth worrying about.

Down the Barricades and Up Again

At its most pious, the SLL has in fact shown a dismaying tendency to slip into imperious attitudes toward Irish revolutionists, as for example when it attacked the Official Sinn Féin organizer Seán Garland in the June 20, 1972, issue of *Workers Press*: "Garland is no ordinary bog-trotting Republican. He prides himself on being some kind of 'Marxist'. . . ."

But vague and hackneyed calls for working-class unity were not entirely sufficient even for the SLL. In order to maintain its claims of offering a revolutionary alternative, it needed to be able to point to concrete betrayals by the forces leading the struggle. Therefore, the SLL switched its position on the barricades that were supposed to be separating the Catholic workers from their "Protestant brothers." The SLL transformed these formerly unfortunate barriers into sacred arks of the revolution. When the barricades were taken down in 1969, the SLL suggested betrayal.

When again, in the summer of 1972, some barricades were taken down in the course of a confrontation between the British army and the people of the "no-go areas," the July 1 *Workers Press* proclaimed: "What Whitelaw thinks today, the Social Democratic and Labour Party says tomorrow—and the Republicans the day after that.

"So it was with the ceasefire. So it is with the barricades—the last remaining symbol of defiance to British military occupation.

"It only needed a hint from the Ulster Defense Association-Vanguard group that 'selective' barricades were going up this weekend for the SDLP—in the person of Bogsider John Hume MP—to immediately launch an appeal for the removal of the barricades. . . .

"Synchronously with this appeal came the announcement from Republican sources that three barricades would come down because they were 'rat infested'.

"The barricades, of course, have only a symbolic and provisional significance since the IRA agreed to bury their arms together with the cause for which they fought—namely a united Ireland. . . .

"So, thanks to the SDLP collusion and the IRA (Official and Provisional) capitulation, and only a few hours after the SDLP meeting, the Londonderry [sic]¹ Commission bulldozer knocked a 12-foot path through the Little Diamond Barricade to the paradoxical cheers of the local inhabitants."

The UDA did more than hint that barricades were going up. It went on a campaign of building barricades in an attempt to give the imperialists an excuse for attacking the ghetto areas in the guise of impartial peacekeepers. It also threatened to go in and "clean out" the Derry ghetto if the British troops did not do the job.

With the Catholic community divided in the aftermath of a series of political disasters in the spring and early summer, the ghetto defenders were in an extremely difficult position. The objective problems of the Official IRA were made even worse by their ideological weaknesses, including the idea that a confrontation with the "Protestant workers" would be the ultimate catastrophe.

This, of course, was the same line the SLL had been trumpeting since 1969, but the Official republicans, whose skins were really at stake, unfortunately took this dogma seriously and followed it rather consistently, at the risk of finding themselves and their followers ideologically disarmed in the face of new pogroms.

Protestants Battling the British!

That the SLL's doctrine of "working-class unity" was only a propaganda pose is clearly shown by the gyrations on the question of the reactionary Protestant popular organizations and militias.

In its October 7, 1969, issue *Workers Press* hailed the riots touched off in Protestant areas by the moves leading up to the dissolution of the B-Specials, the reactionary militia of the Protestant ascendancy. These outbreaks, according to the Healyites, heralded the approach of working-class unity. British imperialism had proven unable to maintain the division of the class.

"But the game is up! Because capitalism can provide no future for either the Protestant or the Catholic worker; and because these workers sense the strength and offensive power of their class throughout the world, their need to fight will not and cannot be contained within the old religious 'sectarian' framework.

"Within only a week or two of the clashes between the forces of the state and groups of Catholic workers in August this year, a remarkable change took place in the situation.

"Protestant workers, for half a century used as a pillar of support for the 'British connection', found themselves in street battles against the British Army!"

1. Derry is the native name. The "London" was added when the London corporation acquired title to the land as a result of English conquest. Since the Irish name also has the advantage of shortness, only proimperialist chauvinists and those most respectful of "her majesty's" municipal nomenclature continue to use the form introduced by the conquerors.

The republicans (still not formally split) also saw grounds for hope in this clash between Protestant workers and British troops. The November 1969 issue of their paper, the *United Irishman*, carried "An Open Letter to the Poor Protestants of Ulster," which said, among other things: "Fifty years of religious and political loyalty to the Crown and what do you get but a kick in the stomach. Or worse.

"You who have fought so fearlessly for the connection with England have been rewarded by English bullets, English bayonets and English tear-gas. . . .

"The main reality is the economic reality; and if worker stands against worker because deluded by the boss that he should do so for some snobbish silly reason ('we're better than they are'), the only one to suffer will be the worker, all workers.

"Most of us workers are joined already in a trade union which fights the boss, Orange or Papist, for better wages and conditions.

"Isn't it time we got together politically to do away with all bosses and their hypocrisies?"

In contrast to the "Marxists" of the SLL, who were so quick to see a linkup coming between Catholic workers fighting the repressive forces of British imperialism and Protestant workers protesting the disbandment of the most ill-famed terrorist force of the state, the republican statement was not outside the bounds of reality. It was correct to take the opportunity to try to explain to Protestant workers that Britain was not really concerned with defending their interests.

But a false conception was embedded in the republican appeal. The flattery of the Loyalists who were supposed to have "fought so fearlessly to maintain the connection with England" (Against whom did they fight? They were armed to the teeth by British imperialism and fought against half-armed and outnumbered nationalists) was indicative of illusions that were to have serious results.

Voices were raised in Official circles suggesting that the next time the British troops and Protestants had a go, it might be a good idea to stage diversionary attacks on the imperialist troops to divert them from attacking "our brother Irishmen." Since the main clashes occurred when Protestant mobs were on their way toward Catholic ghettos, it could be predicted that this idea would be hard to defend to the nationalist-minded people. It was apparently dropped.

The Primacy of Politics

The same concept showed up in an article entitled "Tao-bhú leis na Protastúin ["Side with the Protestants"] in the October 1969 issue of *An Phoblacht*, the monthly paper reflecting the views of Provisional Sinn Féin.

"If a section of the Protestants start a fight against the forces of the crown in the Six Counties, what should we in the republican movement do? If a group of Protestants rise up against Westminster, London, what should we do?"

"That is how the question was put to me recently. I have only one answer to the two questions; take the side of the Protestants against the army that has its boot on the stomach of Irishmen in the six counties of the Northeast.

"But are these people fascists? . . .

"It doesn't matter if they are fascists; they are Irishmen and we are Irishmen and England is the enemy." [Is cuma faisistí nó eile iad nó is Eireannaigh atá iontu agus is Eireannaigh muide agus is ea Sasana an namhad.]

At least this writer was more consistent than the SLL "Marxists." He was able to dismiss and not ignore the political ideology guiding the Protestants who clashed with the British troops. Furthermore, the Irish writer shared the SLL's evaluation of the need for fighting the influence of the Catholic church:

"The Presbyterians never cared much for kings and princes or aristocrats in general. They didn't need bishops. They understood what democracy was.

"I must remind those who are dubious about the role of the Protestants in the new Ireland that the Catholic church has worked hard against republicanism with the strongest weapon it could use against believing Catholics — excommunication."

It is not surprising that republicans armed only with moralistic ideas and unanalyzed (but rationalized) tradition should make errors about the dynamic of the Northern struggle, which is certainly extremely complex. This is clearly a case where Marxists can make the best demonstration of the superiority of their method.

The first thing a Marxist would have to explain is the primacy of politics: that as long as the Protestants mobilize in opposition to the movement of the Catholics for national liberation, they can only move in a reactionary direction. It is understandable that populist republicans think that all of the poor, the "people," or the working class can be rallied by appeals to a general common interest. There is no excuse for Marxists making this mistake; they have a rich heritage of analyzing differences in the working class and mobilizations of popular strata for reactionary interests.

But not only did the SLL not offer an objective and scientific analysis of the Protestant behavior; it did not even have the courage of its "convictions."

The republicans, operating in accordance with the romanticized view of the Protestants bequeathed by petty-bourgeois nationalists like Eoin Mac Neil, not only drew the same optimistic conclusions as the SLL about the cases of Protestants clashing with British troops; they tried to act on the basis of this view. They sought contacts and dialogue with leaders of the Protestant militants such as Ian Paisley and the UDA leaders, who were often at sharp variance with the British authorities and the established leaders of Unionism, at times even being subjected to jail terms and other forms of repression.

This policy was a logical conclusion of the SLL's view of the Catholics and the Protestants converging in struggle. But when the republicans actually tried to do something about it, the SLL took this as another chance to raise the cry of betrayal. When Paisley carried out some tactical maneuvers in the fall of 1971, opposing internment (in favor of regular prison sentences for IRA "terrorists") and talking vaguely about a deal with the South, if the theocratic features of the Free State were removed, most nationalist opinion was disoriented. Both the Officials and Provisionals, as well as other nationalist organizations and personalities made overtures to the "activist" proimperialist groups.

In its December 6, 1971, issue, *Workers Press* seized on one such overture by David O'Connell:

"A leading member of the IRA has issued a statement calling on the Rev Ian Paisley to build branches of his extreme right-wing party in Catholic working-class areas.

"This reactionary appeal is a damning indictment of the treacherous forces inside the IRA leadership."

It is possible, of course, that the SLL writer was unaware of the circumstances around this appeal; one stray newspaper clipping might have triggered a conditioned reflex. It is also possible that this journalist did not draw any consistent conclusions from the SLL's pronouncement. There is not much real consistency in the SLL's attitude over the last four years. But what was unforgivable was the implication that the Provisionals and the Protestant rightists were both equally reactionary. This was pandering to the worst chauvinist prejudices of the British working class.

On the Question of Terrorism

Another example of inconsistency on the part of the SLL raises even more serious questions about its understanding of principle. *Workers Press* has continually repeated the classical Marxist criticisms of terrorism as a method of revolutionary struggle, opposing both the republicans and the young British ultraleft. On occasion, these criticisms coincided with the Official IRA's critique of the Provisional campaign. For example, the September 13, 1971, *Workers Press* said:

"The use of 'terror' in a negative, one-sided fashion is doing considerable damage to the building of unity between the Catholic and Protestant workers."

After the political disaster the Official IRA suffered in May 1972 in Derry as the result of executing a local youth on leave from the British army, the May 26 *Workers Press* had some friendly advice for the Officials:

"We call upon the official IRA to consider seriously political changes in its policies which will mean the abandonment of terrorism and its replacement with revolutionary policies which unite the Irish with the English working class against their common enemy the Tory government."

But when the Officials called a halt to "offensive action" a few days later, the May 31, 1972, *Workers Press* trumpeted:

"For the second time in ten years the Official IRA leaders in Gardiner Place, Dublin, have sold out the heroic struggle of the Catholic Irish workers in the North.

"No amount of Republican rhetoric and no amount of evocation of sectarian violence can hide this. . . .

"Calling off the military campaign will not lessen the sectarian hatreds, but will only strengthen the demands of the 'Vanguard' gorillas. William Craig dismissed the IRA 'initiative' as 'unimportant' and designed 'only to gain favour in Londonderry'.

"The Orange reactionaries predictably view this capitulation with contempt and are encouraged in their campaign to put more pressure on the army to take the Creggan and other 'no-go' areas by storm."

The Officials' retreat from terrorism was now seen as betraying the forces still engaged in such activity.

"This is exactly British strategy in Ulster: split the Officials from the Provisionals [now who's talking about unity with the Provos?], neutralize the former, isolate the latter, and hit the Provos hard.

"With leaders like the Gardiner Place reformists who needs the British army? Beaten by Lynch's referendum in the South and bewildered by direct rule in the North, these petty-bourgeois imposters are now crawling unashamedly before imperialism.

"Nobody should be surprised if yesterday's inmates of Long Kesh and the wanted men on the RUC's list should

soon be seen serving on Whitelaw's wretched advisory commission.

"Is it any accident that Whitelaw's nominee on the Commission, Tom Conaty from the Central Citizen's Defence Committee and his mouthpiece in the SDLP, Gerry Fitt, have unreservedly welcomed the Officials' statement?

"The stage is now set to go from direct rule to direct collaboration."

From the safety of its London offices, *Workers Press* dismissed the danger of the Irish fighters becoming isolated from the nationalist community, where for the first time in months the moderates felt strong enough to launch a "peace offensive."

"While it is true that the indiscriminate bombing of the Provisional IRA has outraged Protestants and incensed many Catholics, this does not give the Officials any political justification to kowtow to Whitelaw or his stooges.

"Workers Press, which has criticized in the past and will continue to do so in the present and future, the Provisionals' political bankruptcy and sectarianism, denounces this act of the Officials.

"It is unprincipled and traitorous. As the Provisional leaders stated: 'We look upon this surrender as a gigantic confidence trick aimed at giving firmer control to the Official wing of their undisciplined members.'"

The SLL's principles are thus so elastic as to make it possible to have your cake and eat it too. Its "orthodox Marxist" condemnation of terrorism did not stand in the way of appealing to the romantic ultraleftists getting vicarious thrills from the "armed struggle" in Ulster. Out of the wreck of the Irish cause, the SLL could hope to emerge as the only uncompromised guardian of "revolutionary principle," in other words, a church where a few of the survivors might want to seek sanctuary and spiritual solace.

Unfortunately, this sectarian project needed a long period of relative stagnation to be successful, and the Irish struggle was still to experience some dramatic shifts.

When the Provisionals were also forced to declare a truce few weeks after the Officials, the June 24 *Workers Press* wrote that the betrayal of the "nationalists" was now complete and only the "Marxists," represented by the SLL, were still in the field.

"Peace' says Harold Wilson—three years after dispatching the troops who started the war in Ulster. 'Peace' shout the disparate group of People's Democracy, Official Republicans, Women's peace corps and last but not least, Miss Bernadette Devlin, MP, as they crawl behind the SDLP.

"And 'peace' says the two-faced Lynch as he jails more Republicans to prove it.

"Peace' grunts the paratrooper as he slips another round into the breach of his SLR [self-loading rifle].

"And now comes the echoing cry of 'peace' from the Provisionals as they bury their arms—and probably some of their comrades who opposed the cease-fire. . . .

"If 1922 was a tragedy, then this is history repeating itself as a grotesque farce. The Irish petty-bourgeois Republicans—in alliance with the revisionists—have once again led the Catholic working class into the cul-de-sac of sectarian terror only in order to recoil from their folly and prostrate themselves at the feet of imperialism in the end."

Our Line's Been Changed Again

But less than three weeks later, when the Provisionals ended their truce and resumed their bombing campaign, the SLL had to revise its claims about the betrayal being complete. It even began to refer to the Provisionals as "the IRA":

"... the IRA had every right to reject the truce and fight back—however tardily. Workers Press, while criticizing the policies of the IRA which led to the 'truce', nevertheless supports unreservedly, the disruption by the IRA of the cynical and fraudulent 'truce' of imperialism. We also support critically [?] the withdrawal of troops (not in 1975, but now) and the release of internees and political prisoners in Ulster and Britain.

"For the same reason we condemn categorically the unprincipled and cravenly middle-class reformist attitude of the Official IRA and the 'Morning Star' to the breaking of the 'truce'.

"The Official Sinn Fein in Dublin have 'regretted' the Provisionals' decision to resume fighting. Their statement alleges that 'the resumption of offensive action will take the pressure off Mr. Whitelaw . . .' Having made their peace with imperialism, these reformist-nationalists have no desire to make Whitelaw's job any more difficult—or to embarrass Generals Ford and Tuzo.

"Whilst correctly reproving the Provisionals for having secret talks with Whitelaw and accusing the British army of employing *agents provocateurs* to kill innocent people and inflame sectarian passions, the Officials conclude by the most pathetic display of capitulationism:

"The close co-operation between the British army and the UDA over the last week surely should have warned the anti-Unionist forces against the position of confrontation."

"At least 16,500 British troops, aided by the most brutal police force in the British Isles, stand menacingly over the Irish workers and the Official Sinn Fein says 'Don't fight!'" (*Workers Press*, July 12, 1972.)

Once again the Healyites took the opportunity to morally condemn the Officials' policy without bothering to analyze it. This was a grave dereliction of duty on the part of a group that claims to be Marxist, because there was, in fact, a serious danger that the Officials' incorrect ideas would disarm them in the face of British repression and Orange terror.

The Officials were only following the logic of the position, put forward with such a show of dogmatic "conviction" by the SLL, that the same dynamic was present in the Protestant differences with the British army and the mobilizations of the nationalist-minded population. Therefore, their basic strategy was to split the Protestant militant groups away from the imperialist and proimperialist establishment and draw them into unity with their Catholic counterparts.

As a result, the healing of the split between the UDA and the British army in the period around Operation Motorman was seen as the ultimate disaster. In point of fact, it was extremely dangerous. Because what it represented was division in the ghettos and international isolation of the nationalist-minded people, which enabled Whitehall to take the "tough" policy against the nationalist ghettos that the UDA demanded. The imperialists and the various proimperialist factions, no longer faced with

unity of the anti-imperialist population and the widespread sympathy abroad for their cause, were able to overcome serious divisions over how to handle the threat presented by the protests and demands of the oppressed people.

Nonetheless, the policy of the Officials was the exact opposite of what was needed to stave off attacks on the nationalist people. By flattering the Protestant "activists" and blaming their fanaticism on the actions of the Provisionals, the Officials made it more difficult to arouse international public opinion to defend the beleaguered Catholics. This line in fact coincided with the position of the capitalist press that both sides were equally irrational and reactionary. Still worse, by portraying as the ultimate catastrophe the head-on collision with the Protestant militant groups that is virtually inevitable at some stage if the struggle for national liberation is to be carried through to victory, they paralyzed the will of the most conscious revolutionists in the Catholic ghettos. At the same time, by fostering the illusion that staving off counterrevolutionary pogroms depended on moderation by the Catholics, they fell into reformism.

There is no doubt that political errors by nationalist forces have made it easier for the rightists to rally larger sections of the Protestant community behind them. But the basic fact is that as long as the Protestants remain under the influence of reactionary ideology, that is, in the last analysis, under bourgeois political domination, their actions are dictated fundamentally by the policy of the bourgeoisie, or the sections of it that stand closest to the Protestant community. As four years of conflict have shown, the interests of these strata of the bourgeoisie lie in breaking the spirit of the Catholic population. The "moderation" of the Catholic people and the pessimism of its best leaders could have the precise effect of inviting more determined attempts to intimidate the oppressed population.

Moreover, while criticizing the Officials for "giving up the struggle" in the North, the Healyites commended the very rationale for doing so. In its November 30, 1972, issue, *Workers Press* said: "By this summer, although they had learned nothing, some Officials at least saw the reality of the position. Commenting on the resistance in the North, Sean Garland said: 'We are not on the brink of victory, but on the brink of sectarian disaster and sell out.'"

It is no wonder that the few Irish Healyites who get their direction from *Workers Press* seem to do nothing but engage in rambling and contradictory denunciations of every group and prominent individual involved in the struggle. What kind of guide does this offer? If you are against terrorism and for working-class unity at any cost, *Workers Press* is even more so than anyone else. No one can possibly be as virtuous as the Healyites on this. If on the other hand you favor striking out immediately at the repressive system at any cost and resorting to bombings and other forms of terrorism, you can't approach the SLL in revolutionism, and if your throwing arm gets tired you face the certainty of being condemned as a "traitor." The only consistent thread in the SLL's attitude is its striving to remain "above" the real struggle and its duties. The SLL's course resembles the flight of a hot-air balloon that rises as the ground heats up.

Need to Campaign for Troop Withdrawal

The Healyites' calling for immediate withdrawal of British troops is a good example of their technique. This demand is probably the one raised most consistently by the Healyites. It is the demand that most sets them off from the bulk of the British left, which also spends most of its time trying to convince Irish republicans of the need for "working-class unity" based on "industrial action"—and in terms that (aside from the inimitable Healyite tone) must seem to an outsider almost indistinguishable from the SLL arguments.

There is no doubt that the demand is a hard one to put across. It is hard to explain its importance to the masses in the Catholic ghettos, who fear the fanatical assaults of the Protestant extremist gangs more acutely than the more drawn-out repression of the army. It is true that the British government is more sensitive to public opinion and more inclined to make concessions to the oppressed population than are the local clients of imperialism.

It is not so obvious that since the entire system of repression, including the Orange gangs, depends in the last analysis on British power, any suggestion that the troops can play even a limited or temporary positive role in the situation strengthens the hand both of the Unionist fanatics and the imperialist regime, which can maneuver to divide the communities and at the same time disarm the oppressed population and prepare the way for still more devastating pogroms whenever it suits Whitehall's interests. Naturally, the masses of the people feel the immediate threat of Orange outrages more acutely than the larger-scale dangers inherent in the operation of the imperialist system of control. Only a well-established and trusted revolutionary leadership could convince the people that they must rely on their own strength against both the British army and the proimperialist terrorists.

A small British group cannot do this. Among other things, it would be too easy to counter that while such a call might sound revolutionary, those who raise it in Britain do not face the same dangers as nationalists in Northern Ireland; or that they do not even really understand these dangers. But a British revolutionary group could help spread an understanding in Ireland of the need to demand immediate withdrawal of the troops if it patiently explained this need to the most conscious elements of the Irish movement. The SLL, however, is uninterested in doing this. Its approach is shown by the statement of the "International Committee of the Fourth International" (the Healyite "international" rubric) in the June 28, 1972, issue of *Workers Press*. Characteristically, it begins: "Only the Socialist Labour League and the International Committee opposed direct rule from a class standpoint." The declaration goes on to say:

"Only the International Committee and its sections came out unequivocally against the intervention of British troops in Ireland from the very first minute. Against every other tendency we asserted that this was a basic question of principle: the forces of the capitalist state were there to enforce the protection of property and bourgeois order and on no account could they act in the interests of the working class."

The Healyites had no interest in educating the Irish

vanguard, but simply in scoring debater's points in British sectarian circles. If they were seriously interested in getting the Irish people to understand the need for fighting the repressive system as a whole, why didn't they do something in Britain to show the Irish that they were not alone in their struggle against terror and systematic violence?

There is not the slightest indication that in the last four years the SLL has done anything whatever to defend the Irish people except to offer some purely propagandistic support through articles in its paper.

Moreover, while *Workers Press* blossoms with denunciations of every Irish tendency when explosions or dramatic turns of events occur in Ireland, it has never chronicled any attempts by the SLL to win support for the Irish struggle in Britain. The "Trotskyist daily" has called at various times for "armed" workers defense groups in Ireland and for immediate withdrawal of the British army, but it has never written anything aimed at the British soldiers themselves. It has never done anything to blunt the main instrument of imperialist repression, the army of its own country.

The SLL has organized no demonstrations calling for the withdrawal of British troops. It has not sought to create sentiment in the British troops to get out of Ireland. But in the September 30, 1969, issue of *Workers Press*, one of the first issues of the "first Trotskyist daily," published only a few weeks after the first troops were dispatched to Northern Ireland the following large action by the SLL was featured:

"Workers' Press in! Wilson out! Brighton's narrow streets rang with slogans like these on Sunday afternoon as 1,500 members and supporters of the Socialist Labour League, the Young Socialists and the All Trades Unions Alliance marched proudly through the town to celebrate the launching of our paper.

"Headed by the Socialist Labour League Central Committee, followed by a sea of red banners, contingents from all over Britain demonstrated behind the lead banner: 'Socialist Labour League. Forward with Workers' Press. First Trotskyist daily paper'.

"Leading trade unionists from many areas marched in step with young workers and students.

"The enormous potential of Workers' Press was expressed in the marchers' determination and the magnificent collection at the meeting which followed the demonstration."

In the almost four years since that time there has not been one demonstration or one campaign by the SLL in support of the struggle in Ireland!

It is true that the SLL at one time or another had published all the correct slogans (as well as a series of incorrect ones) for the struggle in Ireland. It is clear at the same time that these slogans were neither consistently followed, nor advanced as a guide to action. The SLL's policy in fact is distinguished by repeated 180-degree turns designed to give the group the most "revolutionary" appearance possible.

Not only could such propaganda educate no one, but many of the formally correct statements of the SLL condemn their authors most effectively, such as this incontestable enforcement of the protection of property and bourgeois order and on no account could they act in the interests of the istic thinking. In practice it leads to empirical and improvised adaptation to events."

Title: Performing Artists on a Flying Trapeze

Author: Gerry Foley

Date: 1973

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