

IRELAND: WHY THE TROOPS MUST GET OUT

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WHY THE TROOPS MUST GET OUT

IMAGINE the town you live in. Imagine that each day heavily armed troops patrol your street. Each afternoon, as school comes out, troops train their guns on the children and their mothers. When you drive to work or to the shops your car is halted at a check point and searched. In the sky helicopters monitor movements below. At night their searchlights scan the streets.

Looming over your estate is a fort protected by barbed wire and watchtowers menacing the whole area. Computers log every detail from the name of your dog to the colour of the wallpaper in your front room. Homes are searched regularly to keep that information up to date.

Virtually every family you know has someone in prison or someone who has been in prison. Yet this is a society with one of the lowest crime rates in Europe!

The courts have no juries. One judge sits in judgement. There are a battery of special laws which have been rammed through with little or no debate. The security forces have repeatedly been found guilty by international courts of brutalising suspects.

This is real life for the Catholic community in Northern Ireland. Yet this society is supposed to be part of Britain, no different to John Major's Huntingdon constituency. In truth it is a world apart.

Once you begin to understand the reality of Northern Ireland it is not so surprising that ordinary, working people fight back against the security forces and the system they uphold.

Again and again we are told by the British government—whether Tory or Labour—that the violence in Northern Ireland is senseless. It is the product of a few criminal minds, of a few psychopaths. We are told that British troops are trapped in the middle trying to keep two warring sides apart.

These arguments have been carefully woven to conceal the truth. The divisions in Northern Ireland have been carefully nurtured and maintained by Britain, just as they used a policy of divide and rule in the Indian sub-continent, in South Africa and in Cyprus.

A continued British presence can offer no solutions to the problems of Northern Ireland. There can be no peace there until Britain gets out.

WHY BRITISH TROOPS WENT IN

HAROLD WILSON'S Labour government ordered troops onto the streets of Belfast and Derry in August 1969. At the time people in Britain and Ireland were told two things: that British troops would protect the Catholic population and that they would guarantee fair play and civil rights for all.

The British Home Secretary, James Callaghan, even visited the Catholic Bogside in Derry to tell the people: "I am not neutral. I am on the side of all people who are deprived of justice." Among the promises he made was that the police, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, would be disarmed. Over 20 years later that promise remains a dead letter.

At first the troops were welcomed by Catholics. Over the previous three days the people of the Bogside had been besieged in their homes by the RUC and Loyalist mobs. Against the guns, the riot gas and the armoured cars of the police, the people erected barricades and fought back with stones and petrol bombs. There were no guns on hand for the people of the Bogside in August 1969, no IRA in operation. Yet slowly they began to push the RUC out of the area.

Far from British troops being sent in to protect the Catholics, they were sent in to prop up a police force and its masters who were tasting defeat.

The British government made this clear at the time. The statement issued by them at the time explained: "The Government of Northern Ireland has informed the United Kingdom Government that as a result of the severe and prolonged rioting in Londonderry, it has no alternative but to ask for the assistance of troops at present stationed in Northern Ireland to prevent a breakdown of law and order."

James Callaghan recalled: "When I got back to the Home Office I was informed that earlier in the afternoon Sir Harold Black, the secretary to the Northern Ireland Cabinet, had telephoned to say that Anthony Peacocke, the Inspector General, feared that the police would be unable to contain the Bogside for much longer and that if troops were not made available the police would be compelled to retreat from their position in front of the barricades."

Meanwhile in Belfast these very forces of "law and order", the RUC, were leading an all out attack on the Catholic Lower Falls. Behind their

armoured cars a Loyalist mob surged into the area. Police joined with the mob in setting light to Catholic homes. Armoured cars raced up and down the Falls Road and opened fire with heavy machine guns. Over two nights eight Catholics were killed, 500 houses were burnt out and 1,500 Catholic families forced to leave their homes.

Today when anyone asks who introduced the gun into Northern Ireland the answer is simple—the RUC. The gun was never very far away. The RUC was permanently armed. Members of the Protestant B Specials, the police reserve, were allowed to keep their guns at home.

In August 1969 the IRA was a tiny band of people on the sidelines of events. They had no guns to fire back with even if they wanted to. Angry Catholics wrote "IRA—I Ran Away" on Belfast walls.

Why had Northern Ireland exploded? The chain of events had begun just months before in Derry on an October day in 1968. Three or four hundred people assembled for a civil rights march. They were marching for jobs, houses and fair voting rights. Their placards carried slogans such as "Class Not Creed", "Orange And Green Unite" and "Tories Are Vermin". No one thought in terms of bringing down the Northern Ireland state or of creating a united Ireland.

Yet as soon as the march began it was beaten off the streets by the RUC. Shocked television viewers around the world saw protesters and passers-by beaten senseless and then drenched by water cannon.

As further civil rights marches took place the reaction by the police grew more and more violent. On New Years Day 1969 a march set out from Belfast to Derry. Nearing its end the police led it into a carefully prepared ambush. A Loyalist mob led by off-duty policemen and B Specials attacked with rocks, chains and clubs. After the march limped into Derry drunken RUC men attacked the Bogside.





One resident told a British government enquiry: "At a quarter to three in the morning, a crowd of police in our street were shouting 'Hey, Hey, we're the Monkees. We'll Monkee you around till your blood is flowing on the ground...'. I looked out the window and one shouted 'Come out you Fenian, 'til we rape you'."

Mrs Donnelly instinctively went to the phone to ring the police and then realised it was they who were rampaging up her street smashing windows. That single incident summed up the reality of Northern Ireland. People were marching for change, for reforms. But the state was irreformable. To any threat of change it reacted savagely.

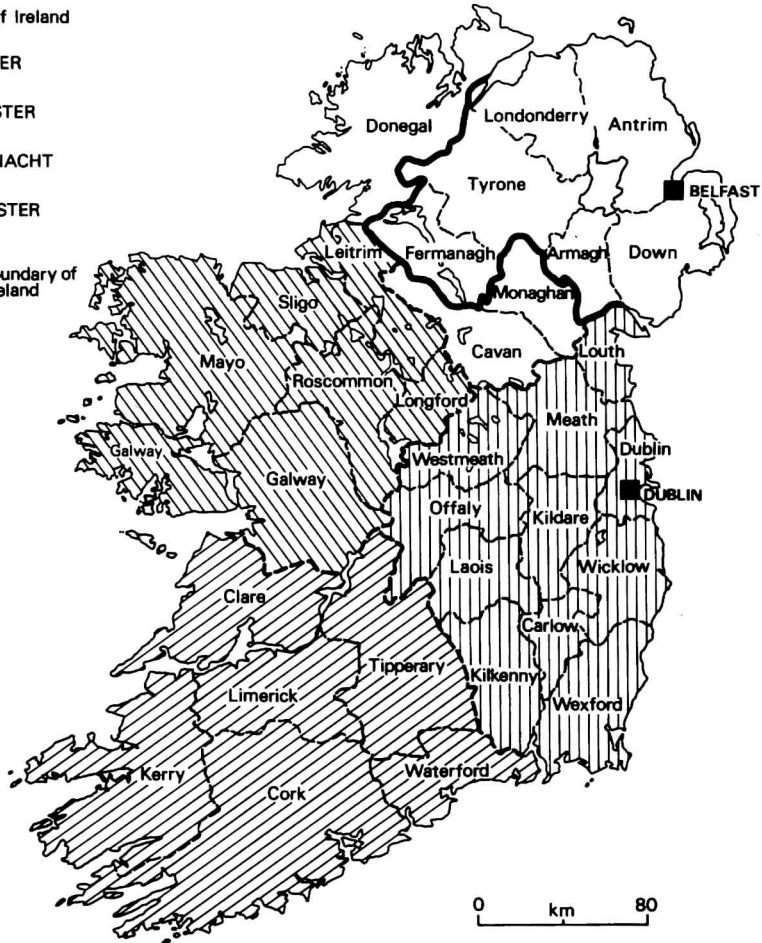
The Labour cabinet which sent in British troops understood this. One of its members, Richard Crossman, recorded in his diary the discussions that took place when they decided to commit troops: "Callaghan and [Denis] Healey both reminded us that our whole interest was to work through the Protestant government."

What was this "Protestant government" which Britain was propping up?

KEY
Provinces of Ireland

-  ULSTER
-  LEINSTER
-  CONNACHT
-  MUNSTER

 Partition boundary of Northern Ireland



THE REALITY OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND STATE

“A PROTESTANT state for a Protestant people.” That was the proud boast of Northern Ireland’s first prime minister. From its birth Northern Ireland was a divided state within a divided Ireland.

It is common to refer to Northern Ireland as Ulster. Yet the province of Ulster has nine counties. The state of Northern Ireland comprises just six counties. The reason is that within those six counties there exists a

permanent two thirds Protestant majority.

The boundary which divides Ireland was drawn by a British civil servant in order to create an artificial state on the basis of a sectarian head count. The three counties which were excluded each had a Catholic majority. Including them would have undermined the Unionist majority.

This state was run for 50 years by the tiny group of industrialists and landlords who controlled the Unionist Party. In all those years the Opposition succeeded in passing just one piece of legislation—an act protecting wild birds!

If the very boundaries of the new state were rigged to allow one party rule the Unionists went further. In Derry, which had 20,000 Catholic voters to 10,000 Protestant voters, the electoral boundaries were arranged so that the Unionists had permanent control. Extra votes were handed out to Unionist businessmen on the basis of the property they owned.

And if such gerrymanders were not enough, the Unionists could rely on repression. The Special Powers Act gave the Northern Ireland home affairs minister power to ban anything from gramophone records to funerals. One clause of the act gave him power to outlaw whatever he wished! Opponents of the regime were interned—often for years—without charge or conviction in each decade of Unionist rule. And if repression did not work these gentlemen were prepared to fan the flames of sectarianism.

In the 1930s the horror of the Great Depression brought Protestant and Catholic unemployed workers together. They marched and rioted against the Unionist government. After this fightback had passed, the Unionists set out to rebuild all the old divisions. A Unionist minister, and future prime minister, told a rally that there were a great number of Protestants and Orangemen who employed Roman Catholics. He felt he could speak freely on this subject as he had not a Roman Catholic about his own place. He would appeal to Loyalists therefore, wherever possible “to employ good Protestant lads and lassies.”

Catholics were permanently barred from a whole range of jobs. They were excluded from the shipyards and engineering firms which dominated the Northern Ireland economy, from the civil service and from the town halls. Catholic workers were held down while Protestant workers were encouraged to see them as the enemy.

Who benefited from all this? Compared with Britain, of which it claimed to be a part, Northern Ireland suffered from lower wages, poorer housing, education and health care plus higher rates of infant mortality and longer dole queues.

Catholic workers suffered most but Protestant workers were little better off. All paid the price of this divide and rule. Britain subsidised this set-up from the beginning. It turned a blind eye to the workings of a grubby police state on its own door step. Until 1968 Northern Ireland scarcely merited a mention in the House of Commons.

HAVE THINGS CHANGED?

"OKAY, BUT that was then. Britain abolished Unionist rule in 1972. Since Westminster has administered Northern Ireland, all that lies in the past." You can almost hear a smooth British minister explaining all this away.

But since British troops arrived in Northern Ireland in 1969 the position of Catholics has grown worse. Today Catholics in Northern Ireland are two and a half times more likely to be unemployed than Protestants. That is worse than the position in 1969.

The British government's own figures show Catholics suffer poorer housing and poorer services. In inner city areas of Catholic West Belfast unemployment stands at 70 percent.

Northern Ireland has been characterised since its birth by three things: discrimination, repression and poverty.

The discrimination is all too real today. The British government's Fair Employment Agency has found cases of discrimination against Catholics at the Ulster Museum, at Queens University, Shorts aircraft plant, amongst building society staff and within numerous Unionist-run councils.

The level of repression has grown worse each year that has passed since 1969. More and more special laws have been rushed through with little or no debate. More and more sophisticated weapons have been dished out to the police and army. Special prisons and interrogation centres have been built. Censorship shrouds our television screens. Northern Ireland is today an armed camp.

Finally, the British presence has done nothing to arrest the growth of poverty on both sides of the divide. Northern Ireland is the poorest corner of Northern Europe. Its economy has collapsed, not because of terrorism, but because it is ageing and starved of investment. There has been a continual British economic withdrawal since the 1930s.

Unemployment stands at Third World levels. Protestant unemployment is not so great as Catholic, in part due to the availability of jobs with the security forces. But this is no great benefit. Britain uses Protestants as cannon fodder in the literal sense. In order to minimise British casualties, locally recruited police and part time soldiers have been pushed to the fore.

Put simply, Britain has nothing to offer the people of Northern Ireland—Catholic or Protestant.

VIOLENCE—WHO'S TO BLAME?

THE PROVISIONAL IRA did not exist in 1969. They came into being at the end of that year. Some old-time Republicans and some young men and women who had experienced first hand the violence of the Unionist state came together to found the Provisionals. Their initial aim was simple; to provide some means of protection for the Catholic ghettos of Belfast and Derry.

The few Republicans in Northern Ireland had been sidelined throughout the civil rights marches. After August 1969, the Battle of the Bogside and the assault on the Lower Falls, they moved centre stage.

Their message was clear. You could not reform the Northern Ireland state, you had to destroy it. Their aim was a united Ireland. They argued that history showed you could not rely on Britain to protect the Catholic community—they had to take matters into their own hands.

The behaviour of British troops soon strengthened this argument. They were situated within Catholic, not Protestant, areas. British troops ushered Orange marches through Catholic estates in Belfast, provoking rioting. Then, in July 1970, the newly elected Tory government ordered a show of strength in Belfast. General Freeland declared a curfew over the Lower Falls. He chillingly stated: "All civilians in this locality are to get in their houses and stay there. After the military occupy the area, anyone found in the street will be arrested."

The area was saturated with riot gas. Four civilians were shot dead. Soldiers smashed their way into cramped homes searching for the few arms people had collected to protect themselves from any repeat of the events a year earlier. At the end of all this the British army took two Unionist MPs on a tour of the area! All of this occurred before the Provisional IRA fired a shot.

From the beginning of 1971 the Provisionals began to hit back. The only response from the Unionist regime and the British government was more repression. They introduced internment without trial in August 1971. Few of the hundreds carted off in the early hours were in the IRA. Word soon came out of the torture of a few selected internees. The Catholic ghettos exploded. The IRA was flooded by recruits.

In January of 1972 the paratroops were sent to Derry in order to try and inflict a defeat on the Provisionals. They opened fire on a peaceful civil rights march. Fourteen marchers died. The aim was to draw the Derry IRA out into the open in response to the killings and then to

eradicate them.

Ireland exploded in response to this cold-blooded slaughter. An angry crowd burned down the British embassy in Dublin. The Irish government only headed off a general strike by calling three days of mourning.

The failure of such direct repression led the British government to scrap Unionist rule. It had gone—and gone for ever. The once mighty Unionist Party splintered into warring fragments.

Yet since 1972 Britain has not been able to offer any political solution to the problems of Northern Ireland. Every attempt has been still-born. Instead Britain has only offered repression. Political status was taken from Republican prisoners, forcing them to go on hunger strike. Margaret Thatcher then cold-bloodedly allowed 10 men to die in 1981. Security forces operate a shoot to kill policy against unarmed suspects. When an English policeman, John Stalker, unearthed the truth in 1986 he was slandered and sacked.

Innocent Irish men and women have been railroaded into jail for years. The cases of the Guildford Four and the Birmingham Six came to represent what could be expected from British justice for many, many Irish people—the vast majority of whom have no connections with the IRA.

As long as this repression, sectarianism and poverty remain, ordinary young men and women are going to fight back. And in the conditions of Belfast and Derry that means looking to the IRA.

British politicians queue up to denounce the violence of the IRA. We cannot ignore the often terrible consequences of the IRA's bombings. But they pale into insignificance before the record of those same politicians who backed the use of B52 bombers against Vietnam and Iraq, or who defend nuclear weapons. The violence our rulers oppose is the violence of ordinary people fighting back against the ruling class system. They want their class—with its state, army and police—to have a complete monopoly of violence. They use violence mercilessly against anyone they see as challenging their wealth.

Socialists start from a very different basis. We put the blame for the killings in Northern Ireland where it lies—with British rule. We defend the right of people to fight back against very real oppression—whether in South Africa, Palestine or Northern Ireland.

Yet we are not simply cheerleaders for the IRA. Their aims are different from ours and so are their methods. Firstly, the Republicans set their aim as removing Britain from Ireland and destroying the border. They are very clear in this and argue that fighting for socialism in the here and now can only disrupt nationalist unity.

Yet such unity is a pipe dream. The rulers in Dublin have shown themselves as ruthless as the British in jailing, torturing and killing Republicans. They benefit from a divided working class. They wholeheartedly agreed to the division of Ireland. The Republicans' appeal to nationalism offers no way forward to the mass of workers in the Irish

LABOUR'S SORRY RECORD

LABOUR'S RECORD in Northern Ireland is appalling. It sent in the troops in 1969, clear in the aim of propping up Unionist rule.

Back in government in 1974, Labour rushed through the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act. Under this act tens of thousands of Irish people have been held for days without being charged. The Guildford Four and the Birmingham Six were framed under that Labour government.

In 1976 Labour abolished political status for Republican prisoners. The man appointed secretary of state for Northern Ireland, Roy Mason, set out to break the IRA by sanctioning brutality against Republican suspects. Britain was found guilty of this at the European Court. In 1981 the Labour leader, Michael Foot, sent MP Don Concannon to tell a dying Bobby Sands, who was on hunger strike for political status, that Labour backed Thatcher's stance and that Sands could die.

Labour has operated a bi-partisan policy with the Tories over Ireland since 1969. This is no accident. Labour aims to administer the system as it exists. In 1916 Labour's Arthur Henderson sat in the war cabinet which ordered the execution of the leaders of the Dublin Easter rising—including the great Irish socialist, James Connolly. In the 1920s Labour administered the British Empire and jailed supporters of Indian independence.

In the 1940s it unleashed a brutal colonial war in Malaya. In the 1960s it gave slavish support to America's bombing of Vietnam. In the 1990s it joined the warmongers baying for Iraqi blood.

It's a rotten record but it flows from those who reject socialist change and seek to administer this bloody system.

Republic who face everyday attacks from Irish bosses, an Irish government and Irish bishops. "Brits out" gives the Republicans popular support in the Catholic community in Northern Ireland but little or no support in the Republic.

Secondly, the Republicans see the task of freeing Ireland as belonging to a few hundred volunteers of the IRA and through electing Republican candidates at the ballot box. This strategy was summed up by a prominent Republican: "But will anyone here object if, with a ballot paper in this hand, and an armalite in this hand, we take power in Ireland?"

A few hundred IRA volunteers cannot defeat the British army and its backers. They can at best hold them down in a long guerilla war with little sign of an end. And, even if the Republicans could gain popular electoral appeal throughout Ireland, radical change does not come through the ballot box, it comes through the actions of thousands and millions of ordinary people on the streets and in the factories. Such power is diminished by the idea we can leave the task to IRA volunteers or elected representatives.

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

THE FIRST argument you encounter when you argue for British troops to be removed is: "but there will be a bloodbath".

The obvious reply is to point out that since British troops arrived in 1969 over 3,000 people have died. The vast majority of the violence from those opposing the British presence is not mindless or sectarian. It is aimed at the security forces.

The second answer is to ask what Britain has to offer Northern Ireland. It has given up on any economic recovery. It is simply content to maintain the Northern Ireland state as an armed camp. As long as the killings do not impinge on British political life our rulers are content for matters to take their course.

Neither of these answers fully explains why there should not be a bloody civil war as soon as the British quit. But why should civil war occur? On the Catholic side British withdrawal would remove the need to carry on with a military campaign to force Britain out. Regarding the Unionists, there are many instances of people bombing themselves out of the British Empire. There are no cases of people bombing themselves back in!

The very fact of British withdrawal would remove the basis of Unionism. It would force a new agenda onto the stage.

Since Ireland was divided in 1921 there have been great changes. Northern Ireland then had a booming economy reliant on the British Empire. The Unionists felt confident—confident enough to threaten to take up arms if they were included in an independent Ireland. They could rely on their Tory allies and sections of the British army to support them in whatever they did.

The Unionist machine was one of the most successful in history. Each 12th of July—to commemorate the supposed Protestant victory at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690—the Unionist prime minister, followed by his cabinet, would lead a massive procession through Belfast.

Today that unity and confidence are gone. The prosperity which fuelled it lies buried in the past. Even in 1974 the Protestant community could unite in a strike which scuppered British plans to bring Protestant and Catholic politicians together to administer Northern Ireland. In 1986 similar attempts were made to mobilise against a treaty between the London and Dublin governments, allowing Dublin a minimal say in how Northern Ireland is governed. The campaign fizzled out. Despite many threats mass mobilisations never occurred.

The Unionist leaders hate each other almost as much as they hate the IRA. They are divided over what they seek. Some want a return to Unionist rule. Some want Northern Ireland to be integrated into Britain and run like Surrey. Some talk of an independent Northern Ireland. All are pipe dreams. There can be no return

to Unionist rule. That has been swept away forever. Britain is not going to let a cancer into its domestic political affairs. An independent Northern Ireland is a complete non-starter. Within the Protestant working class there is a deep suspicion of the British government. There is a deep hatred of the cuts and redundancies forced on them.

Belfast is not Beirut. Protestants and Catholics work together, despite discrimination. They belong to the same unions. They fight together again and again.

For socialists the key lies in the majority of Irish workers—those in the Republic. That country is today an industrial one. A majority of its population is working class, living in and around Dublin. It is a working class with a fine history of struggle.

Here lies the force for change. A fight by the Southern working class means confronting both the Irish ruling class in Dublin and its counterparts running Northern Ireland.

Southern workers do not see the way forward as the creation of some nationalist idyll. They have lived with the empty rhetoric of Irish nationalism and know its day to day reality. Instead they could offer an alternative based on socialism and workers' power. Such a socialist alternative would offer a way out of the ghetto for both Protestant and Catholic workers in Northern Ireland. It would offer a real alternative both to nationalism and Unionism.

"It is a dream", say our critics. Well yes. But it is a dream which is far more real than believing Britain can solve Ireland's problems. It is a dream based on change from below, the only real change. It is a dream which can undermine the hold of sectarian division. It is a dream which socialists can fight for and organise to win.

Finally, British workers have an important part to play in all this. We pay a price for what our rulers do in Ireland. Northern Ireland is Britain's political sewer. And the sewage is seeping back into our society.

The same special laws that exist there are coming onto the statute books here. Censorship has been introduced. Whenever trade unionists fight back or black people resist police racism we see the riot techniques learned in Northern Ireland employed here.

We need to explain what is happening in Northern Ireland and argue for troops out. We need to campaign against British repression. But the best solidarity we can offer is to fight back against our own rulers who created and maintain the divisions there.

To do that we need to build a socialist organisation which fights oppression wherever it occurs and looks not to winning votes but to mobilising workers in action.

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TO JOIN THE**

SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY

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