

Note: this document is a response (but not simply a 'reply') to cd Campbell's paper in Conference Bulletin no 2. I've also tried to take up some other points various comrades have made in conversation.

1. Should we have a position at all over Irish military activity in Britain? Some comrades argue no, or that we should simply endorse the positions of anti-imperialists in Ireland (whatever those positions might be). This seems to me quite wrong. In the first place, there is a major debate on the left (and elsewhere) in Britain, and we have to explain why Irish people do engage in military activity here. One part of the debate inevitably involves the question whether or not bombings here are correct, and it would be ducking that issue to say "it's up to Irish people to choose". (In any case, that position leads inevitably to saying that military activity here is correct - because it's taken by the people who have the exclusive right to decide - or at least that if it's not correct it isn't so incorrect that it matters. Eg, the RCT says that it is a tactical issue, and that British revolutionaries have no right to disagree with Irish revolutionaries over tactics....)

2. But more fundamentally, the question of whether or not we should have a position goes to the heart of what revolutionary politics is about: the fight to get rid of all oppression - racist, sexist, national, class, whatever - all over the world, not out of abstract humanitarianism but because there are real, important links between different struggles. And it is simply impossible to say, we are vitally concerned for the freedom of the Irish people but we refuse to think about the means of achieving what we so highly value. (What is important, though, is to avoid the typical arrogance of much of the left in Europe or North America, of assuming that we are in a position to lay down the law about how anti-colonial struggles should be conducted, irrespective of our degree of support for those struggles, and irrespective also of any serious effort on our part to learn about them. All too often European revolutionaries assume, without any reason except the narrow-mindedness of people in colonialist countries, that there is no real difference between the correct way to fight in their own countries and the correct things to do elsewhere. And that, certainly, we must avoid like the plague.)

3. Another problem is whether or not - if we have a position - we should make it public. There are some comrades who argue that, even if we disagree with Republican military activities here, we should keep quiet about it, at most arguing the disagreement in private discussions. There is a lot of force to this argument, because important sections of the British far (and not-so-far) left, not excluding groups like the SWP, have used criticisms of particular actions of Irish anti-imperialist fighters as a way of de facto condemning the movement as such, and even the cause itself of Irish freedom. It is essential that BF avoid any such mistakes: anything we say about bombings etc must make absolutely clear that we endorse the republican movement's struggle and its objectives. That means, not just a few token words, but a real attempt to rouse anger against Britain's role in Ireland, amongst working people here. Hence, for example, it's no good having articles almost all of which condemn the republicans but then printing something upside down in Sanskrit next to the printer's name saying "of course their struggle is just". The present discussion started because many BF members (including me) thought that the Jan '79 issue of BF newspaper made fairly serious mistakes along the lines just mentioned.

4. But if any expressions of disagreement with particular actions have never to be confused with condemnation of the movement's struggle, the fact remains that, if we disagree with military activity in Britain, the debate here is such that copping out of expressing that disagreement would involve putting a partial, not a balanced position about what was going on. And, like it or not, bombings are incorrect, because they're counter-productive for the Irish struggle itself. In arguing that view, it's worth looking at the case advanced by (some) Republicans for the bombing campaign.

5. In the Six Counties, Republicans argue that an economic bombing campaign has a destabilising effect, of which advantage can be taken by the oppressed national-

ist people. Such a viewpoint is 100% correct, as the last nine years have born out. What is not correct is to extend the argument to the different conditions in Britain itself. A recent (rather incoherent) article in "AP/RN", the Provisional paper, on 12.5.79 put a "personal view" in favour of bombings in Britain, and the general argument was that they drew attention to the war, and provided the basis for the development of mass opposition to the war on a chauvinist basis (the chances of any other mass opposition being, it was argued, effectively negligible). The essential flaw in this argument is that it fails to distinguish between a large number of people passively opposing the war but being disorganised and unable to act collectively against it, on the one hand, and an organised campaign on the other. Bombings have certainly increased the number of people who favour withdrawal, but they simultaneously force bourgeois politicians and opinion-formers to close ranks against "Irish terrorists", thereby depriving any potential chauvinist anti-war movement of the leaders and structures it would need to come to life. That is to say, the argument of some Republicans is that bombings here are destabilising in a way favourable to Irish freedom: in fact, despite increasing the numbers of people favouring withdrawal, their overall effect is raelly stabilising, inhibiting the development of a split in the bourgeoisie and even a chauvinist mass movement for withdrawal.

6. Which brings me to some of cd Campbell's comments. On his point about a 'sustained campaign' in Britain, (p 2, point ii) my basic thesis is that such a campaign is impossible, because of the small size of the Irish community and its vulnerability to repression. If lots of things were different, then a 'sustained campaign' might be correct, but they aren't and it's not even possible.... On whether we want a chauvinist or an anti-imperialist troops out campaign, I don't see them as mutually exclusive. There are two changes in circumstances which, given the present military balance of forces within the Six Counties, would be needed to force British withdrawal: much greater involvement in the struggle of workers and small farmers in 'Southern' Ireland, and/or opposition to the war here on a large scale. But without a split in the bourgeois camp, just as happened in France, the US, Portugal in other recent colonial wars, I don't believe there will be a mass campaign on any basis. On the other hand, a split in bourgeois public opinion would open up the political space to get across the anti-imperialist troops out case to a mass audience, so the by-far-most-probable scenario is of both movements growing simultaneously, and of us (of course) putting our efforts into building the anti-imperialist movement. Cd Campbell is obviously correct in his further point that withdrawal of British troops is necessary but by no means enough for real freedom from oppression in Ireland: so far as I know, though, no one (including both Chris Marshall and the Provisional Republicans) is arguing anything else.

7. There are, I think, two possible important points of disagreement between me and cd Campbell. The first concerns the links between the struggle in Ireland and class struggle in Britain. Various forces in Britain, which call themselves left, hold more -or-less explicitly the view that the Irish people's struggle should be held back so as to help the development of the class struggle in Britain. In my view it is very important for BF to reject such a view: on the contrary, by pursuing their struggle vigorously the Irish will render the most help to the struggle of British workers - temporary apparent set-backs notwithstanding - since defeats in foreign wars always undermine the authority of any ruling group. The reverse position - that the Irish should hold back - is both chauvinist and in its own terms incorrect: holding back the Irish struggle in the hope of helping things along here would in fact have the opposite effect, because it would be seen by vast numbers of people as proof of the power of British capital. It therefore follows that Republican military activity in Britain (just as elsewhere) should be judged by whether it furthers the struggle for Irish freedom, and that that aspect should over-ride considerations of short-term effects on the struggle of the British working clas. /Compare, for example, the struggle of women: BF rightly says that women should fight sexism now, not tone down their opposition on the spurious grounds that it might adversely affect traditional working class struggles. The cases are very similar, and most of the reasons for supporting struggle now by women apply with very little change to supporting struggle now by Irish people. / What worries me - I can't put it stronger - about cd Campbell's

arguments is that sometimes he seems to hint - I seek clarification, rather than make accusations - that the Irish struggle should be toned down or held back on account of supposedly adverse effects in Britain. It would be very useful if he could clarify his position on this - meanwhile BF as a whole must be clear that we judge Irish people's activities by whether they further the Irish freedom struggle, not by the short-term interests of workers in Britain.

8. The other point where I seem to disagree with cd Campbell is over "morality". Rephrasing my position, it is that our judgement of (say) Irish bombings here cannot be based on abstract moral rules ("though shalt not kill (civilians)"), but has to be based on whether they advance the cause of Irish freedom. Since cd Campbell says we are not pacifists, thus far we seem to agree. The question of other people's 'moral' beliefs is entirely different from the question of whether we adopt a 'moral' approach: whilst other' beliefs and activities and reactions are important in deciding the effectiveness of any action, they remain just that: other people's reactions, not our guiding ideas. Nor do I accept comrade Campbell's objections to "effectiveness": most if not all of what he says about having other objectives as well as supporting the right of national liberation I agree with, but I think that that is taken into account in assessing the effectiveness of military activity here for the Irish struggle. If he is saying that the Irish struggle is not of over-riding importance in assessing what the IRA and INLA do, then we fundamentally disagree. If he is saying something else (which he may very well be), then I'm a bit baffled what it is. I don't personally see any other basis for assessing any possible actions by anyone except whether or not they are effective for certain objectives, taking into account that they also have by-products, can also affect other objectives, etc etc. But maybe that's going a bit far afield for present objectives....

9. Finally, a few words about the amendments. The IrComm asked Campbell and me to withdraw our original resolutions, and try to submit a joint amendment to the motion from cd Flynn. Because of communications failures and other problems, we have each withdrawn but have submitted separate amendments. As far as I can see, there is no substantial difference over basic politics between the first part of cd Campbell's amendment and mine: they are both based on the same sections of the original Marshall motion. I prefer my text, though, because it is more complete, better as a text rather than in underlying position, in that it includes an explanation of why we (should) disagree with military activity in Britain, whereas cd Campbell says we judge them by such-and-such criteria, and that we are entitled publicly to disagree, but doesn't say on what grounds we disagree, and therefore also neglects what we say publicly when we do so disagree. I suggest that the best thing to do is for cd Campbell to withdraw the first part of his in favour of mine, and to take the second part of his separately, though I'm open to alternative ideas.

10. But the second part of his amendment is a different kettle of fish. The second sentence is OK, since it ought hardly to need saying that we attempt to discuss with Irish revolutionaries on the same basis (which?, by the way) as with other people abroad. But cd Campbell's first sentence, saying there is a close link between the Irish and British socialist revolutions, is a disaster! Not that there isn't such a link - on the contrary, there is and it's important - but cd Campbell ducks the question of what the link is. (Compare what I said at para 7 above). Yet there are lots of different views on that question - from the "Militant" position that it's all a fight to transform the British Labour Party through the view that Irish people should tone down their struggle for the supposed sake of the class struggle in Britain right over to the BICO view that British troops in the Six Counties help (!) the struggle for socialism. Because of their ambiguity (to put it at its mildest) BF would never pass resolutions saying "the struggles of men and women are closely linked" or "the struggles of black people and white people are closely linked": we would all argue that they missed out that black people and women are partly fighting against white people and men, and that any resolution should say so! And the same is true of the Irish struggle: it is partly against the preferences and privileges of British workers, though not their long-term interests. Hopefully, Conference will reject cd Campbell's view.