

## IRISH COMMISSION - SUMMARY REPORT TO THE CONFERENCE (DRAFT)

### PART ONE - THE SITUATION IN IRELAND

1. At the time of the last conference (April '75), Big Flame and most Irish Republicans and Socialists believed that Ireland was on the brink of civil war. The Loyalist forces were openly planning a 'final offensive': they had formed a Provisional Government ready to take power; an Ulster Loyalist Army Council, uniting all the paramilitary groups (except the UVF) into an assault force to smash the IRA and resistance in the Catholic communities; and their speeches were increasingly bold and warlike, as when Craig promised "the bloodiest summer yet".

The Loyalists wanted a full return to the old Ulster supremacy, and felt Britain had betrayed them in trying to impose power-sharing, and even negotiating with the IRA. But such an attempt to seize back the power and government was clearly going to meet with stiff republican resistance - and mass support for that resistance in the South. So the perspective was another Irish civil-war.

2. The civil war never happened, because the Loyalist unity crumbled. The seizure of power by the Loyalists was timed for when the Convention came to an end. (The Convention was the elected assembly for the different politicians to try and define a new Constitution for N. Ireland; it was elected in May 1975). So the Loyalist seizure of power was timed for the end of the summer. However, Rees managed to spin the Convention out (until January in fact) and this is when things began to "go wrong" for the Loyalists. They were losing their momentum, failing to seize the time. Old rivalries re-appeared and the strategic unity was being lost. And then came the bombshell: the most right-wing Loyalist of them all, William Craig, announced that he favoured temporary power-sharing with the Catholic, middle-class dominated SDLP. He was supported by one or two other leading lights, like Glenn Barr of the UDA. Suddenly, the plans for a vicious seizure of power were buried.

Why did it happen? There is some disagreement in the Irish Commission around this point. Some comrades believe that we were wrong to so strongly point to the inevitability of civil war: they say that the British Government would never have allowed a full and vicious Loyalist takeover, and that the Commission was too close to PD in its constant warnings of the danger of a Loyalist putch. Others relate this 'failure' to an overall lack of Marxism in the Irish Commission's analysis of the Irish situation, and say that Craig's move was always on the cards and should have been foreseen.

However, we are all agreed - in retrospect - that Craig backed down because

1. as the prospect of a Loyalist takeover grew nearer, he realised that the project of an independent Ulster state, based on the old Loyalist system was no longer possible. Economically, the Northern bourgeoisie has to co-operate with the Southern economy and become much more of an integrated whole inside the EEC. And politically, the Loyalist regime could not make such a violent rupture with Britain and the "Western democracies" and survive.

2. he realised that the protestant section of the working-class was no longer sufficiently united and confident to impose its conditions on the British Government as it had done during the UWC strike in 1974. The protestant working-class was being hit by growing unemployment.

3. he realised that the republican strength could not be defeated without the help of the SDLP and the Southern Government. (Particularly as at that time the Provisional movement was increasing its political and military power - see below.) An all out assault on the Northern Catholics would only "unite the enemy" - and that gamble was too big.

In other words, Craig stepped into the twentieth century, because in planning the coup in real terms, he - and his followers - had to come face to face with the fact that it was historically obsolete.

3. Imperialism is now looking to cultivate a new "Ulster centre". The Loyalist backdown meant that the initiative in N. Ireland politics was again up for grabs; and slowly it is passing to a new "centre" in Ulster politics: a) the 'old reformists', -- the SDLP, -- the Alliance Party, and Brian Faulkner's Unionist Party of N. Ireland -- i.e. the people who've been sold on 'power-sharing' since 1973-4. b) The newly converted: Bill Craig, and more recently the Official Unionist Party, which has started negotiations with the SDLP.

This groups is a long way from being a single, unified block. But they are beginning to revolve around the same ideas: government power has to be shared between the catholic and protestant middle-classes in some way or other; the N. Ireland economy needs re-structuring in alliance with the South; the 'extremists' have to be dealt with.

This block is the biggest 'centre' Britain has ever cultivated in the North, and it is determined not to see it crumble. Rees is not looking for rapid solutions or quick-fire successes. He is happy to see the politicians talk, whilst direct rule continues for the time being.

Britain is however putting on pressure through economic withdrawal. The closure of the ferry terminal at Heysham; the threat to stop subsidies to Harland and Wolff; the cut-back in spending in the North announced in the recent round of public spending cuts, the discontinuation of government subsidies and free factories to industry etc. .... all help to serve notice on the Loyalists that unless they go along with the political plans, then Britain could plunge the economy into total crisis. In other words, build this new 'centre' politics -- or else!

There is discussion -- and not a little ignorance -- in the Commission, about how this economic withdrawal fits into the overall pattern of the changing distribution of regional investment within the U.K. since the U.K. went into the Common Market. One view is that this economic withdrawal is also designed to make permanent changes in Anglo-Ulster economic relations. It forces the Northern economy to look elsewhere for its future (i.e. the EEC as a whole, and therefore also the South) and it fits in well with the latest scheme to be floated: an Independent Ulster with British, Southern Irish and EEC support. Both SDLP and Loyalist politicians have spoken in favour of investigating this scheme, and both groups have sent representatives to the EEC to discuss financing, subsidies etc. The bourgeoisie desperately need a solution that enables Irish capitalism to develop and change, and this idea of independence is very possibly the one -- and the one they can 'sell': the SDLP using the grounds that it breaks the ties with Britain; the Loyalists, that it keeps Ulster out of the grips of the South and the Catholic church.

4. However the changes the bourgeoisie and imperialism want to see, go no way to answering the demands of the Irish struggle over the last 6 years. Firstly, the moves to a reformed Ulster can only go so far. At the level of government, the SDLP could be given some power, so that middle-class catholics may have more say. But the Ulster state and system -- in its entirety -- the police, the civil-service, local administration, school system, culture -- cannot be civilised by reform. The Orange supremacy, cultivated over years, will only die when the artificial state is killed. And Britain, SDLP and Loyalist politicians are all quite clear that an independent Ulster can only be built on the total defeat of the republican revolt.

Secondly, the present situation cannot be interpreted as a British withdrawal from Ireland. Certainly British economic subsidies and interests have been reduced; so too have the troop levels in recent moves to 'Ulsterise' the security forces (bringing the RUC back into the ghettos; recruiting a full-time UDR). Certainly in the long run Westminster would love to free itself of Irish politics. But British withdrawal -- in a real sense -- is not on the cards at the moment. The measure of that is whether or not the British state is reducing its overall commitment to the

Certainly, in the long run Westminster would love to free itself of Irish politics. But British withdrawal - in a real sense - is not on the cards at the moment. The measure of that is whether or not the British state is reducing its overall commitment to the Loyalist and Catholic bourgeois forces in the 6 counties. Is Britain pulling the carpet from under the Ulster regime and therefore boosting the republican struggle? The answer is obviously no.

5. The situation in N. Ireland today is one of drawn out, prolonged crisis. Unlike a year ago, there are no signs of a rapid way through the stalemate of struggle in N. Ireland. The 'Ulster Centre' is being cultivated slowly, while the army carries on and even steps up its constant battle with the paramilitary organisations. (The nature of the repression seems to have become more vicious recently: for instance, allegations of army torture methods reminiscent of internment and 1971.)

Traditional Loyalism - Paisley and others - carry on, but have been undercut by the 'Loyalist reformists'. The UFF steps up its indiscriminate murder; Paisley boasts a new vigilante force. Both represent the constant threat; both are deadly. But neither are able to seize the initiative inside the Loyalist camp.

However, the new situation also brings the republican movement and the class revolt in the Catholic ghettos into fresh crisis. Comrades have often criticised the Ireland Commission for our 'overestimation' of the Provisional movement. However, the majority in the Commission would answer that we have always been aware of their severe political weaknesses. The point is that there has never been an alternative, and that, when faced with civil war, the Provos were the only force capable of spearheading the defence of the ghettos and the organisation of the struggle in those times. This is why the Catholic masses relate to them, and why the left-wing in the Provisional movement could never consider splitting the organisation on programmatic differences.

But with the new situation, the absolute and immediate need is not for defence, but for a clear set of political ideas, and for political organisation to match those ideas, to give the masses the possibility of struggling for an alternative to the power-sharing schemes of the bourgeoisie. And in particular, a programme which meets the needs of the class struggle, and organisation which is inside the class struggle, in the whole 32 counties of Ireland. The Catholics in the North are tired. Unless new forces are brought into the national/social struggle, then the North will die of fatigue and isolation.

But here the Provisionals fall down. i. Their ~~lack of~~ overall lack of class perspective means they are unable to relate to the Southern working-class on any consistent basis. For instance, their response to the economic crisis is simply to blame foreign capital and lament the weakness of Irish firms. iii. In the north, the armed struggle is still allowed to develop its own path without reference to the ability of the masses to politically cope and understand it.

The Provisionals oscillate between tactics (eg stopping the RUC getting into the ghettos) and grand historical designs (e.g. they publish a lot of material on what the future Ireland will be like): but they lack strategy to take a 32 county mass struggle forward. This does not mean that there are no discussions. In Belfast, they are initiating peoples' assemblies to bring the masses back into the picture. It is an excellent move, but probably limited to the most left-wing section of the movement.

6. With the decline of mass struggle and perspective in the North, the situation in the South comes right to the fore. The Southern working-class faces enormous problems: it faces the twin attack on the economic plane: wage-cuts, unemployment and cutbacks. Like in Britain, capital is restructuring in a way that means permanent loss of jobs, as industry

is made less labour intensive. Secondly, it faces new levels of state repression as the government clamps down both on republicanism and the working-class.

The crisis facing the Southern workers is intimately tied up with the North and British imperialism. Economically, the position is the same and will become even more inter-connected if the bourgeoisie, North and South, are able to move towards economic integration. Politically, the repression North and South is becoming more united (e.g. the Common Law Jurisdiction Bill.)

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Up to now the Southern workers have to find a response. Struggles are hard but often isolated and disunited. There is no large-scale traditional reformist party, and there is evidence to suggest that this gap is being filled by the growth of the Official Republicans - which is not a healthy sign.

The task of organising the South becomes a priority for Irish revolutionaries. Only if the Southern masses come alive to the capitalist and pro-imperialist policies of its own bourgeoisie - and are able to identify their links with the Northern struggle, can we envisage the forces able to take forward the struggle for Irish independence and socialism.

## PART TWO - OUR WORK IN BRITAIN

At the conference last year, it was generally agreed that we should continue to give a high priority to work in support of the right of the Irish people to national self-determination - that we would give a particular emphasis to the struggle against British imperialism in Ireland. We re-affirmed our position of solidarity with all forces fighting British imperialism - the Provisional and Official IRA, the IRSP, PD, RMG .... - and laid down our main task in Britain as building a single anti-imperialist movement in this country on the Irish question, "that movement for the moment being the Troops Out Movement".

The Ireland Commission stands by all these principles, which we feel should continue to be part of the minimum basis for being a member of Big Flame. However, it's important to discuss our work in relation to the changes which have gone on in the struggle in Ireland, and to some of the developments - such as the start of a campaign against the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and the relative decline of the Troops Out Movement - which are taking place in Britain.

### 1. The Troops Out Movement

At the time of the last conference, the TOM was a fairly dynamic broad front, encompassing a number of small revolutionary groups - RCG, Workers' Fight, CFB, ourselves; a number of ex-IMG members led by Gery Lawless, and a significant number of 'independent' socialists. There were about 600 members, and 35 active groups around the country. Big Flame acted as a political leadership for a large number of the independents, and we were the largest single organised force in the TOM, though we could always be defeated (and often were) by the combined strength of the Trotskyists. Our strategy for the TOM was based around our perspective that there was a very real possibility of an attempted consolidation of a Loyalist state in N. Ireland in the short-term, and therefore the possibility of civil war. We said in the report to Conference:

"The task of revolutionaries in Britain is to make it impossible for the British Government to implement these 'solutions' without facing the possibility of a deep division in the Parliamentary Labour Party and the official Labour Movement, and massive street demonstrations".

We therefore saw the importance both of mass work - with Irish workers, students, black organisations, militant workers - and of work in the official Labour Movement. Our emphasis on mass work was always 'tolerated' by the Trotskyists (we even won the right to do Relief Work for the northern ghettos among Irish people in this country - though it was a hard struggle

with two defeats at national meetings until we eventually won!). But it was only tolerated on the understanding that 1) they wouldn't have to do it 2) that national Labour Movement work would remain the real priority. Given the numerical strength of the Trotskyists, (and the ideological stranglehold of Trotskyism in this country), this became the majority position in the TOM. And in the interests of democracy, those members of Big Flame who were also national organisers of the TOM carried out this policy in a very non-sectarian manner. Two of our comrades were principally responsible for organising the highly successful National Labour Movement Conference on Ireland in May '75 - which attracted 330 delegates from various Trade Unions, Trades Councils etc. around the country.

The very success of this conference was a boost for the Trotskyist position in the TOM. Meanwhile, Big Flame militants in London TOM were increasingly servicing the TOM - always seeking to maximise unity, to make the broad front work etc. - but at the expense of carrying forward any mass work i.e. at the expense of the presence of a major component of our politics in T.O.M.

At the same time, and particularly following the May conference, the TOM was suddenly flooded with a new influx of Trotskyists, taking the TOM seriously for the first time after the success of the conference (and - to put it cynically - seeing the possibility of recruiting from among the many T.U. delegates at the conference). Very rapidly, the T.O.M. became a hotbed of sectarian infighting between various Trotskyist tendencies - and in the face of this, and their refusal to do any of the real, grinding political work in the local groups, many independents began to leave the T.O.M. Increasingly, Big Flame was isolated in the T.O.M., our politics becoming more and more marginal.

In November '75, the Commission decided on a major change of emphasis. We would withdraw from our central role in T.O.M. at a national level, and instead work hard in T.O.M. local groups around our own perspectives - the importance of mass work among Irish people, schoolchildren and students, in local communities and factories. Big Flame comrades in London rapidly pushed for, and succeeded in organising, a campaign against the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and anti-recruiting work among schoolchildren; in Birmingham, they began some very successful work anti-recruiting work (see most recent Irish Bulletin); Manchester were an important part of the Irish Relief campaign; and are now part of starting the anti-PTA campaign; Merseyside organised the most successful local conference on Ireland for years.

This was the positive side to our withdrawal from our previous heavy commitment to TOM nationally. But there were negative aspects: 1) it left the many "independents" who had previously looked to us for political leadership at a national level in TOM without any support; many of them began to turn to the Communist Federation instead 2) at a national level, TOM became increasingly dominated by a very reformist Trotskyism, preoccupied with lobbying Labour MP's, getting resolutions from Constituency Labour Parties to the Labour Party Conference, getting affiliations and resolutions passed in Trades Councils, Trade Union branches, LPYS and Labour Party branches. All thoughts of direct action, mass work etc. are scorned. 3) the new, and successful, local work we were doing was isolated, having no national presence.

And in the past six months, all this combined with the downturn in the Irish struggle itself, has considerably lowered morale in TOM. Membership of TOM has dropped to only a third of what it was a year ago. The number of active branches is scarcely more than a dozen, if that - and they are engaged in routinised activity for the most part. The leadership of TOM hold out one hope for the future - the mass Labour Movement delegation to Ireland this September.



## 2. The Delegation to Ireland

On September 17th, 18th, 19th. the TOM is taking a delegation of about 100 people on a fact-finding tour to Dublin and Belfast "to meet organisations and people who can best advise the British Labour Movement on a policy to help the Irish people achieve national self-determination". The delegation was clearly perceived with Trade Union and Labour Party delegates in mind - but we fought and won for it to include delegates from tenants associations, claimants unions, women's aid groups and women's centres, neighbourhood organisations, Right to Fuel groups etc. - and 15% of the seats must go to delegates from these organisations. This was a very important - and hardwon - victory. But the delegation has nevertheless been organised to meet the needs of resolution passing trade unionists - not of rank-and-file militants. In Ireland, hours will be spent hearing speeches from leading Labour Movement/Labour Party figures, and from leaders of Provisional and Official Sinn Feins, the Irish CP, P.D. etc. in large conferences. There will be little opportunity to meet ordinary people in the ghettos - except in the socials at night (which should be good!) - unless we arrange alternative possibilities for those delegates that want to.

Nevertheless, the delegation could be very important. If it's successful - and if it is a fact-finding tour which tried to come to grips with the new situation in Ireland, North and South, it could be crucial in helping to rebuild an anti-imperialist movement on Ireland in this country. And it could be used in a mass way - through report back meetings in communities and factories reaching the widest number of people. Unfortunately, neither of these is part of the intentions of the organisers. They have a static picture of the situation in Ireland - which draws strongly on parallels between Ireland and Vietnam; they are emphatic on the importance of the Labour Movement in Ireland - and they are not concerned that report-backs in Britain should be directed at the base.

However, the delegation itself is formally independent of T.O.M. It will be holding a preliminary conference to discuss the agenda of the tour etc. on August 12th - with all delegates present. There we can fight for our ideas - provided we have a strongly led section of delegates sympathetic to Big Flame (or members of Big Flame). So the Commission is giving a great deal of emphasis to the delegation.

## 3. Big Flame and Mass work around the Irish question

In general, we feel that Irish work has become too much the job of "Irish specialists" in Big Flame, and not sufficiently a normal part of the work of all Big Flame militants in their various struggles. There is no reason, for example, why anti-recruiting work with schoolkids is discussed only in the Ireland Commission, and is solely the responsibility of those of us working around Ireland - rather than, say, the Education Commission. But this is only part of a general problem we have encountered - how do we raise a question which to many people seems an external problem, in a mass way? How do we raise Ireland on the estates where we're working, on the shop-floor etc.?

Anti-recruiting work has been one solution. Work in Irish communities to give concrete support to Irish people lifted under the PTA - through a 24 hour emergency telephone service, instant legal aid, and immediate pickets on police stations and prisons where people are being held - is another. And in the Harlesden area, the PTA campaign has made possible some important links between black youth and the Irish struggle. But these are only partial solutions - and we must have a much fuller discussion in all sections of Big Flame about how the Irish struggle can be raised in a mass way. Until we are convincingly able to offer an alternative, the Trotskyists will continue to maintain their stranglehold in TOM.

## CONCLUSIONS:

1. For the moment, the prospect in Ireland seems to be one of protracted struggle, with the class struggle in the south becoming an increasingly important component of the situation.
2. The British domination of the north remains the primary contradiction, determining the balance of class forces throughout Ireland. Solutions such as the 'Ulster centre' being pushed by the British state will resolve none of the long-term problems of the proletariat - the divisions in the northern working-class; the abysmal poverty of the northern ghettos; the British control in the south. The logic of the class struggle has posed the national question in Ireland, and the struggle for national self-determination remains the key political question for the Irish working-class.
3. Therefore, Big Flame should reaffirm the following minimum agreement on the Irish question for membership:
  - a. support for the right of the Irish people as a whole to national self-determination
  - b. solidarity with all forces fighting British imperialism in Ireland
  - c. the centrality of building a single anti-imperialist movement in Britain on the Irish question.
4. Despite the downturn in the Irish struggle, and the protracted nature of the crisis, it's clearly essential that a group of socialists should continue the task of long-term propaganda and agitation in the working-class against British imperialism in Ireland, and to maintain the infrastructure for any upsurge in the struggle. The objective possibility of creating a mass movement in this country on the Irish question does not, for the moment, exist. Nevertheless, we should recognise that the Irish section of the working-class in Britain suffers directly the consequences of the British domination of Ireland, and in our mass work we should aim to build an identification with the Irish struggle, and take into the British struggle some of the lessons from the Irish.
5. Our Irish work should, where possible, be carried out through TOM and the anti-PTA campaign. We work in broad fronts in order to maximise unity, seeking to involve independent socialists seriously concerned to fight British imperialism in order to create the possibility of a broad movement (however small), rather than a narrow alliance of groupings and organisations. A major difficulty in this approach lies in the dominance of the Trotskyist tradition of sectarianism, opportunism (ie using broad fronts principally to recruit new members), and their emphasis on work in the reformist organisations of the working-class. So we should no longer be primarily concerned with servicing the structures of these broad fronts - rather we should be giving consistent support and leadership to independents who are opposed to the Trotskyist tactics. If agreement on the kind of work we think important is impossible to win in one of these broad fronts, then we should carry out that aspect of our work outside the broad front, on our own. Our weakness in challenging the Trotskyist domination of broad fronts has been our lack of public speakers, and lack of a clear alternative strategy based on mass work, which can provide a short and long-term effective public political presence for the particular broad front. We should urgently begin a wide-ranging discussion throughout Big Flame on how to integrate the Irish question into our mass work, and on working in broad fronts, dominated by Trotskyist and reformist ideologies.
6. We should begin to make formal links with the groups with whom we are in solidarity, and enter into a critical, two way relationship with them. Our right to criticism must always be seen to be earned, and should be based on a real respect for those organisations fighting the struggle. We should prioritise relations with Marxist groups closest to our own perspective (IE PD and the Committee for a Socialist Programme) with whom we should have full, formal and serious discussions.

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