

## THE SWP AND IRELAND - HOW DO WE EVALUATE THEIR PRACTICE ?

This was originally intended to be an article in the last paper, however, due to a variety of difficulties it did not appear. What is written here is much more of a discussion than the original article which in retrospect seemed rather declamatory, not sufficiently examining the very real difficulties which all campaigners for Irish self determination in this country face.

### THE STIMULUS.

Over the summer the IRA let two bombs off in the centre of London. Marking as they did the triumphalist end to the Malvinas War the reason for their timing was obvious. Eleven soldiers died, and Ireland was for the first time in months catapulted onto the front pages of the daily press. Despite vigorous attempts, the media largely failed to whip up the racist hysteria achieved after the Birmingham bombings, although several instances of anti-Irish violence were recorded. Public concentration was subsequently focussed on the plight of the injured horses and their battle for full recovery. No serious examination was carried out as to why the event had taken place at all.

On the whole the coverage of the left press was not that much better. The daily 'News Line', paper of the WRP, predictably condemned the bombs as part of a conspiratorial plot to divert the English working class back from the brink of revolutionary insurrection. Others hailed the explosions as part of the process of bringing the war home to Britain. What most galled and frustrated BF members of TOM was the coverage meted out to the bombings by organisations nominally having the same position on Ireland as our own. Socialist Worker, in particular, carried headlines condemning individual terrorism and articles seeking to explain "Where the Provos go wrong". A discussion of these articles and a resolve to produce a reply took up much of the last Irish Commission Meeting. It was resolved to take up the issues raised in a point by point manner. The initial result was an over-spirited and potentially sectarian sounding polemic which although not a million miles off beam in content failed on a number of points. Firstly, its tone would have endeared itself to few SWP supporters and would probably have not have gone down well with Big Flame readers not closely in tune with events in Ireland. Secondly, on a more serious level of content, the article did not seriously examine the political method - and not just the opportunism which had led the SWP to adopt the position they did. The latter effects their international politics as a whole. An examination of it, hopefully, will improve the way in which we seek to develop our own international politics.

### UNCONDITIONALLY GUARANTEED ?

For a while up until our last conference BF had a rather odd position on Ireland. Odd in that we stressed that criticisms we had of the republican movement should be made within the anti imperialist movement. This was because our then current international policy was ambiguous as to the method of mounting such criticisms. Many in the Irish Commission feared that unless this was tightened up the sort of errors and outrages committed by SWP and the Militant could possibly be reproduced by our membership. At the last conference, the McCool document helped clarify the situation as have other pieces by Gardiner and Marshall. It's well worth examining them again.

Perhaps the easiest accessible source for exploring the SWP's wrong mindedness on Ireland is an article by Chris Bamerry in the spring '82 edition of International Socialism.

Focussing on Northern Ireland in the year since the Hunger Strikes, the article is more of a sustained critique of Sinn Fein than an analysis of the class forces

at play in the situation. The result is a sectarian critique of SF in an idealised scenario. The article is presented as a series of notes which says roughly this :

- 1/ It was Sinn Fein's fault that the H Block was largely northern based.
- 2/ It was 'obvious' that the prison focus back in '76 that the prison focus was going to become of prime importance. Sinn Fein didn't grasp this. When the Hunger Strike started they pushed the humanitarian and not the political aspects.
- 3/ Sinn Fein concentrated on military at the expense of mass action. Belfast was left subservient to a right wing Dublin leadership.
- 4/ SF's position of pushing Fianna Fail and SDLP through a broad mvmt wrong. They exhibited a "failure to organise politically when they were at the centre of events".
- 5/ The prison Hunger Strike was weak in itself as a tactic....
- 6/ SF saw the TU's as just another strand and failed to push them.
- 7/ Protestants were at the time divided and demoralised and posed no threat. Sectarianism is not their automatic response - it's existence results from the failure of reformist TU leaders to challenge loyalism.
- 8/ SF underestimates the potential of the protestant working class.
- 9/ The article concludes by stressing the demoralisation of the nationalist working class, accepting wholesale British media versions of the supergrasses, internal republican feuding.

Firstly, the whole basis of the analysis is back to front, but let's begin by examining the accusations made.

1/ The criticism is based on Sinn Fein's policy, dating from the beginning of the current struggle, to focus their efforts on the north. The IRA similarly confined its military operations there. That's where the sharp edge of British imperialism was felt and where inevitably, in any case, the bulk of republican working class recruits emerged. To begin with SF for much of the '70s did little to counter this tendency following the IRA's lead of not wanting to alienate Fianna Fail grass roots sympathy for republicanism. The pressure of events in the north; military harassment, raids and imprisonment did much to make the struggle one for mere survival for much of the period any way. In the past few years there has been a switch in emphasis towards politically campaigning in the south, in community struggles, TU etc. This has been made possible because the republican movement in the north has survived. It is the border itself, fragmenting the social relationships in Ireland, which imposes the difficulties upon all Ireland possibilities of organisation.

2/ The 'obvious' significance of criminalisation in '76 was lost on most people accept some prisoners, the Northern Ireland Office and Nato foreign ministers. It was certainly lost on the SWP, who like everyone else only realised what the significance of the H Blocks was as events unfolded.

3/ This is simply untrue. SF in the north during the Hunger Strike protests went out of its way to de-escalate severe violent confrontation in order to allow maximum mass involvement. They did this to such an extent that many rank and file republicans became frustrated with the lack of military activity.

4/ Here is not the place to examine precisely the nature of tactics pursued by the various political forces within the all Ireland H Block committee. Suffice it to say that firstly, the nature of conditions prevailing in Ireland, under imperialist domination, are different from those in Britain and so different tactics will have to be pursued. Secondly, the SWP's short lived initial contribution to the campaign was Charter 80 which was criticised by all and sundry, including SF, for being too humanitarian. Like the ANL it sought to be a low level pressure group. At least with the Five Demands, taken as a whole the demand political status could be clearly understood.

5/ That this was so was clearly understood by SF. It partly explains their earlier reluctance to escalate matters, the leadership knowing full well, often through bitter experience the horrors of hungerstrike protest. It was when the prisoners themselves had determined to take this course of action that SF decided to give them their total support.

6/ Whether through ignorance or deliberate guile the SWP get it wrong on several counts here. Firstly, it is assumed that the TU's in the north, and the south for that matter, are more or less the equivalents to the ones found in Britain. Nothing can be further from the truth. The transcription published in the September DB 82 shows how this is the case. It also shows how many republicans, and increasingly SF, are campaigning in the TU's, what the difficulties are and why a syndicalist approach misunderstands the nature of sectarian class divisions.

7/ Again the SWP display their political limitations. Yes, the class alliance that loyalism represents is in crisis. This does not mean that loyalism does not exist or that its fragmentation is going to propel significant sections from its social composition towards revolutionary or even socialist politics in the near future. The SWP should know that loyalism is intergrated within the structure of the northern state which, as long as it continues to exist, will reproduce those very sectarian social relationships. To say that loyalism is weak reformist leadership within the TU movement in the north is to misunderstand both loyalism and the significance of reformist leaders, class consciousness etc...

8/ Once more it is the SWP who underestimate the limitations placed on the protestant working class as a result of the sectarian nature of the state.

9/ The SWP, like other British left organisations saw the outcome of the Hunger Strike as a defeat, pure and simple, for the republican movement. However, as we have shown elsewhere, this was far from the case in practice. Not only were vast numbers of people mobilised behind the Hunger Strike but their support was solidified - witness the Assembly Elections of October 8<sup>th</sup>. In any case reforms were granted and seen to be. The prisoners enjoy a significant proportion of the five demands. The republican struggle has come to be seen world wide as being legitimate.