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20p FREE WITH SOCIALIST OUTLOOK

The persistence of the Irish national struggle



Andrew Ward/Report

Solidarity campaigning with the Republican Hunger Strikers in 1980-81 was a high point of links north and south

WHERE IS the Irish struggle going? Here D. R. O'CONNOR LYSAGHT argues that the Irish national struggle, far from being a dead end, is the key to radical change in Ireland. But, he says, this struggle cannot be victorious until the revolutionary nationalist Irish minority – in the six counties – seeks strategic allies.

In the short or medium term there is only one potential major ally – the working class in the 26 counties. Linking up with them, he says, means a major change of strategy and tactics by the Irish Republican movement – towards a class-based movement pursuing the national question by means of the fight for a 32-county workers' republic.

IS THERE an Irish national question any longer? Events since the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 and, more particularly, the inconclusive struggle of the last 20 years have caused the national question to be re-examined.

After the Easter Rising of 1916 had opened the way for a new and partially successful national democratic revolution, communist leaders, including those such as Radek who had dismissed Irish national claims altogether, united to support the Irish Republic. What is more, this support continued after the leaders of that Republic had signed it away in the 1921 Treaty with Britain, leaving its cause to be upheld in arms by the majority of its military force (the Irish Republican Army, or IRA), unsupported by the majority of nationalists.

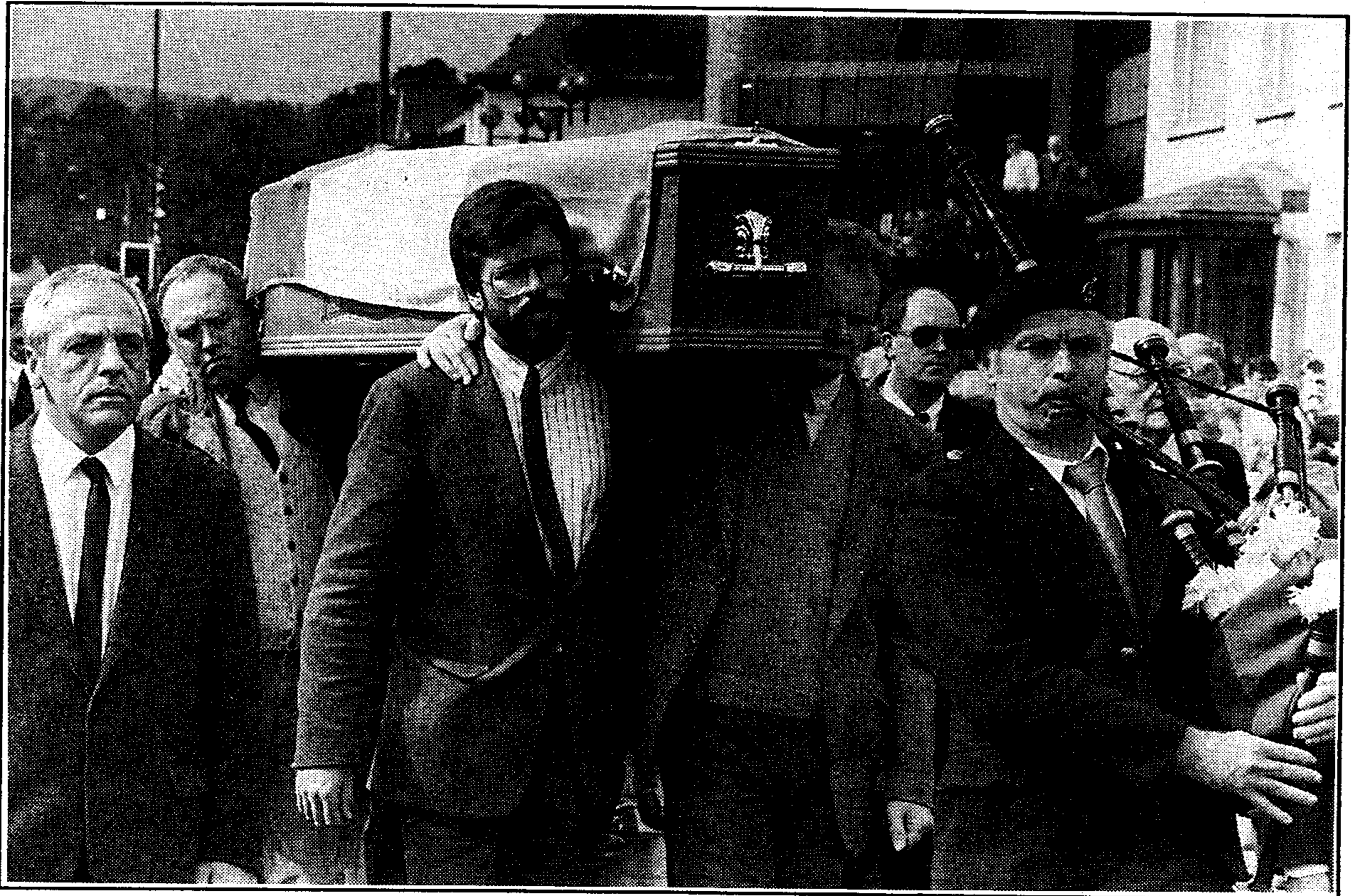
Opposition to the Treaty has been continued by Lenin and Trotsky's heirs in the Fourth International. In particular, although it was not immediately clear that the partition of Ireland was to be the core of Britain's reformed domination of the whole country (only Ireland's James Connolly, executed after the Easter Rising, had foreseen this), Britain's ability to surrender on everything else has established this truth. So not only does the Fourth International stand with those who fight for Irish unity and independence with all means possible, but it considers that their struggle must become one for workers' power if it is to be successful.

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This position is consciously opposed by many, including some former anti-imperialists in the Irish labour movement. Some of these insist that Irish nationalism was counter-revolutionary and anti-democratic from the start, objectively if not subjectively. Most would accept it as generally progressive until the 1921 Treaty. The subsequent partition of the country is interpreted by them, however, as being no more than acceptance of the Ulster Protestant democracy's alleged right to self-determination. Its justification is assumed by reference to the undoubted Catholic sectarianism of the present Republic of the nationalist 26 counties. That state's constitutional bans on abortion and divorce are considered adequate explanations – and, for some, excuses – for the political and economic discrimination maintained by the Ulster regime and its proletarian supporters' readiness to follow some of these islands' most reactionary politicians in the name of religion against class. After all, it is accurately remarked that most of the Republic's workers are also tied to bourgeois parties. The weakness of their economic base compared to the Northerners' is not recognized as a natural cause for this, or else it is used economically to prove northern workers' superiority rather than to start questioning why, with their advanced base, their consciousness is backward.

All this is held to prove the British dimension as either non-existent or, at least, irrelevant. Irish capitalism is as strong as it can be; its weaknesses are internal (and, if explicable, due mainly to 26-County Catholicism). If there is an outside imperialist exploiter it is the United States of America, which threatens all Western Europe equally. Irish-British relations are like those of Belgium and the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain, Denmark and Germany: states formerly in client-patron relationship but now equal partners in the (West) European Community. If the North of Ireland is to resolve its problems, this will be through democratic reforms enforced by Britain, if from outside, and, in the economic sphere, grubstaked by the EC and the USA. The 26-County Republic can contribute only by suppressing its irredentist claim for Irish unity. The fight for Irish unity will not only not lead to socialism, but is an undemocratic diversion from that end.

The social context for this viewpoint will be considered later. Here, it is enough to say that it comes out of 26-County conditions as much as those of the Northern Irish Protestant working



The Republicans are revolutionary nationalists representing a minority of six counties Catholics

class. More to the point in hand, it provides a challenge to revolutionary preconceptions that has not been answered by the largest Irish revolutionary nationalist party, Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin's failure makes it all the more necessary to answer it here.

The British connection

IRELAND'S relationship to Britain cannot be explained simply in the terms provided by Lenin in his study *Imperialism – the highest stage of capitalism*. His central concept of twentieth century clientelism through colonial investment by metropolitan capital has applied to the North of Ireland since its foundation, but has only been a systematic policy since 1950 when its local industrial situation became more critical. The Republic has only made serious efforts to import capital since 1958. Even now, three-fifths of its debt (315 billion) is owed to Ireland's own banks.

Yet this formal metropolitan status cannot be separated from the historical context preceding the period when it became significant. Ireland was exporting capital before its economy was strong enough to benefit from such exports. Until the 1960s, it believed it had no easily worked raw materials – one of Lenin's four main reasons to in-

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vest in a country. The possibility of reducing the price of land sufficiently to justify its potential for foreign investors was thwarted in the 1880s by a combination of foreign competition and rural agitation. Labour, though relatively cheap compared to Britain, was, at least from the moment of partition, expensive compared to its comrades in Africa and Asia. However, even when the last two factors – cheap labour and land – were more encouraging to investors, Lenin's fourth condition – scarcity of capital – remained self-perpetuating. Capital left underdeveloped Ireland for the nearby London stockmarket and the more secure and profitable holdings of mainstream imperialism.

This direct import of Irish capital is only part (and a decreasing part) of Britain's interest in Ireland. Its rulers (at first, just the rulers of England) have always had two basic reasons for their occupation: to milk its resources and to prevent it becoming a military threat. Other reasons have

come and gone: the lobby first of Irish Unionists, and then purely Ulster ones, influenced British policy over the centuries (but it must now be remembered bitterly that the executors of that policy know no permanent friends, only permanent interests). On the other hand, military strategic considerations today include the possibility that Ireland will not just handicap British defence interests, but might yet become a major social

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revolutionary threat ('Britain's Cuba', as feared most publicly by British conservatism's right-wing, and less openly by more powerful figures). This possibility was apparent at times during the 1919-21 Anglo-Irish War and the subsequent Civil War in the 26 counties, as well as during the struggle of the last twenty years.

Both these basic reasons for occupation can be questioned and should be examined further. Certainly, the economic cause has changed over the years.

The problem of investment

TODAY, IRISH banks are ready to advance three-fifths of the state's debt, but not to move their investments out of foreign industry. So special incentives are given to encourage foreign firms to invest in Ireland, with diminishing success. In this process, it is certainly true that British interests are outnumbered by those of the United States: in 1988, new British investment amounted to a quantified £330m out of a total £3270.5m of foreign investment, of which the USA had supplied £3179m. The point is that Britain does have an interest, second only to that of the Americans. What is more, it is close enough to be the obvious choice as policeman for all imperialist investors. A new and more than ever before sustained and broadly-based national democratic revolution ended in a compromise by which the garrison was given its own federal relationship within the union, while the nationalist majority obtained what its leaders claimed was a 'stepping stone' to full independence, which it proved to be if independence excluded territorial unification.

The garrison that forms the majority in the province of 'Northern Ireland' has kept it in being so that the 26-County Republic can enjoy its neutrality without worrying the British government. Many would claim that Irish neutrality is not such a cause of worry in the nuclear age. In fact, countries have been destabilized for less (notably, the Micronesian island of Palau). No country with pretensions to great power status is likely to feel

happy, even now, about a neutral country the size of Ireland relative to Britain, that blocks its approaches, unless it is neutral itself. As it is, nuclear submarines belonging to Britain and other NATO powers are known to patrol in the Irish Sea. A united neutral Ireland would be in a position to block such craft passing through the North Channel between Larne in the North of Ireland and Portpatrick in Scotland, the narrowest and shallowest sea division between the two islands. To keep the Channel open, the British government has to control both its shores; it does so under the present status quo.

So British imperialism has an interest in Ireland that involves keeping it divided. Only complete and public acknowledgement of its authority by the rulers of allegedly independent Ireland, literal and open acceptance of its satellite status – including entry to NATO – and the maintenance of this position for at least a decade could justify Britain allowing Irish unity. Ideally, it would probably prefer such a solution to the present instability, or even the lesser instability that existed before 1969. The trouble is that, while the Republic's response to the struggle to its north has not been very favourable to the freedom fighters, it has tended to compensate for this over the years by taking a firmer stand on one issue open to it: neutrality. This is arguably more formal than real. NATO planes fly across Ireland and are even guided by a communications beacon in west County Cork. Nonetheless, such collaboration remains covert – more so than NATO desires. In the last 25 years, neutrality has been turned slowly but definitely from a bargaining chip in negotiations for EC membership into a matter of principle. Over 80% of the people of the Republic agree with this.

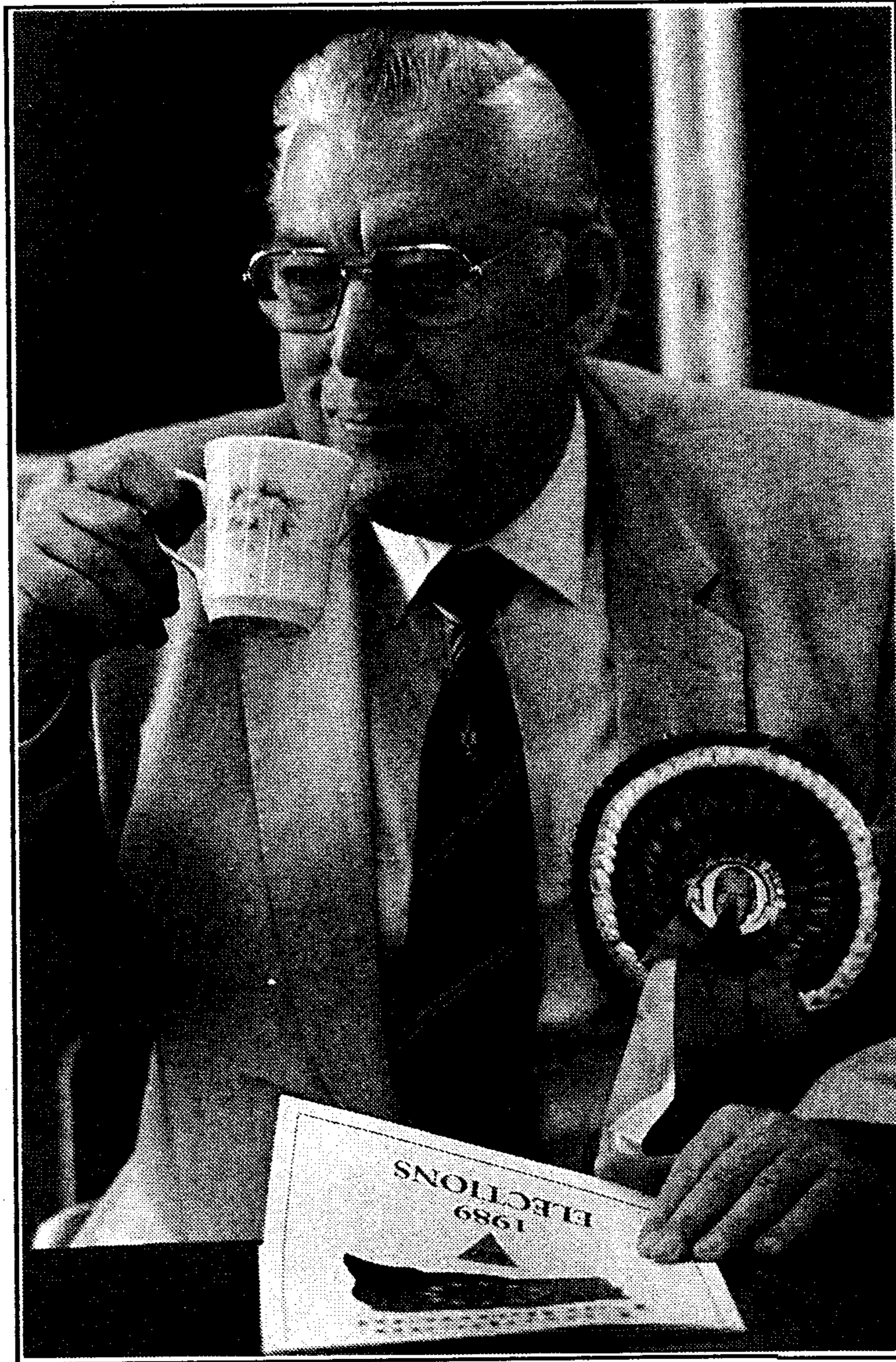
This makes it all the more important for Britain to maintain its alibi. It will not spurn the wishes of its garrison population in the Six-Counties of 'Northern Ireland' on the basic issue of the province's surrender to the Irish majority. It might even have got away with this had it been prepared without mass or military duress on insisting that the partitioned state be administered according to full democratic norms. Instead, from within a year of partition, it left matters to its garrison, the Ulster Unionists. They had begun their fight against Irish nationalism on an openly anti-democratic and imperialistic platform, denying the Irish the right to self-determination. As the struggle progressed, they organized around the Orange Order, which had been created to fight against the first Irish Republic rising on that very basis. Its central role as organizer of Unionism made it impossible for the North of Ireland to be run save on a sectarian basis that upheld and extended the discriminatory hiring practices common in the area.

Today, Protestants have two-and-a-half times better job prospects than Catholics in all sectors. Britain allowed this to happen – it was interested in its security, not Six-County democracy.

Building a revolutionary opposition

THE VANGUARD of the struggle against the occupation is – as it has been from the beginning, save for sympathetic upsurges on specific issues in the Republic – a minority cross-section of the Six-County minority. In this cross-section, unemployed workers and the younger children of the petty bourgeoisie have a disproportionate influence since they suffer most from the area's sectarian hiring practices. At the same time, such is the institutionalized discrimination at all levels that the local national bourgeoisie is also reasonably represented. The result is a strong, active revolutionary nationalist movement representing 35%-40% of the Six-County's nationalist population, with a majority in areas such as West Belfast and the border regions of County Armagh and County Fermanagh and a significant influence in those counties across the border whose economies have been weakened by partition. In all, up to now the necessary struggle for Irish unity is that of the political minority of the religious minority within Ireland's territorial minority.

This continuing three-fold minority position of the revolutionary nationalist movement gives superficial justification to the arguments that the crisis in the North of Ireland can be ended in the North of Ireland itself, arguments that are not only put forward by pro-imperialists. Whether this was ever possible is doubtful; its current impossibility is cer-



Ian Paisley: front line defender of Protestant ascendancy

tain, given the problems of levelling job opportunities between the religious communities. In practice, of course, this cannot be done without outside aid, either to hold the ring or to supply money to level up the difference. For most of its proponents, then, the 'internal solution' is an internal United Kingdom solution. The only supporters of an internal Six-County solution (called, significantly, UDR88 a la Ian Smith's Rhodesia) are, spasmodically, groups and individuals adhering to extreme right-wing Unionism who understand it as an assurance of permanent Protestant power.

So the question confronting revolutionary socialists must be: where can Ireland's revolutionary minority seek allies if it is to win? Of course, there have been, and still are, those who would insist that it does not need to win allies, only benevolent neutrals. For them, the war will be won by the Republican movement's (the term generally used for the major nationalist organization Sinn Fein and its armed wing the Irish Republican Army - IRA) superiority of arms – notably supplies of Libyan Semtex (plastic explosive), heat-seeking missiles and superior mortars. The first objection to this argument is that it supposes an aggressive armed struggle. Yet this is not the basis on which the Republican movement gains most of its support, but rather because its arms protect the nationalist areas in the North of Ireland against even worse attacks from the British and Loyalists. Already, it is doubtful whether the Republicans have the numbers to hold the supplies they need and protect their people.

The second objection is reflected in the fact that those who assert the possibility of their lone victory can also recognize, unlike the proponents of the 'internal solution', Britain's determination to keep its Irish base. Such determination will not be beaten by weapons alone. As yet, Britain has been able to fight a partly military and partly democratic struggle; it hopes to hold all the six counties and to win an internal settlement satisfactory to it. However, if the Republicans ever looked like forcing its withdrawal, Britain would be able to take the offensive, rebuild its bridges with the Unionists and abandon civil rights to fight an immediate and terrible war. This might provoke workers in the 26-Counties, as previous British atrocities have done. Whether this result would tip the scales for Irish unity if achieved in this way is doubtful, and becomes more dubious the longer the current struggle is prolonged.

So the Republican movement, being still the largest of all Irish revolutionary bodies, has a

responsibility to maximize its support outside of its northern strongholds. It has three groups from which it can choose, beyond its chances of becoming a majority of the Six-County minority which cannot be an adequate substitute for any of the others. The three are:

- The northern Irish Protestant majority;
- the national bourgeoisie in the Republic;
- the working class in the Republic.

Only one of these provides the correct strategic priority. Appealing to the Ulster Protestants leads immediately to the 'internal solution'. The vast majority of this community has no interest in Irish unity other than as part of a socialist workers' republic and, more to the immediate point, it cannot itself even make this exception when such a republic is not on the obvious agenda. What is more, the Protestant majority is particularly hostile to the Republicans' armed struggle, whose aim they think is genocide against them. As long as it continues on its present offensive basis, its organizers and supporters are the very last people among whom the political leaders of Ulster Protestantism will seek allies.

Protestant economic base

ONE THING should be added. The fact that the Ulster Protestant community, even the workers within it, are not immediate allies in struggle against imperialism does not mean that they will always oppose it. The Ulster Protestant working class has had a developed economic base for longer than the workers in any other part of Ireland. It has produced labour leaders who compare favourably with most of those elsewhere. Its weakness is that the conditions that created this base also revived the sectarianism that negated its effects: the best leaders of Ulster Protestant workers have tended to be more politically isolated within their community than other Irish labour leaders. This cannot always be. Faced with a genuine secular socialist revolutionary movement that hegemonizes the mass of Irish nationalist workers and seeks state power actively – a movement that has not yet been seen in Ireland, but this does not mean that it is impossible – then it can be expected that Ulster's workers of both traditions will unite in a higher cause than that of political rights within one union.

In the six counties, conditions have maintained the revolutionary potential of bourgeois nationalism; in the south, this potential is practically extinguished outside the border counties. In the Republic, the capitalists have built a secure base, with an economy more separate from that of the North of Ireland than it is from that of Britain. This base expanded industrially in the 1930s under

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policies of self-sufficiency initiated by Fianna Fail, the constitutional heir of the militant opponents of the 1921 Treaty. By the end of the 1950s, the policies necessary to ensure economic independence were too radical for Irish capital. The economy was reopened to multinational firms with immediate, if short-lived, success as far as unemployment was concerned. From the end of the 1960s unemployment has tended to increase, while in this decade it has engendered a rise in emigration for the first time since the 1950s.

Despite this, the capitalist classes enjoy a measure of stability that is threatened by the ac-

tivities of their fellow-nationalists in the North of Ireland. Early in this struggle, to stave off its spread, they attempted to reduce economic discontent with increased government expenditure, which has increased the national debt to a level where it has come to be perceived as an even greater destabilizer than the national struggle. So, since 1982, the debt has been attacked by a series of retrenchment policies.

This account of the development of 26-County capitalism could be portrayed as the history of a developed, if inefficient, metropolitan bourgeoisie. This is, indeed, the interpretation made by the Socialist Workers' Movement (SWM), the Cliffite ('state capitalist') group, which is one of the largest non-Stalinist and non-Republican groups on the Irish revolutionary left. For the SWM, since 1921 the 26 counties have enjoyed as much control over their

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economy as is compatible with capitalism. From this, it follows that it is capitalism rather than national oppression that is, subjectively as well as objectively, the primary enemy of the Irish revolution. The country is too advanced for any strategy of permanent revolution – socialist struggle emerging out of the democratic one – in the sense that it may have succeeded elsewhere. Irish unity and secular democracy are secondary, if unavoidable, demands, with the struggles to achieve them simply ‘part of the necessary training of the working class to fight oppression’ (Socialist Worker, January 1989).

The economic facts that underpin this argument are unimpressive. A large proportion of them depend on the strength of the native banks, still claiming their three-fifths of the national debt. However, in the first place, national oppression is not linked directly to economic factors – for example, Catalonia and Euzkadi have been relatively prosperous parts of Spain. What is more, Irish banking was even stronger and more independent of Britain at the time of the Anglo-Irish War. Today, all Irish banks, with one possible exception, are controlled by British interests. And the one doubtful one (but the biggest), the Bank of Ireland, has at least 40% of its stock in British hands. They were more independent in 1921. Even so, then as now, founded to fund an industrial revolution that lacked the raw materials to exist, the banks were as much an instrument of national oppression as of capitalist exploitation. They syphoned off capital resources that could have been used to fund jobs for those who were forced to emigrate to find work, whose earnings since 1921 could have provided only positive payment balances. The importance of the banks to their depositors in what was, until the 1960s, a predominantly peasant society has made it impossible for the constitutional heirs of the anti-Treatyites to deal with them. The most definite challenge to the banks, by the constitutional Republican Clann na Poblachta in 1948, almost certainly lost it both votes and seats.

Here again, it is clear that what Wolfe Tone, Irish Republicanism's ideological ancestor, called ‘breaking the connection with Britain’ must mean breaking Irish finance capital. And while schematically the reverse can be said to be true, the history of the last 20 years shows that, by spreading the struggle for unity against the uneasy stability that justifies capital's resistance and the divided state power that defends it, revolutionaries can overcome the opposition of the banks and their depositors. Without the national struggle as the booster – in effect, if this struggle is defeated – no anti-capitalist revolution is likely to succeed in Ireland for many years.

The Socialist Workers' Movement warns against socialist revolutionaries ‘riding the nationalist tiger’. The danger is there, of course: the last years of national revolutionary downturn have seen the swallowing of socialist revolutionaries – and in many cases, their digestion – by the said tiger. The point is that these have been years of downturn. Similar phenomena occurred at similar moments during and after the Anglo-Irish War.

When the struggle takes off again, an inevitable condition and result of this remobilization will be the development of the nationalist struggle towards a socialist perspective.

There is another reason given (although not used by the SWM) for denying the subjective political priority of Irish unity. This is the sectarian nature of the state established and ruled by the leaders of those who fought for Irish independence and unity. The results of the referenda on abortion and divorce have had a demoralizing effect on many democrats' aspirations for a united Ireland. In fact, the fighters in the Anglo-Irish War did not have strong views about keeping their state free of birth control and divorce. The Catholic hierarchy did not support the freedom fighters in this struggle, lest it open its divisions (after all, most of its members were constitutional ‘Home Rule’ nationalists). It could unite only to support the Treaty, albeit with necessary token protests against partition. In the new state, with more than 90% of the population Catholic, it was natural that the majority Church be in a strong position. Natural, too, that successive 26-County governments keep in with it by ensuring that their decisions were guided by it, particularly on sexual matters. Today, Catholic dominance of the 26-County state is a necessary part of that state's stability within the partition settlement; its political base is strong because of partition.

Finally, as for the Republic's national bourgeoisie, the cultural expression of its inadequacy both as a nationalist force and a developed imperial

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metropolis is its active role as patron to the opponents of its expansion. Such opponents exist in all states. In the Republic, the smallness of the milieu and the continuing limitation of higher education to a bourgeois elite comprising a smaller share of the state's population than elsewhere, has helped ensure that a monolithic view of the Irish situation is enforced in academic and media life. The bourgeoisie's single-minded intellectual dumping of the struggle that led to the founding of its state may seem strange until it is understood that the majority of this class has always accepted the Treaty as its title to state power. Its new enthusiasm is benefitting it. Over the last two decades, the

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power of its state against civil liberties has grown with little protest, since this growth has been directed specifically against Republicans.

The national democratic revolution cannot and should not seek to expand its support among the Ulster Loyalists or the 26-County bourgeoisie. There remains the third possibility: the working class in the south. The Republic's bourgeoisie – or, at least, its less anti-nationalist wing – traces its ancestry to those who fought the Anglo-Irish War. Not all who can claim this inheritance were or are bourgeois. Despite the betrayals of its leaders and the resultant slowness of its members to go beyond trade-union consciousness, despite its backwardness that left many open to the anti-nationalism of its country's capitalists and despite the errors of the Republican movement itself and its inability to appeal on working class lines, it remains true that the

26-County workers are less hostile to the struggle for Irish unity than their bosses. The two major advances that the struggle made into their area were also its advances towards a working class strategy. Both the strike after the British Army's massacre of civil rights demonstrators on Bloody Sunday 1972 and the Hunger Strike agitations of 1980-81 involved large-scale, partially spontaneous,

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mobilizations of workers.

The problem is how to build on this potential. On the positive side, it must be recognized that bringing the struggle into the 26 counties must involve transforming it into a class one. A programme must be prepared as the centre for all future struggles around the core and present active revolutionary demand for a united Ireland. This Freedom Charter must include transitional demands. These can be developed. Of the transitional demands, however, it is clear that repudiation of the debt must be included to release the 31.8bn per annum interest for reconstruction, as well as the savings on the border garrisons. But the most important fact about a Freedom Charter is that, once drafted, it should become the central focus of anti-imperialist strategy.

And this raises the negative point. Any front to implement a Freedom Charter has to include Sinn Fein, which is probably larger than all the other anti-imperialist bodies put together. Sinn Fein's strategy is not even centred on its own political programme but, rather, on its minimalist duty to support the aggressive armed struggle that it sees being waged by the Irish Republican Army. Time and again, this struggle – fought as if its soldiers can drive the British Army into the sea – has inevitably blundered, killing civilians pointlessly and increasing hostility to it from 26-County workers who become more open to the enemies of Irish unity arguing against any revolution developing beyond the Catholic parts of the North of Ireland.

The Communist Party's answer to this, true to its apocalyptic vision of a grand alliance combining Loyalists and Catholic bigots, is to call for a cease-fire. (This is the most friendly solution of all the groups that support an internal settlement.) There are two objections to this. Firstly, the IRA cannot enforce a cease-fire; there are too many armed groups already outside its control that dissident elements could join. More importantly, on the form of the two previous cease-fires in 1972 and 1975, the British and the Loyalists will ignore such a move. For them, it will be a sign of weakness enabling them to smash all nationalist resistance once and for all. This reaction may stimulate a revival of this resistance and even (as such a move did with Bloody Sunday and the Hunger Strikes) stimulate the reaction in the Republic that is necessary for victory. The trouble is that, as on previous occasions, the process leading to this escalation will not have been prepared and is likely to collapse. It would be a gamble that should not be taken.

Instead, the fighters should change their strategy within the armed struggle. They should see themselves not as the vanguard of what is still a none-existent rising in arms of the Irish people, but as defenders of the Northern Catholics (on whom their actual existing support depends) and, still more accurately, guarantors that the existing state repression will not go beyond a certain point. This will enable them to adapt their tactics, like their allies, to the claims of the Freedom Charter.

The Irish national question remains acute. It can only be solved by transcending its existing minimum programme of Irish unity – through the process of permanent revolution. Beyond this, it is a long speculation, but it should be added that this process may mean that the solution of the Irish question in favour of the oppressed and exploited will be the greatest revolutionary change in Western Europe since 1945. As such, it is likely to be the sign that the permanent revolution is beginning for Ireland's neighbours. ■