Revolutionary Communist Tendency
International Conference

## IMPERIALISM IN THE 'EIGHTIES
5-7 September 1980

**The present phase of imperialism is one of instability and conflict. Over the past decade the balance of power established under the domination of US imperialism after the Second World War has been seriously upset and a new battle to redivide the world is beginning. Today the crisis of imperialism more and more demands political and military intervention in Africa and in the Middle East.**

**The aim of the RCT's three day conference is to discuss the growth of rivalries among the imperialist powers and assess its significance for the working class. This is vital if the international labour movement is to be prepared for the imperialist offensive to come. *Imperialism in the 'eighties* will be of interest to revolutionaries the world over. Speakers from a number of countries have been invited and there will be full opportunity for thorough debate.**

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| Sessions on: | Ireland | Theory of imperialism |
| | Zimbabwe | Imperialism and the EEC |
| | Iran | Racism and migrant workers |
| | Afghanistan | National liberation movements |

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# *Ireland's victory means Britain's defeat*

# Revolutionary Communist Pamphlets

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# IRELAND'S VICTORY MEANS BRITAIN'S DEFEAT

## The role of the labour movement

### HOW TO SOLVE A WAR?

#### A British solution

'Why are we in Northern Ireland anyway?' Margaret Thatcher is said to have inquired of her new Cabinet shortly after the Tory general election victory in May 1979. This question expresses the frustration of the British ruling class over the war in Ireland. Surveying the death and destruction of the last decade and the enormous financial burden of the war, British politicians sometimes wish they could just get rid of the troublesome Six Counties they control in Ireland. But these are rare moments of sentiment and weakness. The British know they have no alternative for the Six Counties but direct rule from Westminster.

When Thatcher despatched her Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Humphrey Atkins to consult the various parties in the Six Counties and come up with a new political solution, informed bourgeois opinion in Britain was sceptical. The editor of *The Times* explained:

> 'The differences so stubbornly insisted upon in Ulster concern the most fundamental of all political issues: allegiance, national identity, the legitimacy of the state. . . .These are issues which are usually disposed of only when one side prevails decisively over the other.' (21 November 1979)

The war in Ireland is a direct threat to the British nation and its state: the ruling class knows that it must 'prevail decisively' over the national liberation movement in Ireland. Meanwhile, *The Times* went on, let Atkins talk – at least the government is 'seen to be doing something' in Dublin, Washington and Brussels. But behind the diplomatic manoeuvres there is the conviction that 'all in all direct rule has much to commend it'.

The British ruling class desperately needs a solution to the war. The most experienced and best equipped counter-insurgency army in the world has been fought to a stalemate by a popular and effective guerrilla force. But as Britain

plunges deeper into recession a stalemate is not good enough. What the press used to call cynically 'an acceptable level of violence' is no longer acceptable to crisis-stricken Britain. As the pressures mount for the government to impose its final solution on the Irish people the War has been thrown open to public debate in Britain.

In recent months Ireland has appeared on the agendas of trade unions, Labour Party conferences and other labour movement forums after years of passive acquiescence in British domination. While the ruling class is in no doubt that military repression will provide the backing for whatever minor constitutional adjustments Atkins proposes, the labour movement remains hopeful that Britain will implement a progressive solution in Ireland. A new 'Labour Committee on Ireland' has been launched with the aim of getting a resolution calling for 'British withdrawal' adopted at this year's Party conference. A similar motion was defeated last year. The Socialist Workers Party is backing the Young Liberals' 'Committee for Withdrawal from Ireland' whose June 1980 'Voices for Withdrawal' rally provides a platform for Liberal and Labour politicians, trade union bureaucrats and other dignitaries to call for a new British initiative in Ireland.

This pamphlet is our response to the deadlock in Ireland. The success of any British solution depends on the defeat of the national liberation movement. The opposite is also true: Ireland's victory means Britain's defeat. The left's middle way – a British scheme to bring peace and progress to Ireland – is an illusion which can only give credibility to whatever solution the government finally devises. Our object is to win the support of the British working class for the struggle of the Irish people. The labour movement is their most powerful potential ally in the struggle for national independence. This task demands more than stirring workers' sympathies for the Irish. It means winning their active support for the defeat of the British state.

## Britain needs to win

Britain's allies are impatient for a solution in Ireland. The world recession has increased tensions amongst imperialist powers and revived Cold War conflicts. As the United States is drawn towards military intervention in the Middle East it needs to minimise instability within the Western alliance. The powerful Irish lobby of Carey, O'Neill, Kennedy and Moynihan is the means by which America puts pressure on the British Government to settle affairs in Ireland. From Europe too come diplomatic pressures on Britain. Since it joined the EEC the Irish Republic has formed closer ties with the important Continental powers. Irish Taoiseach Charles Haughey has begun to exert influence on French Premier Giscard d'Estaing and the Council of Europe in favour of an Irish settlement. The Irish War threatens to destabilise both Ireland and Britain and ties down a substantial section of NATO forces; it is a war capitalist Europe wants ended.

Most importantly of all Britain itself needs to resolve its Irish problem.



Now one of the weakest of the leading imperialist nations, Britain is severely afflicted by the world crisis. The British Government must force through a programme of austerity at home to revive British capitalism. It needs redundancies in tens of thousands in major industries as well as in central and local government. And it has to destroy trade union rights and curtail the rights of women and ethnic minorities. The severity of Britain's crisis calls for drastic solutions, but these risk provoking serious unrest and disruption in British society.

Street fighting in Southall and Bristol shows the mounting resentment of young blacks in Britain. Steadily rising youth unemployment bottles up anger and frustration that may burst out at any time. And working class resistance to cuts and closures brings trade unionists into violent conflict with the police on picket lines and demonstrations. In the first four months of 1980 there were more arrests of people involved in industrial action – around 500 – than in any comparable period in the last 50 years (*The Times*, 1 May 1980) With all this aggravation on its hands at home the British ruling class can no longer afford a drawn out war of attrition in Ireland.

Britain's problem in Ireland arises from the peculiar colonial relationship between the two countries in the past. The only way Britain could contain rebellion in Ireland was by integrating it into the imperial state. The Act of Union in 1801 fused Ireland with the British nation. Partition in 1921 retained the Six Counties as part of the United Kingdom; this was the only way the British government could bring Ireland as a whole under firm political control. Because the Six Counties is constitutionally a part of Britain the sort of 'de-colonisation' carried through in Kenya and Uganda, Cyprus and India was never a possibility in Ireland.

The integration of the Six Counties into the United Kingdom is a source of potential instability for the British state itself. The liberation struggle in Ireland is not just a nuisance like Mau Mau in Kenya or EOKA in Cyprus – it is a direct threat to the British state. The integrity of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is what is at stake in the Irish War.

Ex-Labour Minister Stan Orme warned delegates at the 1979 Labour Party conference that the Irish War imperilled law and order in Britain. The War 'could overflow into the cities of Britain, into the Liverpools and the Glasgows and the Londons, the Birminghams and the Manchesters' (*Conference report*, p382). These are the grim forebodings of the British ruling class that underlie its determination to win in the Six Counties, whatever the cost in taxpayers' money, soldiers' lives and international prestige.

## Ireland has to fight

The nature of British rule in Ireland makes withdrawal impossible – but it also puts reform out of the question. The Six County regime is based on the denial of the right of the Irish people to national independence. Political oppression is built into the system of British administration in Ireland: it is

the only way in which it can be sustained. All the measures of discrimination and repression directed against Catholics in the Six Counties flow from Britain's need to stifle their national aspirations and keep them in subjection It was the demands of the Catholics for civil rights in the late 'sixties that sparked off the War that has ravaged the Six Counties ever since. Britain could not grant these demands then – and it is in an even weaker position to grant them today.

The crisis has had a catastrophic impact on the Six Counties. It has accelerated the decline of the traditional industries. Production has stagnated through the 'seventies; new investment has resulted in further rationalisation rather than the creation of new jobs. Unemployment is now running at over 11 per cent and is expected to move rapidly towards 20 per cent this year. Average wages in 1979 were 20 per cent lower than in Britain although prices in the Six Counties are four to five per cent higher. A 1978 survey of housing conditions in Belfast showed that nearly a quarter of the city's housing stock was unfit for human habitation. A recent Supplementary Benefits Commission report notes that more than 14 per cent of the population in the Six Counties depend on social security. The Six Counties is one of the poorest regions in Western Europe.

Unemployment and poverty are not evenly distributed among the people of the Six Counties. Numerous surveys demonstrate that Catholics suffer higher unemployment, lower living standards, worse housing and higher rates of emigration than Protestants. The January 1978 report of the Fair Employment Agency confirmed that there were two and a half times more Catholics out of work than Protestants and that Catholics were less likely to be employed in middle class occupations. Local unemployment rates in the Catholic ghettoes of Belfast ranged from 18 per cent to almost 50 per cent.

At the same time the Catholic community of the Six Counties is the target of intense repression. The British Army, the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) all patrol, harass and intimidate people in the nationalist areas of the towns and cities in the occupied counties. Roadblocks, identity checks, house searches; raids, interrogations, shootings and covert operations are the routine procedures of a foreign army of occupation. Diplock courts – where confessions extracted under torture are sufficient to guarantee convictions – and the H-Blocks of Long Kesh concentration camp are indispensable features of British domination in Ireland.

## The Irish War – victory or defeat?

To stabilise its rule in Ireland Britain divided the country in two 60 years ago. The Twenty-six Counties was granted formal independence in 1921 and it subsequently declared itself a republic. It cannot however be seen as an independent Irish nation – Ireland has 32 counties and as long as part of its



territory is annexed by a foreign power the national question will remain at the centre of Irish political life. Partition allows Britain to rule Ireland – directly in the Six Counties and indirectly in the rest of the country. On both sides of the border capitalist relations can only be preserved by repressive legislation and the use of the army and police on a much greater scale than prevails in Britain. Internment without trial of political opponents was introduced in the Six Counties in 1971. Hundreds of republicans were incarcerated in prison camps over the next four years. Internment has also been used against republicans and socialists in the Twenty-six Counties. The rights of women and homosexuals are curtailed in all 32 counties.

British strategy since the troops went in in 1969 has been to smash the resistance of the national population. To achieve this the government has encouraged discrimination in housing and employment. The British have exploited sectarian divisions in their drive to defeat the republican movement.

In pursuing its strategy of repression Britain has retained the allegiance of the Protestant community – including Protestant workers – in Ireland. The Protestants identify their interests with British imperialism. While many Protestants live in poverty in slum housing they are at least better off than the Catholics. In the conditions of the Six Counties the differentials between the two communities are sufficient to guarantee Protestant loyalty to Britain.

Direct rule has displaced the Protestant leaders from their dominant position within the Six Counties and caused strife and divisions within the Unionist Party. But mass Protestant support has always moved towards the more extreme representatives of loyalism. Last year's electoral successes have confirmed the position of Democratic Unionist Party leader Ian Paisley as the dominant force in the Protestant community. Paisley's election programme was simple. Demanding that 'Ulster be put on a war footing', it put the 'security' situation above everything else and called for the death penalty for IRA 'terrorists'. With this platform Paisley extended his influence from rural areas to win the support of Belfast workers. In March this year 15 000 Orangemen took to the streets of Belfast to demand tougher 'security measures' against the republican movement. In recent months the Protestant paramilitary gangs have been back in action conducting random sectarian assassinations within the Catholic areas.

The Catholics' response to the steady deterioration in living standards, the relentless coercion of the army and the police and the ever present threat of the Protestant paramilitaries has been courageous resistance to all aspects of British domination. The IRA has regrouped and reorganised itself into an efficient guerrilla force. A captured British intelligence document last year revealed the army's grim assessment of the capacity of the republican movement to persevere with the armed struggle. In the last few weeks a mortar attack on an army post in Newry, simultaneous explosions at three hotels causing damage worth more than £1m and a series of sniper attacks on soldiers show the ability of the IRA to strike effectively at the enemy forces. Demonstrations and protests focusing on the conditions of prisoners in Long

Kesh, Armagh and other prisons reveal the extent of popular support for the nationalist cause.

We give our unconditional support to the Irish struggle against imperialism. Britain has never brought Ireland anything but poverty and terror. The last decade of crisis and coercion shows that Britain can usher in neither economic progress nor a more democratic administration in Ireland. Imperialism is the barrier to social advance. Until it is defeated there will be either no progress or only partial advances bought at terrible cost to life and liberty.

## IRELAND AND THE RCT

The Revolutionary Communist Tendency's immediate objective is to build a revolutionary working class party in Britain. Propaganda and action on the Irish question are essential to make this a reality. Why? Because Ireland is the issue on which class interests are most clearly defined. Solidarity action in support of the Irish liberation movement advances the clarification of a distinctive working class outlook which is vital in building a revolutionary party.

### The War and the working class

In essence the issue is simple. There is a war in Ireland with two sides. You can choose to support one side or the other – either the British ruling class or the Irish people. However, given the fact that the republican movement is at war with Britain, support for the Irish people has serious consequences for British workers. It means they are supporting a military attack on their own state. It indicates a recognition of the common interests of the British working class and the Irish people in the overthrow of the British state.

This stand against the state is important because the state, as the defender of the capitalist class, is the fundamental obstacle to socialism. But it has a much more practical significance. Workers come into confrontation with the courts and the police whenever they try to resist the cuts, defend trade union rights or fight for decent wages. The state is an immediate barrier to the defence of working class living standards. By supporting the Irish struggle against the British state, workers declare their own class interests in opposing the state. This can strengthen the defence of jobs and wages today and speed up the emergence of a movement capable of overthrowing the bourgeois state once and for all.

Unconditional support for the national liberation movement, expressed in the slogans 'Self-determination for the Irish people' and 'Troops out now', has always been at the centre of RCT activity on Ireland. We put forward these demands on demonstrations and at meetings and argue vigorously against those on the left who favour toning them down or dropping them altogether in favour of slogans which have more popular appeal.



One way of winning support for the Irish people in Britain is through campaigning against the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). The British state uses the PTA to silence and harass any domestic opposition to its war in Ireland. It is the most effective weapon the state has for fighting the war at home.

**Since the PTA was introduced by a Labour government in 1974, more than 4600 people have been detained. Of this number 64 were charged with offences under the Act and 44 found guilty. More than 200 people were expelled from Britain to Ireland after detention and interrogation.**

**The Smash the PTA Campaign**

- **provides practical support for PTA victims: pickets, legal aid and other assistance**
- **gathers information about the use of the Act and publicises the repression of anti-imperialist activity**
- **gives unconditional support to the Irish national liberation movement.**

### Smash the PTA Campaign

Towards the end of 1979 we decided to focus our activity in the labour movement on opposition to the PTA. We organised a national demonstration in November and the Smash the PTA Campaign was launched shortly afterwards. SPTAC was soon in action organising pickets and publicity for victims of the PTA. In addition to the work of providing practical assistance to PTA victims and gathering and disseminating information about the use of the Act, the Campaign has been active in putting across the political arguments for 'Self-determination' and 'Troops out now'.

The SPTAC national speaking tour, which took place around the time of the PTA's renewal in Parliament in March 1980, put opposition to this law firmly in the context of unequivocal support for Ireland's war of national liberation. This was also the theme of the Tameside Trades Council conference on Ireland and the British labour movement which SPTAC initiated and helped to organise. Indeed the anti-imperialist orientation was so explicit that it provoked the local National Front into calling a counter-demonstration and led to the conference room booking being cancelled by Tameside's Labour Council. The conference was finally banned by the TUC. A few weeks later the TUC, spurred on by the Communist Party, disaffiliated Tameside

Trades Council for its intransigent stand against British imperialism in Ireland (see 'The Tameside Conspiracy', *the next step*, No 4, April-May 1980)

### Union politics and class politics

Although SPTAC is directed at British trade unionists we do not try to present the Irish War as a *trade union* issue. As trade unionists, workers are organised to defend the interest of a particular section of the labour movement. In industrial disputes unions organise a group of workers against their boss, not the working class as a whole against the capitalists. Trade unions are important defensive organisations but they cannot effectively unite the working class against the state.

In wages struggles political differences are measured in percentages. Moderate steelworkers' leader Bill Sirs went into negotiations during the recent steel strike looking for a 14 per cent rise. Left-wing militants in the ISTC demanded '20 per cent with no strings'. The final compromise disguised the conflict of interests between a trade union leader whose first concern was the profits of the British Steel Corporation and activists who spent weeks on picket lines fighting to defend workers' wages, jobs and conditions. The Irish War is different: political differences are absolute. Either you support Ireland or Britain, either you take a pro-working class or a pro-ruling class position.

In the end class politics are necessary to defend trade union rights. Elementary trade unionism has not been effective in defending workers from redundancies and wage cuts. Most trade unionists have no independent political outlook; they are ready to accept the view of their employers and union leaders that they should adopt a common approach to overcoming the difficulties thrown up by the crisis. They are susceptible to appeals for restraint and even sacrifices made in the name of 'our' industry and 'our' nation. Their response to nationalist propaganda is to join with the government, the CBI and the TUC, in helping to solve the problems facing British industry. Steelworkers, like workers in British Leyland, are paying the price in closures and productivity deals for accepting responsibility for the state of industry. The Irish War however shows that workers and employers, labour and capital, have interests which, far from being shared, are directly antagonistic. Trade unionists who take a stand against British imperialism in Ireland will be in a stronger position to pursue their distinct interests as workers against employers and the government on the shopfloors of British industry.

SPTAC does not ask British workers to oppose the PTA because it might be used against them *as British trade unionists*. This appeal to the narrow self-interests of British workers was the central theme of the Trade Union Campaign Against the PTA ( a short-lived radical left initiative in the mid 'seventies). It remains the thrust of the anti-PTA activity of Communist Party-backed bodies like the NCCL and radical groups like the SWP. The left's familiar appeal for opposition to repression in Ireland on the grounds that the techniques perfected in the Six Counties could be used against workers in



Britain shares this approach.

The failure of these appeals confirms that people respond to major political issues according to their class outlook. Most British workers broadly accept the position of the ruling class on the Irish War. They are impervious to appeals to their narrow material interests because they take a broader view of the Irish War. They accept repression because they accept the prevalent bourgeois justifications for it: that the army is defending the rights of the majority in the Six Counties, that Britain must keep law and order and defeat terrorism and that the situation would be worse if the troops were removed. Workers will not oppose the PTA or the army's activities until this ruling class outlook on the War is replaced by a working class outlook. How does the RCT take up these arguments in its drive to convince workers that it is in their class interest to oppose the PTA and every facet of British rule in Ireland?

## IRISH QUESTIONS

Some workers fully accept the government line on Ireland. They share many of the anti-Irish prejudices of the British ruling class that the labour bureaucracy helps to spread among workers. There are however many who are concerned about the war in Ireland. They are uneasy about the record of British rule and the repressive role of the army. Many workers will broadly agree that the Irish should have independence but raise a number of questions which seem to be intractable obstacles to this ideal being realised.

### What about the Protestants?

**'I agree that the Catholics have had a raw deal and I can see that they want an independent united Ireland, but the majority of the people in Northern Ireland want to remain in the United Kingdom. Why shouldn't they be allowed to?'**

It is true that in a referendum in 1973 the majority of the people in the Six Counties voted to remain a part of Britain. But the Six Counties was set up to make sure that there was a permanent majority within its borders in favour of the union with Britain. In a country infamous for gerrymandering, Partition was the greatest gerrymander of them all.

In the only election ever held in the whole of Ireland on the question of national independence – in 1918 – an overwhelming majority of the people voted for Sinn Fein and freedom from British rule. But the Protestants of the north-east were committed to keeping the British connection. They were concentrated in two counties: Antrim and Down. However they needed a greater area to make their new 'province' of the United Kingdom a viable proposition. Partition in 1921 included Armagh, Derry, Tyrone and Fermanagh to make up the Six Counties. The border was carefully drawn to ensure a

Protestant majority. Three other predominantly Catholic counties of the old Irish province of Ulster (Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan) were excluded from the new Six County regime.

Thus talk of the 'majority' in 'Northern Ireland' means endorsement of Partition. This is not merely a quibble about history. The division of Ireland remains to this day the central instrument of British domination over Ireland as a whole. But the question still remains – 'What about the Protestants?'. They did not want an independent Ireland in 1921 and they do not want it today.

The Protestant community in the Six Counties is solidly loyal to British imperialism. Britain has fomented sectarian divisions to consolidate its rule ever since it planted Scottish Protestants in Ireland in the seventeenth century. The British connection still guarantees Protestants more and better jobs and marginally higher living standards in a country where even a small measure above the poverty line means a lot.

But British imperialism cannot develop industry or agriculture in Ireland. It could not do this when British capitalism was strong and expanding – it is less than ever able to do it in today's crisis conditions. Imperialism cannot provide decent living standards or political rights to any worker in Ireland – Protestant or Catholic. But as long as imperialism can maintain differentials between the two communities sectarian divisions will persist. Sectarianism can be overcome and workers of different religions united only through the defeat of British imperialism.

When Protestants line up with imperialism against the national population they are standing against the only hope of economic and political development in Ireland. The Irish people have a common interest in the defeat of British imperialism. But, loyal to Britain, most Protestants will not tolerate its destruction. However if we are to be loyal to the struggle against imperialism in Ireland and in Britain, then we cannot tolerate their obstruction.

## A British initiative?

**'I think it's the responsibility of the British government to come up with a solution to the mess it has created over the years in Ireland and bring the troubles to an end.'**

No British initiative could possibly have beneficial consequences for the Irish people. British imperialism cannot, especially in a period of world recession, play a progressive role in Ireland. The repression meted out by the troops in Ireland is not an optional extra to the British occupation. It cannot be dispensed with on the whim of enlightened legislators at Westminster. Britain can only keep its grip on the situation in Northern Ireland and prevent it from exploding into a major threat to stability throughout the British isles by pursuing its present military policy in the Six Counties.

In today's circumstances any political initiative must move in the



direction of more not less repression. That's why every government announcement about administration in Ireland is prefaced by statements of determination to crush 'the terrorists' – ie, to step up repression of the national population.

The call for a British initiative approves of the British government deciding how Ireland should be administered. We deny 'British responsibility for Ireland' and maintain the exclusive right of the Irish people to determine their own forms of government.

## Wouldn't there be a bloodbath?

**'While I agree that the Irish should have their freedom, I don't approve of their use of terrorist methods to bring about Irish unity. I don't like a lot of what the army does in Northern Ireland but people should be protected from terrorism. If the troops were withdrawn it would provoke an explosion of violence between the two communities, perhaps even civil war.'**

There is a war going on in Ireland. In all wars people are killed and maimed; great suffering results on both sides, often to those not directly involved in the conflict. However in any war we have to look at the social forces involved and decide, from our judgement of the interests of society as a whole, which side to support. Ireland can only become peaceful and prosperous through the defeat of British imperialism. So we support the forces fighting against British rule in Ireland. And we accept that, given the determination of Britain to impose its will on Ireland, this will mean death and bloodshed. As Britain rules by violence it will only be driven out by violence. This is unfortunate but evidently unavoidable. Where do the proponents of the 'boodbath' theory stand?

They all support British imperialism: the theory is particularly favoured by the Labour Party, the TUC and the Communist Party. The 'bloodbath' argument tries to justify this position by comparing two heaps of bodies. One contains the 2000 people already killed in the War, the other a hypothetical pile amassed after a hypothetical British withdrawal. It is a measure of the bankruptcy of both imperialism and the labour bureaucracy that such arguments have to be used to justify British policies.

The 'bloodbath' argument is an apology for British imperialism. Its proponents express sympathy with the victims of army torture and terror, produce their 'theory' as a justification for not opposing the British occupation – and sit back and let the army get on with its barbarous mission in Ireland.

# the next step

review of the Revolutionary Communist Tendency

**Has Atkins got the answer?**
**Will he be foiled by the IRA?**
**Will the Protestants stick with Paisley?**
**What's Haughey's game?**
**Will the Labour Party back 'withdrawal'?**
**And if it does, will anything happen?**

The Irish War raises many difficult questions for the British labour movement. Every six weeks *the next step* gives some answers from the standpoint of unconditional support for the national liberation movement in Ireland. More than that, it points the way forward – through the activities of the RCT and the Smash the PTA Campaign – to building an anti-imperialist movement in Britain.

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## BRITISH ANSWERS

### 'Withdrawal'

An important demonstration was held in London in August 1979 on the tenth anniversary of the invasion of British troops into the Six Counties. It was significant in that it was the first Irish demonstration ever supported by sections of the Liberal, Communist and Labour Parties. It was also the first Irish demonstration since the RCT was formed that we did not support. In fact we organised a token counter-demonstration.

The demonstration was called, organised and led off by the Young Liberals under the slogan 'ask the British Government to commit itself to a policy of withdrawal from Northern Ireland'. The Liberal initiative was an explicit response to the failure of British imperialism to deal with resistance in Ireland. As the leaflet put out by the 'August 12th Demonstration Committee' explained, 'all attempts to find a political solution while the troops remain have failed'. The party which in the past presided over the British Empire and imposed Partition on Ireland now took note that the old solution no longer worked. Although no longer in a position to do much about it, the Liberals could at least take the lead in calling for a new imperialist solution.

The radical left groups, notably the SWP, mobilised for the demonstration with a leaflet with the same political content as that of the Liberals. The SWP repeated the Liberal slogan 'it's time to go' but replaced the timid 'ask the British Government' with a militant 'force the British Government to commit itself to a policy of withdrawal'. It also noted that 'all attempts to find a political solution within the context of Northern Ireland have failed'. This strategy was designed to attract the war weary and the pacifists, people concerned about British soldiers being killed and troubled at the burden of the War on the British taxpayer. Its object? To draw onto the streets members of the CP and LP who have backed British imperialism throughout the War but now see the need for a change in British policy.

While the radical left joined forces with the Liberals to win the support of Stalinists and reformists it resorted to the traditional slogans of 'Troops out now' and 'Self-determination for the Irish people' to mobilise its own membership and periphery. And in an attempt not to compromise themselves too much on the day the radical left groups kept a discreet few yards' distance between the tiny Liberal, Communist and Labour Parties' contingent and the bulk of the demonstration, which formed up under the banners of the SWP, IMG and others.

The RCT refused to join a march calling for a British solution in Ireland. The largest Irish demonstration in London for several years was mobilised around, not opposition to British imperialism, but a call for a different form of domination. It is not that we oppose mass mobilisations, but simply that we oppose indulging the reactionary prejudices of the taxpayers and the



war weary in a manner which can only reinforce their allegiance to imperialism. Only a broad appeal to workers with working class politics can mobilise the sort of opposition to British imperialism that gives real support to the struggle of the Irish people.

Since August last year, the left has become even more preoccupied with diplomatic initiatives. It had previously welcomed American pressure for a solution and praised the *Daily Mirror*'s occasional 'Bring home the troops' editorials. Always on the look-out for war weariness, the SWP now sees possibilities of widening the front still more to include sections of the Conservative Party. 'Are Tory withdrawal symptoms growing?' *Socialist Worker* wondered recently (26 April 1980). So the 'Withdrawal from Ireland petition' ('we the undersigned call on Her Majesty's Government') goes the rounds and the 'Voices for Withdrawal' rally backed by the SWP drew up a list of sponsors including MPs, trade union bureaucrats, vicars and playwrights. What these luminaries share with the radical left is tacit acceptance of Partition and the denial in practice of the right of the Irish to national self-determination.

### Partition stays OK

The left always tries to downplay the question of national oppression. In this way it tries to turn the Irish War into a trade union issue or a matter of human rights and civil liberties. Recently the left has renewed its emphasis on trade union problems in the Six Counties. The most extreme example of this trend is the Militant tendency. The title of its latest pamphlet *Northern Ireland: Tory cuts – common misery, common struggle* sums up the Militant approach to the Irish War. It simply pretends the War does not exist. The Six Counties ('Northern Ireland') is portrayed as just another part of the United Kingdom facing public spending cuts. The War, the British army, the 2000 dead, the prisoners – none get a mention. British imperialism first receives a passing historical reference on page 43 of a 47-page pamphlet. Reducing the fight against imperialist oppression to the 'common struggle' against the Tory cuts becomes simply an endorsement of British domination.

Endorsement of Partition is by no means peculiar to the pro-imperialist Militant sect. Throughout the year numerous articles in the left press have pursued the theme of Protestant-Catholic trade union unity. They examine with glee a Belfast trade union demonstration against the cuts in April while ignoring a march twice the size two weeks earlier calling for more repression of the Catholics. Speculation about unity around 'bread and butter issues' distracts attention from the condition for this dream becoming a reality – the defeat of British imperialism.

### A positive colonial policy

The practical consequence of evading the issue of national oppression is the call on British imperialism to introduce reforms in the Six Counties. The

labour bureaucracy has a long tradition of proposing enlightened policies to deal with native unrest in India, Africa and Ireland. In 1971 the TUC called for a Bill of Rights to be passed at Westminster to guarantee democratic rights in Ireland. In 1976 it added the Better Life for All Campaign (BLFAC), a comprehensive scheme to bring 'peace, jobs and progress' to the Six Counties – to be implemented by Westminster of course! The Communist Party played a major part in initiating and popularising these policies and they have been endorsed by the Labour Party. The absurdity of expecting a government which cannot guarantee jobs and living standards in Britain to be able to provide them in Ireland is such that these schemes have never had any popular support.

But the paternalistic traditions of the labour movement die hard. The radical left has itself adopted the approach of pressing Britain to rule Ireland more fairly and less brutally. The present campaign for 'withdrawal' shows the convergence of the radical left with the traditional reformist approach to the War in Ireland. The resolution in favour of 'withdrawal' adopted by the London Labour Party in March, on the initiative of radical factions within the Labour Party, shows this. This is how they explained the motivation behind the 'withdrawal resolution':

> 'Our aims are still those of the Better Life for All Campaign – to end the violence, the discrimination, and the deprivation in Northern Ireland. However the policies of the last ten years have failed, and it is now clear that the aims of A Better Life for All cannot be achieved until there is a commitment to end British rule. This is the only policy which has not been tried, and the only one which deals with the *cause* as well as the symptoms of the Irish problem.' (*Ireland Socialist Review*, No 7, spring 1980)

Some withdrawal! First British imperialism tidies up the Six Counties and then it commits itself to saying good-bye. The absurdity of the original aims of the Better Life for All Campaign is compounded by some timeless 'commitment to withdraw'.

In reality the BLFAC is designed to crush the national liberation struggle. The original proposer of the BLFAC at the 1976 TUC, Irish Stalinist Andy Barr, understood this. 'The BLFAC', he said, ' is the trade unions' answer to the gunmen' (*TUC annual conference report*, 1976, p565). This is the moving spirit behind the withdrawal campaign. It is yet another British solution to the oppression of Ireland.

When accused of ignoring the issue of imperialist domination the left protests: 'we support the right of the Irish to self-determination'. And on paper it does. After listing a series of demands calling on the British state to modify its oppression, the left tags on the call for 'Self-determination for the Irish people'. Last year's congress of the Communist Party provides a good example. After a list of eight proposals – *all* of which demand legislation from Westminster – the ninth point recognises the 'right of the Irish people to determine their own future' (*Comment*, 1 December 1979, p417). A



Westminster or an Irish solution? You know the choice that the British left will make.

### Left against 'the terrorists'

The rhetorical character of the left's support for the self-determination of Ireland is shown in its attacks on the national liberation struggle. The left is ready to denounce the violence of the oppressed – especially when it is conducted in the heartlands of the oppressor, in Britain itself. Condemnation of 'terrorism' is the universal response of the reformist and radical left alike to the bombings and assassinations carried out by the republican movement in its prosecution of the war with Britain.

There are variations in the terms of these denunciations. The Militant tendency, the left group most loyal to the British Empire, equates the republican movement with the protestant gangs, labelling them collectively 'bigots, religious zealots and paramilitary thugs' (*Northern Ireland: Tory cuts – common misery, common struggle*, March 1980, p39). The Workers Revolutionary Party commonly condemns as 'individual terrorism' the actions of soldiers in an army fighting a war against British imperialism. The SWP and the IMG are more circumspect, approving of republican attacks on British military targets. However they argue that military campaigns in Britain alienate potential supporters of 'withdrawal' campaigns. The radical left generously allows the IRA to carry on as long as social peace in Britain is not threatened.

One final feature shared by all the Irish initiatives of the left over the last 10 years is that they have all failed to mobilise opposition to the imperialist oppression of Ireland. With every failure the radical left has moved closer to the very ideas in the labour movement – about Partition, about the progressive role of the British state and about 'terrorism' – that are the major barrier to building a working class anti-imperialist movement. The left has no role to play on Ireland other than as a pressure group on the Liberal and Labour Parties.

## 1921 REVISITED

The partition of Ireland continues to haunt the British bourgeoisie. It was a short-term answer which contained long-term problems. Today, the bourgeoisie is looking for an arrangement that will reduce political tension in Ireland. Atkins has presided over a protracted constitutional conference. More imperialist plans are ready to be floated at the first opportune moment.

The ruling class is not alone in looking back to the settlement of the 'twenties in its search for a new solution. At last year's Labour Party conference a resolution urged delegates to 'return to the principles of the 1921

Special Labour Party Conference on Ireland which recognised the right of all the people of Ireland to self-determination' (*Conference report*, 1979, p378). The resolution was defeated but this theme remains at the centre of the drive by the radical Labour Committee on Ireland to get a 'withdrawal' motion passed at this year's conference. The draft statement of the aims of the LCI approved at its March conference 'The Labour Party and Ireland' appealed for British Labour to 'return to its original 1921 position'. What was the position of the Labour Party around the time of Partition?

## Withdrawal — 1921 style

In 1920 the Labour Party sent a special commission to Ireland to investigate the war then raging betweeen the republican movement and Britain's notorious 'Black and Tan' militia. The commission condemned the outrages perpetrated by both sides but emphasised the atrocities committed by the Black and Tans and called for a British solution. On its return to Britain the commission organised a mass campaign for the withdrawal of troops and a political settlement. In January and February 1921 it held over 500 meetings, some attended by up to 5000 people. Two editions – 20 000 copies – of the commission's report were published and nearly seven million leaflets distributed.

The resolution 'carried with enthusiasm' at each of these meetings was forwarded to the 1921 LP conference where it was unanimously approved by delegates:

> That this Conference approves the declaration of the Parliamentary Labour Party with regard to outrages conducted in the name of Sinn Fein and reprisals by servants of the Crown; it expresses its satisfaction with the efforts of the Labour Commission of Inquiry to secure a cessation of all violent and provocative actions, with a view to the opening of the peace negotiations between representatives of the Government and the elected representatives of the Irish people.
>
> The Conference is further of opinion that a possible ground of negotiation and settlement is afforded by the following policy put forward by the British Labour Party in the House of Commons, and approved by a Special All-Ireland Trades Union and Labour Party Congress on November 16th:-
>
> (1) Withdraw all armed forces.
>
> (2) Place the responsibility for maintaining order in each locality in Ireland (as in Great Britain outside the Metropolitan area) on the local authorities themselves; and
>
> (3) Provide for an immediate election, by proportional representation, of an entirely open Constituent Assembly, charged to work out, at the earliest possible moment, without limitations or fetters, whatever Constitution of Ireland the Irish people desire, subject only to two conditions, that it affords protection to minorities, and that the Constitution should prevent Ireland from becoming a military or naval menace to Great Britain. (*Conference report*, 1921, p23)

This resolution has indeed very much in common with today's radical left and reformist initiatives on Ireland. It equates the violence of the national liberation movement with the random terrorism of the Black and Tans and condemns both – just as today's left-wingers equate republican and loyalist paramilitaries and denounce both IRA bombings and British army assassinations. But does the resolution recognise 'the right of all the people of Ireland to self-determination' as today's Labour Party activists tell us? No. It puts forward a policy to be followed by the British government to set up a new administration in Ireland. The only conditions the Labour Party insisted on were that the military interests of the Empire should be safeguarded and that the rights of the Protestant minority should be protected.

The motivation for the Labour Party resolution arose from revulsion against the actions of the British militia in Ireland and concern about the reputation of British imperialism abroad. In his Chairman's Address, A G Cameron complained that 'the treatment of the Irish nation by the present Government has disgusted and shocked all thinking men and women of Great Britain, and has created nothing but contempt for British methods of government amongst the nations of the world' (*Conference report*, 1921, p146). Other delegates echoed this theme, one – Mary Carling of the Dockers' Union – reminding the conference that 'as a child she had been taught to believe that being an English child and belonging to the English nation she ought to stand for truth and and justice, fair play and the defence of the weak and everything that was noble and beautiful' (p196).

Not only was the Tan War giving Britain a bad name abroad – it was also poisoning relations with powerful allies. Carling warned that 'an immense amount of indignation existed in America' which 'might result in the most dire calamity to this country before many years had passed' (p197). The Conference report on 'British-American relations' expressed concern about the 'hostility' arising from 'the Irish situation' and concluded that there could be 'no solid friendship and co-operation between the two countries until the Irish question is equitably settled' (p38).

The conference was also concerned that British repression was frustrating Ireland's economic development which 'might be a boomerang which would hit us in the very near future'. And the delegate from Liverpool – Mr Duncan – warned of the danger of conflict in Ireland spilling over into Britain: 'Liverpool was Belfast the second', he told delegates (p198).

Today's radical left follows in the Labour Party tradition. It responds to the need of British imperialism to reach a satisfactory conclusion to its embarrassing and potentially explosive conflicts with the Irish people. Labour Committee on Ireland secretary Don Flynn appeals to those 'who want to see the Labour Party adopt a progressive policy on Ireland' to support the LCI 'withdrawal' resolution and the implementation of this 'progressive policy' by the next Labour government (*Labour and Ireland*, No 1, May 1980). Sixty years later the left is still pouring out its sympathy for the victims of British repression and calling on the government to reform its administration of Ireland.

Nothing much new ever happens within social democracy. There is

nothing novel about today's 'Voices for Withdrawal' forum of progressive politicians from across the political spectrum. In the Peace With Ireland Council during the Tan War, Labour leaders Ramsay MacDonald and Sidney Webb joined forces with Tory dissident Lord Cavendish-Bentinck and a number of eminent Liberals to call for a 'just and lasting settlement' (D G Boyce, *Englishmen and Irish Troubles*, Jonathan Cape, 1972, pp64-66) The only significant difference between then and now is that in the early 'twenties the Labour campaigns were much more successful. But what did they achieve?

### Partition acclaimed

In December 1921, a few months after the Labour Party conference, Lloyd George persuaded Michael Collins and Arthur Griffiths to sign the 'Articles of Agreement for a Treaty'. Partition, the division of Ireland into 6 and 26 County regions was formally agreed between the British government and the leaders of the republican movement. The Labour Party was jubilant. 'The whole of the British labour movement', said Party leader Arthur Henderson, 'will welcome the news of the settlement, not only with joy but with great satisfaction'. The Coalition Government was congratulated for implementing the resolution of the recent Labour Party conference:

> 'Step by step, this policy has since been put into operation, until it reached the terminating point when an agreement was arrived at. . .[which] will mean the inauguration of a new era in the history of the British commonwealth of free nations.' (*Daily Herald*, 7 December 1921)

The following day the General Council of the TUC and the Labour Party NEC issued a joint statement expressing 'the deepest satisfaction that an agreement has been reached' (*Daily Herald*, 8 December 1921). The labour bureaucrats had campaigned the length and breadth of the country for a British solution: now they had it. Their endorsement of Partition endowed the 1921 settlement with a powerful legitimacy among British workers. A cunning imperialist manoeuvre was passed off in the labour movement as a progressive solution.

Partition led rapidly to the defeat of the republican movement. A substantial section of 'anti-Treatyites' split from the leadership and continued the struggle against the new form of British domination. After a bitter civil war in which the new government of the Twenty-six Counties was backed by Britain the republican movement was crushed. In the Six Counties residual republican resistance was smashed in a wave of sectarian pogroms. Once stable British rule was thus re-established the troops were withdrawn from the streets of Ireland.



### Ireland pays the price

The Irish people paid a bitter price for the last British solution. On both sides of the border they were condemned to half a century of poverty, high unemployment and political repression. The struggle for national liberation was suppressed for a generation. However, Irish national aspirations were never completely extinguished – continuing British domination made the revolt that finally took place in the 'sixties inevitable.

Sixty years after Partition Britain is again bogged down in a war in Ireland. Again it is under international pressure to restore stability and again the government is looking for a new solution. Whatever scheme Britain devises the acquiescence of the labour movement is crucial to it success. In the 'twenties anti-imperialist convictions were much stronger in the working class than they are today, but the Labour Party won workers' support for Partition with its mass popular campaigning for a progressive colonial policy. Today the labour movement is much weaker politically – it suffered setbacks in the 'twenties and 'thirties from which it has yet to recover. The relative weakness of labour movement solidarity with the Irish struggle is a measure of the decline of working class politics. Now the much feebler campaigns of the Labour left and its radical supporters may well be sufficient to channel the support of the most militant workers behind a new British initiative.

Today's withdrawal campaign with its slogans 'Time to go' and 'End the war' is ambiguous on the crucial question of the Irish War: who do you want to win the war so that the withdrawal of troops can become a possibility? The radical left groups may tell their own members that they want the victory of the Irish people. But their attempts to win broad popular support lead them into alliances with much stronger forces which are committed to the victory of British imperialism. The Labour Party has kept up bipartisan harmony with the Tory approach to Ireland for the last decade. Its left wing and its Stalinist sympathisers have firmly upheld the government's drive to defeat 'the terrorists' – the armed representatives of the national population in Ireland. Whatever its intentions the consequences of the left's 'withdrawal' campaign can only be to build up popular support in the labour movement for withdrawal as part of a new British initiative. The condition for this type of withdrawal taking place and for any British solution working is the same today as it was in 1921 – the defeat of the Irish people's struggle for national freedom.

## WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON?

### A real Communist Party

One party stood out against Partition in 1921. Communist Party chairman Arthur MacManus made a detailed statement, published as an advertisement

in Lansbury's *Daily Herald* on 23 December:

'The Communist Party alone regards the Treaty as dishonourable and inadequate – as a "settlement" which leaves unsettled the vital fact of Ireland's right to independence and makes clear only the determination of British imperialism never to admit that right. . . .

'The Treaty. . .does not acknowledge Ireland's right: it enforces and legalises Britain's usurped authority. It does not set Ireland free: it condones the oppression of centuries by making the Irish a party to their own subjection.'

The newly formed CP, part of Lenin's Communist International, took up a revolutionary opposition to Partition. MacManus' statement did not baulk at the consequences for British imperialism of the Irish struggle.

'When the Irish people struggled against British Imperial Terrorism, the Communist Party supported them, firstly, because in no other way could it dissociate itself from complicity in the Terror, and, secondly, because being itself struggling against that Imperialism it welcomed as an ally anyone who was struggling likewise.'

As the international communist movement degenerated under the influence of Stalinism in the 'twenties, the CP soon abandoned its revolutionary position on Ireland. However, MacManus' eloquent expression of solidarity with the Irish people, at a time when the entire official labour movement was applauding Partition, stands as an example to us today. The early CP recognised that the only way to break the labour movement from its acquiescence in 'British Imperial Terrorism' was to side unequivocably with the struggle against it. The CP greeted the Irish people as allies in the struggle of the British working class against British imperialism.

## Bring the War to Britain

The Revolutionary Communist Tendency today stands in the tradition of the early Communist Party: the substance of MacManus' opposition to Partition is still valid 60 years later. However things stand much differently with today's Communist Party, now in an advanced state of decay after half a century of Stalinist degeneration. When, on the initiative of the RCT, Tameside Trades Council adopted the slogan 'Support the Irish people: bring the War to Britain' for an Irish conference, the CP joined forces with the local National Front, the Tories and the Labour Party to make sure the conference did not take place; the CP encouraged the TUC to disaffiliate Tameside Trades Council.

The radical left joined in the CP's castigation of the RCT and the Tameside conference slogan as 'ultra-left'. Labour Party campaign paper *Workers Action* dismissed the conference mobilising propaganda as 'a daft ultra-left leaflet written by members of the RCT'. The IMG's *Socialist Challenge* censored a letter written in support of Tameside Trades Council by



removing a paragraph approving the slogan 'Bring the War to Britain'.

The slogan 'Bring the War to Britain' *is* ambiguous. On the one hand it is a call to make the Irish War an issue in the British labour movement. We are fully in favour of raising our opposition to Britain's war in Ireland and discussing and debating the political problems it gives rise to widely in trade unions and labour movement organisations. Nobody on the left disagrees with us on this. On the other hand the slogan also implies support for a violent attack on the British state – not only in the Six Counties – but in Britain itself. This is what the left cannot accept: its rejection of this slogan signals its abandonment of revolutionary working class politics.

Objection in principle to violence against the state means the rejection of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the denial of the socialist revolution itself. The dictatorship of the proletariat is the institutionalised violence of the working class against the bourgeoisie. Because capitalism is sustained by violence, centralised in the state, it can only be overthrown violently. This is the only way of achieving and consolidating socialism. The bourgeoisie understands this: it responded with horror to the commitment of the Bolsheviks and the Communist International to the violent overthrow of bourgeois government. And it responds with similar outrage to any sign that the labour movement may be moving towards the use of violence to advance its interests. Flying pickets, angry demonstrations and attempts to disrupt NF marches raise ruling class anxiety. Pressmen and TV commentators are always concerned to extract promises of restraint from trade union leaders, march organisers and anti-fascists. Reformists and liberals are always at pains to reassure the ruling class of their commitment to non-violence. Revolutionaries say that if violence is necessary in the interests of the working class we will not hesitate to use it. The Tameside conference showed the acute sensitivity of the ruling class and its servants in the labour movement over the violent threat of the Irish struggle to the British nation. But the left can't have it both ways. You can't say you support the right of the Irish to national self-determination *and* say you only support them if they fight it out in their own country. There may be excellent military arguments for extending the war into the heartland of the enemy . There is no integrity at all in a position which endorses guerrilla tactics in Ireland but rejects similar operations if they are carried out in Britain.

The slogan 'Bring the War to Britain' encompasses the outlook of militants who think that it's time for more discussion of the Irish War in Britain and the outlook of revolutionaries who see the need to make war on the British state to bring freedom to Ireland and socialism to Britain. Contrast this with the 'withdrawal' campaign. Its slogans contain a different kind of ambiguity: they can embrace reactionaries who want to save British taxpayers' money, British soldiers and British prestige and people who want to see Ireland free from British rule.

The RCT slogan can help to clarify a working class outlook and separate those who oppose British imperialism from those who support it. It can be

used to show workers who have been uneasy about the past silence of the labour movement on the War that support for the Irish struggle means a stand against the British state that cannot stop short of its eventual overthrow.

The insidious ambiguity of the left's 'withdrawal' slogans can only deepen the confusion of the labour movement. They unite people who are hostile to imperialism with those who are supporters of imperialism – on the terms of the pro-imperialists. The logical conclusion is support for a new British solution in Ireland and the 'carnival of reaction' that would follow – not only in Ireland north and south – but in Britain too.

### Time to take a stand

We put three questions to those who want to see an end to the War and a united independent Ireland.

1 Do you support the right of the Irish people to national self-determination?
2 Do you accept the call for troops out now?
3 Do you support the right of the Irish people to fight against British oppression?

You may answer *no* to these questions and reply that:

1 Britain should determine the form of government for Ireland.
2 The troops should be withdrawn at the discretion of the British government.
3 The national liberation movement should pursue its struggle through constitutional means or through the limited use of military methods.

If this broadly summarises your outlook we advise you to join either the Liberal or the Labour Party. Unlike the CP and the radical left these parties have a consistent and coherent pro-imperialist outlook and a long pro-imperialist tradition to boot.

If however you answer *yes* to these three questions it's time you joined in the activities of the SPTAC and the RCT, the only organisation which has, since it was formed, advanced consistent anti-imperialist politics on Ireland in the British labour movement.

*Mike Freeman*




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