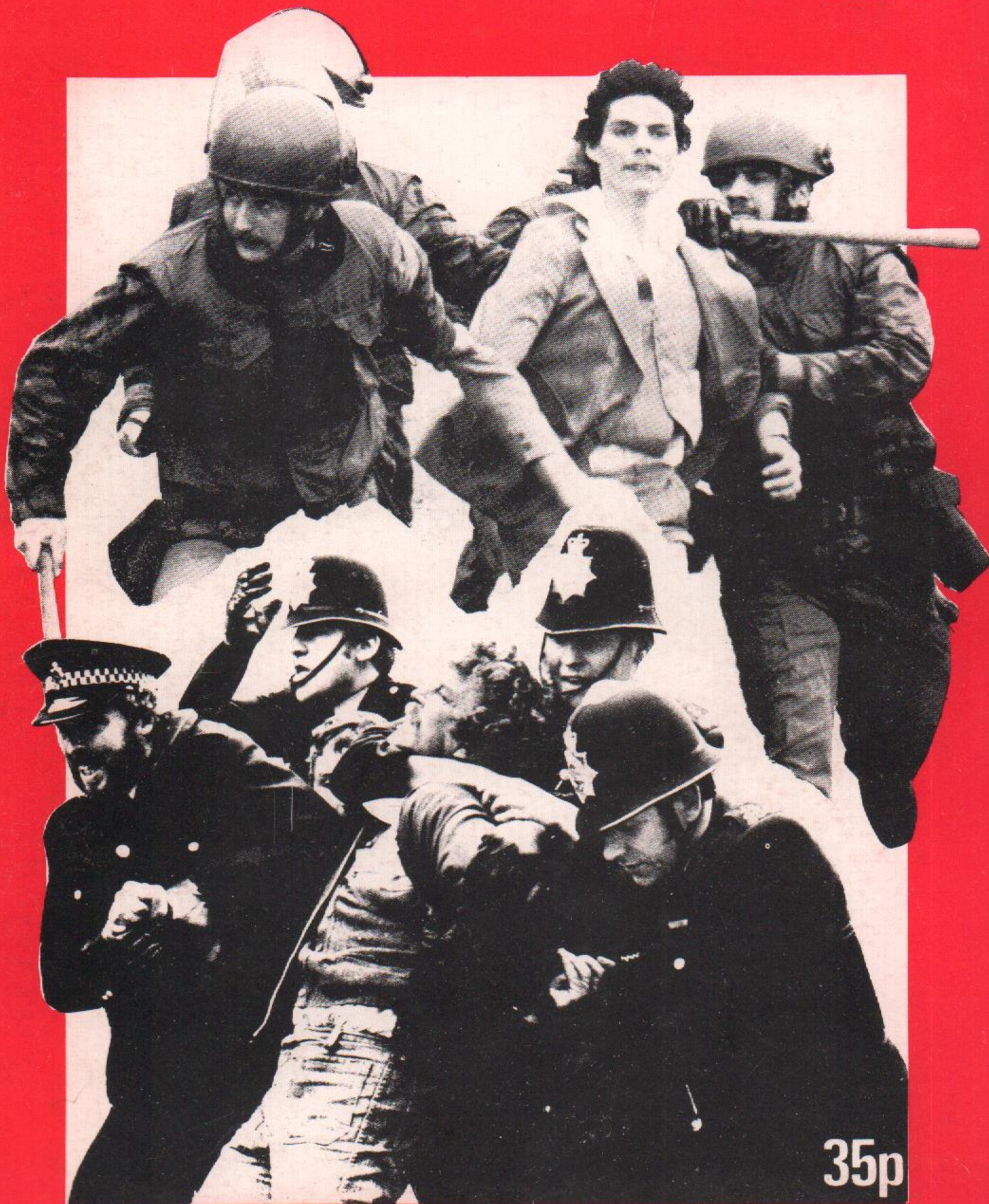


WORKERS AGAINST IMPERIALISM

THE BRITISH LABOUR MOVEMENT AND IRELAND



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THE IRISH WAR – THE ISSUES AT STAKE

Most workers who consider themselves socialists know that there is something wrong with what is happening in the six north-eastern counties of Ireland. A general awareness and concern exists about the activities of British soldiers. For the last ten years they have been seen on television patrolling terraced streets and housing estates in full combat regalia, backed up by armoured cars and helicopters. It is well known that house raids and body searches are features of everyday life in the Six Counties. The appalling conditions of prisoners incarcerated in British concentration camps have been widely publicised. People are suspicious both of the methods used to extract confessions from suspects and of the legal procedures to which they are subjected. It is apparent from films of hostile demonstrations and groups of stone-throwing youths that the presence of British troops is resented by many in the Six Counties. Many British trade unionists view this situation with considerable unease and not a little perplexity.

The recent report of the Bennett Inquiry into police interrogation procedures in the Six Counties acknowledged that suspects have been ill-treated. But it caused no great surprise in Britain. Bennett added nothing to the detailed revelations of police

brutality contained in the 1978 Amnesty International report or the findings of five previous major government inquiries. The *Financial Times* commented wearily:

'There have been other reports, many of which have been forgotten. Few of them said anything which surprised anyone who knew anything about Northern Ireland. Similarly with Bennett, most informed observers, not just the partisan commentators, believe that prisoners are mistreated.'
(*Financial Times*, 19 March 1979)

The indifference of the bourgeois press was shared by the official labour movement. There were no trade union deputations of protest to Westminster, no demonstrations and no strike action in sympathy with the victims of British repression in Ireland.

Despite the misgivings many workers have about the war in Ireland, the organisations of the labour movement have remained passive throughout a decade of military occupation. Today this remains a major problem facing any attempt to build a solidarity movement with the Irish struggle. The daily events of the war are justified by the ruling class as 'an acceptable level of violence'. Yet since 1969 around 2000 people have been killed. The last four years have seen over 12 000 men and women detained and interrogated by the security forces - many of them have been beaten and tortured. More recently unarmed civilians have been gunned down by under-cover army assassination squads. The real problem is that this 'level of violence' has also become acceptable to the British labour movement.

The great evasion

■ The outlook of the ruling class on the Irish War prevails in all sections of British society. The source of the conflict is located in religion, terrorism or economic backwardness. But bourgeois 'explanations' leave some awkward questions unanswered. How do they account for the fact that a handful of 'bog-fascists with personality problems' (*Daily Express*, 20 December 1978), for whom the government says there is very little support in the Six Counties, have managed to sustain a war over ten years against one of the world's best equipped and most experienced armies? The British apparatus of repression includes 13 500 regular troops, 8000 men in the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), 10 000 officers of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the top British counter-insurgency regiment, the Special Air Services (SAS). This massive force has nevertheless been unable to contain resistance to British rule from a community smaller than that of Birmingham. Despite regular

government claims to have forced the liberation movement to the brink of defeat, sniper attacks on patrols, mortar assaults on army checkpoints and bombings of military and commercial targets are still regular events in the Six Counties.

The bourgeoisie cannot ignore this war; instead it tries to evade it, characterising resistance to British rule as the work of 'madmen' or 'men of violence'. It presents the tenfold growth of the prison population in the Six Counties since 1969 as the result of some strange epidemic of psychopathy and terrorism. A very special kind of madness it must be that leads nearly 400 prisoners in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh concentration camp and other prisons to refuse to wear prison clothing and sit, year after year, in their own excrement. Why this madness should have struck the Six Counties remains a mystery to British public opinion.

Some commentators seek the causes of what they perceive as a wave of violent crime in the social deprivation that exists in the Six Counties. They point to high unemployment, slum housing and low living standards as the breeding ground of 'terrorism'. But there are areas in the north of England and Scotland where conditions are little better than in the Six Counties. Teesside and the Clyde are also areas of declining industries, poor housing and bleak prospects. Yet these regions contain no guerrilla armies to threaten the British state - the government does not need thousands of soldiers on the streets to maintain law and order.

Another popular explanation is that the war is a religious conflict stirred up by bigots entrenched in rival communities. But in Liverpool and Glasgow large numbers of Catholics and Protestants live together in relative harmony. Their religious differences are, for the most part, expressed only in support for rival football clubs. But British reporters in Derry and Belfast still try to pass off a decade of war in Ireland as an ancient sectarian feud.

These superficial explanations of the Irish War are contradicted by the most striking feature of modern Irish history. The struggle of the United Irishmen in 1798, the Easter Rising of 1916 and the republican resistance to Britain in the Tan War of 1919-21 were all crushed by British military intervention. The occupation of the Six Counties since 1969 is Britain's latest attempt to destroy the movement for Irish national freedom. The Irish War is a struggle for national liberation against an imperialist oppressor. This is the real explanation for the military campaign against the British army, the popular support for the

republican movement and the courageous H-Block protest.



A Molotov cocktail for the British army:
one boy's defiance of imperialism

Know your enemy

■ The bourgeoisie has a very clear approach towards the national liberation movement in Ireland: it must be smashed. For the ruling class the need to maintain British rule is not a matter for debate. Its importance places it above party politics. Airey Neave, the late Tory spokesman on Northern Ireland, explained this approach and commended the record of repression of his Labour opposite number:

'while soldiers, police and civilians continued to be murdered by terrorists, and a precarious political vacuum continued in the North, it was surely right to keep party differences to the minimum.

'Since Roy Mason had become Secretary of State, he said, the Government had pursued a sensibly firm security policy which, on most occasions, the Conservative Party had found no difficulty in supporting.' (*Irish Times*, 21 August 1978)

Throughout the war Labour and Tory alike have remained united on the need to continue the occupation of the Six Counties and to suppress all resistance to British rule.

The British ruling class instinctively recognises what is at stake in the Six Counties - the stability of the United Kingdom. It has been forced to dig in for a long campaign:

'No one talks of light at the end of the tunnel or of the further reduction of British troops this year, next year, or perhaps even ever. If the level of violence is now acceptable, hardly anyone thinks that it will become any lower. It might well increase and it might well spread, not only to the British mainland but also to continental Europe.' (*Financial Times*, 2 February 1979)

The bourgeoisie is prepared for a relentless struggle against the national liberation movement. It realises that this struggle cannot be conducted within the bounds of bourgeois legality and has no compunction about the methods the army uses so long as they get results. 'The crack Special Air Services units have been allowed to operate province-wide and, although their methods have come in for criticism, they would appear to have killed or captured a number of terrorists' (*Financial Times*, 18 April 1979). The fact that they have killed a number of unarmed civilians, who had no connection with the resistance to the British army, is of no concern. The bourgeoisie is not sentimental about war; it is not impeded by legal or constitutional niceties. It will use whatever means are necessary to preserve its rule.

Earlier this year an unusual response from a London newspaper to IRA bombers and trade union pickets revealed the exasperation of the bourgeoisie in dealing with its class enemies - in Ireland and in Britain:

'Last night's explosions at a Canvey Island oil storage depot, and at a gasometer in East Greenwich, are the IRA's style of "secondary picketing".

'Like the lorry drivers' roving interference squads, these political vandals roam in well-drilled cadres, bent on harming the livelihoods and lowering the spirits of innocent victims. What do Londoners have to do with the paranoid fantasy of a Marxist Ireland?

'Most acts of sabotage on the British mainland are committed by Irishmen partly or permanently settled over here. Just as flying pickets draw social-security benefits while paralysing industries, IRA men find jobs or draw the dole in the nation with which they claim to be at war. They are hypocrites.'

(*Evening Standard*, 18 January 1979)

This is a clear class response to an attack on the British state. Presenting the IRA as a threat to the nation, the *Evening Standard* reveals the bourgeoisie's desire to unite all classes of society in a national alliance against the Irish liberation movement. At the same time the ruling class is faced by an acute capitalist crisis; it needs to impose large-scale

redundancies and reductions in living standards on the British working class. The extension of the liberation struggle into Britain gives the ruling class an opportunity to make 'law and order' an issue in British politics. The Irish War is used to justify both the repression of the Irish people and attacks on trade union pickets and demonstrations.

In contrast with the bourgeoisie, the labour movement has no distinct class outlook on the war in Ireland. Throughout the war the organisations of the working class have not distinguished their attitude to the struggle for Irish independence from that of the ruling class. While militant workers pour scorn on attempts to depict strikers and pickets as criminals and thugs holding the country to ransom, they have a different response to bourgeois prejudices directed against the liberation movement in Ireland. Few workers see through the attempts to castigate as 'political vandals' those who fight to end British rule in Ireland. Few recognise the Irish War as a national liberation struggle because bourgeois explanations hold sway in the labour movement.

The consensus that the bourgeoisie has established on the Irish War has important consequences. The common approach of the labour movement and the ruling class increases the isolation of the national liberation struggle from the support of British workers. At the same time the labour movement's allegiance to the British state in its activities in Ireland undermines the ability of workers to fight for their class interests when they come under attack from the state in Britain. For the last five years the Labour Government has taken advantage of the trade unions' willingness to make common cause with the ruling class. It has won the labour movement's co-operation in the national interest and used it to force through wage restraint, closures and redundancies.

Workers against imperialism

■ The objective of this pamphlet is to put forward a working class perspective on the Irish War. We seek to combat the confusion and prejudice in the labour movement by challenging the prevailing consensus. Every blow struck for Irish freedom provokes an unambiguous class response from the British bourgeoisie. This demands an equally direct working class reply - unconditional support for the right of the Irish people to national independence. Workers' support for this demand assists the movement in Ireland by strengthening the struggle of the British working class against the common class enemy - the British bourgeoisie.

Workers against imperialism begins with the response of the British labour movement to the struggle for Irish independence in the early years of this century. In this period there was widespread recognition among workers in Britain of the national oppression of Ireland. But this sentiment was ultimately contained by the reformist leadership of the labour movement which today continues to frustrate the anti-imperialist potential of the British working class.

In 1921 Ireland was divided into six and twenty-six county zones by a British Act of Parliament. Partition was accepted by the official labour movement as a compromise which brought the war then raging in Ireland to an end, whilst safeguarding Britain's interests. As a result of the supremacy of the reformist leadership over the working class since Partition, the division of Ireland by British imperialism now passes almost without question in the labour movement. This reconciliation of the working class with imperialism has been strengthened since the Second World War. Its consequences are evident in the approach of the labour movement to the war in Ireland today.

Partition led to a redefinition of the Irish question. Before 1921 the conflict between a movement for national independence and the forces of the British Empire was apparent to all observers. After 1921, however, the problem identified by the labour movement was no longer imperialist oppression, but lack of democratic rights and retarded economic development. The Six Counties were seen as part of Britain just like Yorkshire or the West Country. This understanding of the problems of the Six Counties underlies a long series of plans and campaigns in the British labour movement. Labour Party initiatives extend from the Friends of Ireland in the 'forties to the Campaign for a Democratic Ulster in the 'sixties. Today the Communist Party, the Labour left and the TUC all support the Better Life for All Campaign and a Bill of Rights, whilst the radical left has its International Tribunal on Britain's Presence in Ireland. These campaigns share a number of common themes. They all focus on the excesses of British rule in Ireland - dramatic instances of discrimination and sectarianism, particular atrocities committed by soldiers or police, or outrageous violations of civil rights. All these campaigns accept Partition. Although this is usually implicit, as with the Tribunal, which simply ignores Partition, it may be explicit, as with Labour's Campaign for a Democratic Ulster. Finally they all see the British state as a potentially progressive force in the Six Counties. This is acknowledged openly by the Bill of Rights and the Better Life for All

Campaign. Although the Tribunal is more discreet, its orientation also implies the possibility of a more humane administration of British rule in the Six Counties.

These labour movement campaigns to ameliorate repression in the Six Counties are united in their accommodation to British imperialism. The Irish War brings to the fore the dependence of the reformist and radical left on bourgeois politics. The absence of a credible working class alternative to the bourgeois consensus on Ireland is indicated by the persistence throughout the war of a broad agreement on Irish policy between the Labour Party and the Conservative Party.

Workers against imperialism advances a revolutionary position on the Irish War. Only working class politics can provide an alternative to the bipartisan policy of the Labour leaders. This approach also answers the reformist and radical apologists for British imperialism in Ireland.

BRITISH LABOUR AND THE STRUGGLE FOR IRISH INDEPENDENCE

■ The labour movement has not always been indifferent to the British oppression of Ireland. In the first two decades of the twentieth century a militant working class movement emerged in Britain. The political strength of this movement was indicated by its support for the struggle for national independence in Ireland. Its weakness was revealed by its failure to overthrow the reformist leadership of the trade unions and the Labour Party. The ascendancy of reformism was confirmed by the favourable reception given to Partition by the labour movement, the consequences of which still overshadow all attempts to win workers to the struggle for a united Ireland.

Anti-imperialism and the working class

■ In the early part of this century a movement demanding national independence gathered strength in Ireland. Under the leadership of Sinn Fein this movement won an overwhelming majority in the 1918 General Election. This was the first and last occasion when the Irish people as a whole had the opportunity to express their national aspirations at the ballot box: they voted for independence.

The British labour movement appreciated that national oppression lay at the root of the conflict then raging in Ireland. So strong was this sentiment in the working class that the Labour Party and the TUC passed

resolutions demanding Irish autonomy. At the 1916 TUC dockers' leader Ben Tillett called upon 'the British Government and Parliament to establish Home Rule in Ireland under the most generous and free conditions of democratic self-government' (*TUC annual conference report*, 1916, p290). Although the leadership of the labour movement never actively assisted the Irish struggle, it was forced to acknowledge the anti-imperialist mood of the rank and file.

British workers' solidarity with the fight for Irish independence accompanied the relatively advanced forms of struggle thrown up in the period around the First World War, when the decline of Britain's imperial fortunes forced the employers into an offensive on the trade union movement. Every major industry was affected by militant working class action; between 1910 and 1920 over 130 million working days were lost in strikes. There were frequent lockouts and troops were used to break strikes. On several occasions police attacks on workers' demonstrations led to riots. Aggressive tactics of sympathy strikes, blacking and picketing were used in the fightback against the bosses. The employers, backed up by the repressive and legislative apparatus of the state, forced trade unionists to go beyond the limits of bourgeois legality in bitter and often bloody conflicts.

When trade unions in Ireland came under attack in 1913, British workers responded in a spirit of class solidarity. A group of Dublin employers attempted to destroy the newly formed Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU) which, under the syndicalist leadership of James Larkin, was growing in strength and influence. The British state backed up the lockout of 8000 Dublin workers. Its local police garrison baton-charged demonstrating workers and imprisoned Larkin. British trade unions declared their support for the ITGWU and sent food and supplies to Dublin. Militant workers were ready to take direct action; 10 000 railwaymen defied opposition from the trade union bureaucracy and blacked goods in solidarity with the struggle in Dublin. Many workers in other unions were only restrained with difficulty. As an official from the dockers' union recalled:

'In all my experience I have never known a time when there has been manifested a desire to help any union in dispute as there is among dockers both in London and the provincial ports towards their Dublin comrades....It has been with the greatest trouble...that we have so far been able to hold the men in check....' (Quoted in Bob Holton, *British syndicalism, 1900-1914*, Pluto Press, 1976, p193)

British workers were prepared to launch strike action in support of a vulnerable section of the working class, despite the adverse effect on their own livelihoods. They were moving beyond the limitations of traditional trade unionism in pursuit of wider, political goals. Many workers recognised that the state which backed Murphy, the reactionary instigator of the lockout in Dublin, was the same state that was attacking their own organisations in Britain. As one delegate to the TUC explained, by assisting the Dublin workers, trade unionists were 'declaring war on the Government which shoots down the men of the class to which we belong' (*TUC annual conference report*, 1913, p69).

The spontaneous anti-imperialist instinct which British trade unionists showed in their support for the Irish workers never acquired a clear political expression. British workers sympathised with their fellow trade unionists under brutal attack from British police in Dublin. However this support was limited to trade union solidarity. Opposition to the Dublin Lockout in the British labour movement failed to raise the central question of the national oppression of Ireland. Trade union militancy could not challenge imperialist oppression. As a result the trade union leaders were able to limit the solidarity action of the working class within the confines of trade unionism. In response to the calls for a national strike in solidarity with the Dublin workers the leaders of the railway union declared: 'There is to be no national railway strike at present, for the very good reason that there is no straight issue to fight upon' (*Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury*, 19 September 1913). Instead they counselled workers to put their immediate interests first, to 'take hold of the things that mattered most for their future welfare' (*Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury*, 22 September 1913). Effective solidarity would have entailed consistent opposition to imperialism. The absence of this political foundation for solidarity allowed the Labour leaders to curb the militant actions of British workers. Sympathetic strikes were rapidly brought to an end. The Dublin workers fought on in isolation to a bitter defeat.

During the period of intense class struggle around the time of the First World War a number of political groups attempted to give the spontaneity of the working class an anti-capitalist direction. The most important of these organisations were the Workers' Socialist Federation (WSF), which evolved out of Sylvia Pankhurst's Women's Socialist Federation, the British Socialist Party (BSP) and the Socialist Labour

Party (SLP). These organisations had substantial working class support in Scotland, South Wales and East London. They tried to go beyond trade union militancy to draw workers' attention to political issues such as the war and Britain's oppression of Ireland.

The WSF took a determined stand against British repression in Ireland. When the British bourgeoisie condemned the 1916 Easter Rising as treacherous, the WSF replied unequivocally: 'Justice can make but one reply to the Irish Rebellion and that is to demand that Ireland shall be allowed to govern herself' (*The Woman's Dreadnought*, Vol 3, No 6, 1916, p469). At a time when Britain was at war with Germany, rebellion against the British state in Ireland was unpopular in the labour movement. But the WSF withstood these pressures and declared its unconditional support for Irish national self-determination.

The Easter Rising was suppressed but resistance to British rule continued. After the 1918 General Election Sinn Fein's unilateral attempt to establish independence led to further British military intervention. The brutal Tan War fought by Britain's Black and Tan militia provoked the hostility of the British labour movement. Whilst Labour Party rallies in various parts of the country concentrated on the atrocities committed by the Black and Tans, the SLP in Scotland directed workers' attention to the political issues:

'There is a belief widely prevalent in Ireland that the repressive measures of the Government during the last few months have been designed to provoke the people to open revolt If such a revolt takes place it is the duty of the British working class to stand alongside the common people of Ireland to force the British imperialists to take their murderous and unclean hands off the Irish nation.' (J R Campbell, 'The imperialist terror in Ireland', *The Worker*, No 59, 3 January 1920)

The SLP pointed out the necessity for British workers to support the struggle of the Irish people against oppression, and the importance of taking a united class stand against British imperialism.

The political approach of these revolutionaries indicated a significant advance for the British working class. A section of the labour movement had tried to broaden workers' struggles to include opposition to imperialist oppression in Ireland and elsewhere. When the class struggle reached its peak of intensity in the immediate post-war period Irish independence achieved widespread support in the labour

movement. However, the revolutionaries never succeeded in transforming the trade unionist outlook of the mass of the labour movement. The reformist leadership of the trade unions and the Labour Party succeeded in containing the anti-imperialist potential of the working class. The perspective of state socialism came to dominate the outlook of the labour movement, with important implications for the struggle against imperialism.

The allies of imperialism in the labour movement

State socialism has dominated the British labour movement since the turn of the century. The state socialist strategy is to transform capitalism into socialism through the agency of the bourgeois state. This strategy gained credibility at a time when British imperialism was dominant throughout the world. In this period the state was able to make concessions to the working class. A general improvement in living standards was accompanied by a series of social reforms. These developments together with the increased intervention of the state in the economy appeared to vindicate the view that the state could defend working class interests. Thus in 1907, Labour leader Philip Snowden could present state intervention as socialism itself:

'The last 12 years has seen a wonderful supercession of private companies who exploited public need for their own profit by municipalities owning and working tramway systems and innumerable other public services....whenever a fair trial has been given to public ownership it has proved by experience its immense superiority over undertakings in the hands of private companies. Therefore we have established before your very eyes the practicability of Socialism....' (P Snowden, *Debate on socialism*, 22 November 1907, p8)

The identification of working class interests with state reform had the effect of reconciling the labour movement to capitalism.

In a period of imperialist expansion the reformist strategy seemed to make sense. For a small layer of the British working class, imperialism brought real material benefits. This privileged section, termed by Lenin the *aristocracy of labour*, identified its interests with the ruling class and fostered class collaboration in the movement. The labour aristocracy upheld the Empire which guaranteed its status and reinforced workers' pro-imperialist prejudices. It came to dominate the institutions of the working class - the trade unions and the Labour Party - and played a decisive role in consolidating the hold of reformist politics in the labour movement.

For the reformist the state expresses the unity of the major classes within the nation. State socialism leads workers to subordinate their class interests to those of the nation state. This is expressed in the official labour movement's chauvinist attitude towards the foreign rivals of British imperialism. When rivalry between the imperialist nations of Europe resulted in war in 1914, the labour bureaucrats became recruiting sergeants for their own bourgeoisies. They led millions of workers into the imperialist slaughter. The National Committee of the TUC joined the wave of jingoism:

'Fellow Countrymen, - At no time in the history of our nation has it been faced with a crisis of such gravity as the one which now exists....

'There are in the country at the present moment tens of thousands of men of military age and fitness who have not yet joined the colours...We appeal to them to take up at once their share of the burden, not only because by so doing they will be defending their own interests, but also...the vital interests of the nation.' (TUC annual conference report, 1916, p167)

When the 'vital interests of the nation' were at stake the state socialists became ardent defenders of British imperialism. Their influence was felt in even the most militant sections of the working class.

During the First World War there was vigorous trade union resistance to the special regulations introduced for industry. Militant shopfloor organisations led the struggle against restrictions on the right to strike, the intensification of work, conscription and other repressive measures. However, the imperialist war itself engendered little opposition in the labour movement; all the major Labour Party and trade union leaders approved of the war. The national consensus on the imperialist war meant the subordination of working class politics to the interests of the bourgeoisie. This consensus undermined workers' struggles to defend living standards during the war. The nationalism of the British labour movement prevented effective support for the struggle for independence in Ireland. The Easter Rising of 1916 received little sympathy except, as we have seen, from the small socialist groups. The Independent Labour Party (ILP), the largest organisation on the left of the labour movement, refused its support to the rebels:

'We very much regret to read of the scenes of violence which have occurred in Dublin....We need not say that we are opposed to armed force, whether it be under the control of the Government or under the control of a Labour organisation....' (Labour Leader, 27 April 1916)

As the British Government summarily executed the

leaders of the Easter Rising the ILP could only offer moralistic pacifism to conceal its adaptation to British imperialism.

The response of the labour movement to the Easter Rising followed from its allegiance to the British state. The Labour leaders never questioned the right of the British nation to pursue its policy of colonial oppression. Instead they proposed a colonial policy which, while safeguarding the interests of imperialism, contained 'socialist' measures intended to benefit the 'natives'. The state was seen as a progressive agency abroad as well as at home. The state socialists condemned the excesses of freebooters and plunderers and put forward a positive colonial policy to reform colonial oppression and run the Empire more efficiently.

Ever since its foundation the Labour Party has adopted a positive colonial policy in its approach towards countries oppressed by British imperialism. In 1933 the Labour Party's concern for the backward 'natives' was at the centre of its plans for the exploitation of the African territories:

'Their people are in a condition which would make it impossible for them to take over the government of their country on modern lines. In such cases, what is required is education and preparation with the definite object of training the population in self-government.' (*The colonies*, Labour Party policy report, No 6, August 1933, p6)

With its talk of 'devolved government' for the Six Counties and schemes for 'industrial training and job creation' the Labour Party today has a full programme for a reformed system of colonial oppression in Ireland (*Labour Party annual conference report*, 1978, pp43-4). Like the Africans in the 'thirties the Irish today are still considered not to be ready for self-government. Back in the 'twenties, Labour's paternalistic approach to colonial administration ensured that Partition was welcomed by the British labour movement.

Partition – the imperialist solution

■ Partition was the solution of British imperialism to the Irish problem in 1921. This division of the country was the culmination of three years of warfare between Britain and the republican movement. The six north-eastern counties of Ireland were directly integrated into the British state to form the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The remaining twenty-six counties were conceded a phoney independence as the Irish Free State, which became a

republic in 1949. Residual republican opposition was rapidly crushed in the overwhelmingly loyalist Six Counties. In the Twenty-six Counties the new regime, with the help of the British, continued the war to defeat those sections of the republican movement which held out for a united, independent Ireland.



At the barricades: republican resistance to Partition in Dublin, 1922

Partition was a satisfactory compromise for British imperialism. It brought the unpopular Tan War to an end and removed the troublesome 'Irish question' from the prominent position it had occupied in British politics for a generation. The interests of British imperialism were well served by dividing the country. Partition could also be presented as a democratic solution. It appeared to meet the diverse wishes of the Irish people, granting national independence to those who wanted it while allowing those who professed loyalty to the British Empire to remain within its boundaries.

The response of the official labour movement to Partition was strongly influenced by the chauvinist outlook of its leaders. The positive colonial policy

of the state socialists went hand in hand with *social-chauvinism* - pro-imperialist views couched in socialist phrases. Sidney Webb, one of the chief ideologues of the Labour Party, wrote of the Irish:

We will tell you about Ireland when we come back. The people are charming but we detest them, as we should the Hottentots, for their very virtues. Home Rule is an absolute necessity in order to depopulate the country of this detestable race.' (B & S Webb, quoted in J Beveridge, *An epic of Clare Market*, G Bell & Sons, London, 1960, p9)

Unlike his imperialist masters, Webb veiled his contempt for the peoples of the Empire in socialist rhetoric. During the Tan War, Webb asked the Irish liberation movement: 'What is it that you want in the form of self-government, and then we, the people of this country, will listen in the most sympathetic way to your proposals and do our best to carry it out' (*Labour Party annual conference report*, 1920, p161). While thousands of Irish were being slaughtered and tortured, the British labour leaders promised their sympathy. 'By all means, let's hear your proposals' said the labour leadership, 'and we will offer our sympathetic support insofar as it is consistent with Britain's national interest'.

The labour leaders had no difficulty in understanding the interests of British imperialism. For the Labour Party, Partition was an excellent alternative to the messy Tan War. The Labour Party criticised this war, not because of a commitment to the cause of Irish liberation, but because it was seen as counter-productive to Britain's interests. Partition would end the military excesses of British imperialism and provide the foundation for social stability. Even the left-wing ILP greeted Partition, not as a new form of imperialist domination, but as the dawn of a new era: 'We prefer to hope and believe that the era of the jack-boot has come to an end in Ireland, never more to be revived; and that the Irish people, by a generous reading of the treaty terms, will eventually make the finest national gesture that has been made in this sad Peace...' (*Labour Leader*, 25 August 1921).

The widespread support for Partition in the British labour movement indicated the demise of anti-imperialist currents in the working class. A successful bourgeois offensive against the working class took place in the period leading up to Partition. Shop stewards were victimised and revolutionaries became isolated from the labour movement. When in 1921 the various socialist groups finally established the British Communist Party the momentum of the struggles of the previous decade was

already lost. The acceptance of Partition in the same year was one expression of the political weakness of the working class movement. The nascent Communist Party was unable to make unconditional support for Irish national self-determination a credible alternative to the Labour leaders' support for Partition. The reactionary Labour leadership weathered the storm of this turbulent period. The imperialist division of Ireland and the state socialist approach that endorsed it were accepted by the labour movement as a whole.

The stabilisation of British rule in Ireland after Partition lasted half a century until the present war began. Over this period the incorporation of the Six Counties into Britain proceeded with the extension of British legislation, administrative structures, social services and government intervention in industry. At the same time the Irish Republic became firmly established south of the border. Although there was opposition to Partition on both sides of the border, this only occasionally led to violent resistance to British rule. Relative stability in Ireland reinforced the notion that Partition was a democratic and reasonable solution.

The violence that erupted in the Six Counties in 1969 and has since continued unabated is no longer seen as the result of national oppression. In the eyes of the British labour movement the national question was resolved by Partition. The acceptance of Partition meant the acceptance of imperialist domination in Ireland. Once the Six Counties were seen as a legitimate part of Britain the nature of the recurrent strife there was obscured. The labour movement has been unable to challenge the bourgeois view that 'the troubles' arise from the peculiarities of the region and its people. The prevalence of the reformist view of the Irish War has meant that the British state has been given a free hand to smash the national liberation movement in Ireland.

REFORMIST SOLUTIONS FOR IRISH PROBLEMS

■ Partition may have been favourably received in England but it has never been accepted in Ireland. The Six County state has survived only through direct British economic and military intervention. Although Partition has remained, the contradiction between this solution and the aspirations of the Irish people for independence has never been suppressed. The resentment of the national population smouldered up to the outbreak of war in 1969; it will only be extinguished when the British occupiers leave for good.

The Six County state is chronically unstable because its existence depends on the denial of democratic rights. Apart from the denial of Irish national self-determination, on which the northern regime is founded, many other civil rights are restricted. In the past universal suffrage was violated by the practice of giving extra votes to landowners and businessmen and by gerrymandering constituency boundaries to ensure the effective disenfranchisement of Catholics. Discrimination against Catholics in jobs and housing still remains a means of guaranteeing the meagre privileges which sustain Protestant loyalty to the British state. During the 'seventies sectarian employment policies have ensured that two and a half times as many Catholics as Protestants suffer unemployment (Fair Employment Agency for Northern Ireland, *An industrial occupational profile of the two sections of the population*, January 1978).

Partition is an inherently unstable solution from which there is no escape for British imperialism. Britain cannot grant concessions to Catholics in the Six Counties without imperilling the privileges of the Loyalists and incurring their inevitable wrath. The present war in Ireland arises out of Britain's determination to crush the resistance of the Catholics to the diverse forms of oppression they have endured for over half a century.

In their struggle against British oppression the Irish can count on little support from the official labour movement in Britain. The state socialist tradition which accepted Partition in 1921 is today represented by the left wing of the Labour Party and the Communist Party (CP). For these organisations the problem in the Six Counties is not imperialist oppression but economic backwardness and lack of civil rights. Today the CP presents the results of Partition to justify its support for continued British military occupation:

'But the situation in Northern Ireland is unique in many respects. In other countries the demand for the withdrawal of troops was the expression of a developed campaign for national liberation, but Northern Ireland is not even a country; it is a truncated statelet created to ensure a permanent loyalist administration based upon majority support....

'For all these reasons, British troops can only be withdrawn as part of an overall political solution; half-measures are not enough - what is needed is a comprehensive policy.' (I Brennan, *Northern Ireland - a programme for action*, CP pamphlet, 1975, p26)

The troops must stay - until British imperialism can come up with an 'overall political solution'. The CP emphasises the need for a 'comprehensive policy' to

deal with the effects of Partition; Partition itself, the British occupation of the Six Counties, is placed beyond question.

The CP accepts Partition and reduces imperialism to economic domination by the multinationals. According to its general secretary, 'The people of Ireland and Britain have the same enemy - British big business and its political representatives' (G McLennan, *Britain and the Irish crisis*, CP pamphlet, 1973, p4). The CP obscures Britain's national oppression of Ireland; like the British ruling class it treats the Six Counties as part of Britain. For the CP the plight of Irish workers and British workers is identical - they both face economic oppression. The specific political oppression of the Irish people by British imperialism is ignored.

Not only is the British domination of Ireland no problem for the CP; it considers that the Irish people would positively benefit from a programme aimed at the expansion of British imperialism: 'Our fight in Britain for a new economic strategy based on the interests of the working people and aimed at curbing the power of the multi-national corporations would produce an expansion of Britain's economy that would also be in the interests of the Irish people...' (*Morning Star*, 23 October 1978). The interests of the Irish people demand an end to the British occupation; a decade of military struggle has shown their determination to achieve this. The CP meanwhile exhorts the Irish to put their faith in the expansion of British capitalism. With its radical opposition to the 'multi-national corporations' the CP seeks to reconcile the Irish people with their immediate enemy - British imperialism.

Progressive plans for the Six Counties

■ The inclusion of the Six Counties in the United Kingdom demanded modifications in the traditional positive colonial policy. State socialists recognised Northern Ireland as a region of Britain requiring special local policies. The state socialists' traditional role as apologists for British imperialism was considerably altered. They no longer proposed new forms of national oppression in Ireland in the socialist terms of their policies for countries in Africa and Asia. In Ireland, for all practical purposes, national oppression itself was denied. The positive colonial policy thus became a progressive regional development programme.

State socialist policy has evolved as the benign face of British oppression in Ireland. During the last fifty years there has been no credible class

alternative to reformism; state socialism has prevailed in the labour movement. The revolutionary potential of the movement after the First World War was finally destroyed by the Stalinist degeneration of the official communist parties. The pro-imperialist leadership of the labour movement has remained firmly in command ever since. In consequence anti-imperialist politics have been degraded to moralistic pleas and requests for the British state to rule more humanely.

State socialists approach Ireland from the standpoint of the British national interest. Although the CP pays lip-service to the demand for a united Ireland, it always gives priority to the needs of British imperialism. In 1941 leading Party member Willie Gallagher pondered the strategic importance of Ireland for Britain in her hour of need:

'Do we invade Ireland and seize the ports once again, or do we remove the Partition and make a friendly Ireland?....The ports might be seized, but they never could be held....the population of Ireland would have to be exterminated first....

'On the other hand, if the Partition were removed and Ireland as a neutral were given the necessary encouragement, it could become a great source of food supplies....'

(W Gallagher, *Ireland: can it remain neutral?*, Communist policy series, No 8, 1941 reprint, pl6)

'Abolish Partition to save Britain' suggested the CP. Thirty years later the CP still has Britain's interests at heart. It can be found today calling for Irish independence on the grounds of military and commercial expediency. The CP complains that 'Millions of pounds are presently squandered by the British Government on so-called "peace keeping operations" and on the administration of repression' (*Northern Ireland*, CP education department, 1977, p6). Apart from saving money, there would be other advantages if Britain pulled out of Ireland:

'If Ireland were reunited, there would be further short-term benefits to the British people. For a start, no more British troops would be killed trying to safeguard British imperialist interests in Northern Ireland.' (*Northern Ireland*, op cit, pl2)

The CP's concern for British sovereignty, British soldiers and British tax-payers' money is small compensation to the Irish victims of ten years of British barbarism in the Six Counties. The CP is the self-appointed guardian of the national interest. In Ireland the interests of Britain require the suppression of the national population. The nationalism of the CP simply provides a cover for British imperialism.

Since Partition the Labour left has variously

identified the problems of the Six Counties as the inadequacy of democracy, the ascendancy of the reactionary Ulster Unionists in central and local government and the decline of traditional industries. In the late 'forties left-wing Labour MPs called on the government to provide economic aid, outlaw religious discrimination and combat the corrupt electoral practices of the Stormont regime. Partition was ignored; the aim of the left was to press the government to introduce reforms that would alleviate some of the effects of British domination in the Six Counties. Although few concessions were forthcoming the government took advantage of the left's attitude to Partition. In 1949 this allowed the Labour Government to introduce the Ireland Act which further consolidated the fusion of the Six Counties with Britain.

In the 'sixties a new generation of left Labour MPs urged the government to reform the administration of the Six Counties. The Campaign for a Democratic Ulster achieved scant results from the Labour Government, but the emergence of the civil rights movement in the late 'sixties gave the left a new lease of life. Labour MPs jumped on the bandwagon to demand an end to all forms of discrimination. The civil rights movement was the first political opposition to British rule in the Six Counties which did not make national self-determination its central demand. It could therefore be supported by Labour MPs for whom 'Ulster' was a part of Britain in need of a little more democracy. For the left there was no question that the future of the Six Counties lay in the United Kingdom; there could be no better way of completing its integration into Britain's enlightened democratic practices than through a section of the British Labour Party. A delegate at the 1969 Labour Party Conference explained: 'Ulster needs above all a Labour Party, integral in organisation and finance with the rest of the United Kingdom, so that the people of Ulster, no matter what their religion, will be given a real choice based on economic and social policy and not upon history' (*Labour Party annual conference report, 1969, p173*). 'Forget about history' was the message of the Labour Party Conference. Forget about the forcible division of Ireland and its occupation by British troops. Let the Labour Government look after things with a sensible 'economic and social policy'.

Another progressive solution – the 1969 invasion

■ The leaders of the civil rights movement and their reformist allies in Britain wanted to ignore Partition and the question of a united independent

Ireland. But they were soon confronted with the harsh reality of British domination. The demands of the national population for democratic rights threatened the very foundations of the regime in the Six Counties. The British state and its loyalist allies brutally attacked marches and demonstrations and launched forays into Catholic ghettos in Belfast and Derry. The Labour left was outraged: it demanded an immediate government inquiry into the unionist state and the activities of its ruthless 'B' Specials. The explosion of sectarian conflict brought demands that the Labour Government act. By the summer of 1969 the Labour left was clamouring for direct state intervention in the Six Counties: 'Tribune warned Harold Wilson months ago that if he failed to assert his authority in Northern Ireland...he would have to live with an out-and-out fascist Ulster...on his doorstep' (*Tribune*, 25 July 1969). Within a month Harold Wilson asserted the authority of British imperialism in the Six Counties. In the face of growing political disruption the Labour Government resumed open war against the Irish people. Thousands of British troops stormed the cities and towns of the Six Counties to restore imperial law and order.

At the Labour Party Conference which took place within weeks of this invasion there was no criticism of the Government's massive military assault on the Six Counties. Indeed there was ready applause for left-wing delegates who congratulated the Government on its timely move (*Labour Party annual conference report*, 1969, p175). The fact that a declaration of war against the Irish people could be greeted as a progressive step reveals the extent to which anti-imperialist politics had been destroyed in the labour movement. The Second World War and the succeeding boom strengthened reformism and furthered the degeneration of working class politics already evident in pre-war state socialism. The submission of the labour movement to the British invasion of Ireland in 1969 fully revealed the paralysis induced by decades of reformist politics.

Even the most radical sections of the labour movement succumbed to the state socialist outlook. For *Socialist Worker* British military intervention was a relief: 'The breathing space provided by the presence of British troops is short but vital' (*Socialist Worker*, 11 September 1969). From Malaya and Kenya to Cyprus and Aden British imperialism has often claimed a peace-keeping role for its occupying armies. But only in Ireland has British military repression received the commendation of the radical left. *Socialist Worker* adapted to the prevailing state socialist view that



Preparing petrol bombs to defend the
Catholic ghetto; part of the popular
struggle against British imperialism

the troops had a progressive role to play, it could not show that their central function was to contain a major threat to bourgeois stability. In ten years of war no significant section of the working class has questioned Britain's right to use military force to annex part of another country.

The only time the activities of the British state in Ireland are called into question by the labour movement is when the army or the police overstep the mark. There were widespread protests when 14 people were shot dead at a demonstration in Derry in 1972. The internment without trial of large numbers of people also provoked strong objections. Violations of 'British' standards in police stations, courts and prisons have caused periodic outcries. These outrages have often led to protests and calls for government inquiries. But the labour movement never questions the right of the British state to rule in Ireland; it objects only to the excesses of military occupation. While occasional atrocities are isolated and criticised, the official labour movement puts forward schemes to modify imperialist oppression.

More plans for Ireland

■ For ten years the official trade union movement has backed Britain's war in Ireland. Meanwhile, with the endorsement of the Labour Party and the CP, it has made a series of appeals to the state to bring peace and prosperity to the Six Counties. The Bill of Rights proposed by the TUC is intended to guarantee democratic rights in Ireland through legislation passed by the British Parliament. Andy Barr, perennial Northern Ireland spokesman of the TUC, explained the motivation behind the Bill of Rights: 'In this critical moment in Northern Ireland's history the trade union Movement must provide the voice of sanity. We must clearly and unequivocally reject violence.' Delegates to the 1971 TUC responded with unanimous approval to his concluding appeal: 'Let us write another glorious page in the history of our Movement. Let us join hands, Irish and British, and establish democracy, peace and security for all our people in Ireland.' (*TUC annual conference report*, 1971, pp589-90)

The Bill of Rights was supplemented in 1976 by the Better Life for All Campaign which aims to put pressure on the government to end the war and improve employment prospects and living standards in the Six Counties. Before outlining demands in the fields of discrimination, employment, housing, education, social services and political rights, Andy Barr

explained the purpose of the campaign: 'The six-point people's declaration contained within the Better Life for All campaign is the trade unions' answer to the gunmen' (*TUC annual conference report*, 1976, p565).

The Bill of Rights and the Better Life for All Campaign together make up the policy of the British labour movement on the Irish War. This programme of political reforms and economic improvements rejects the solution sought by the Irish people - national independence. Leaders of the labour movement are united in their condemnation of the struggle for national self-determination. The president of the TUC concluded debate on the Six Counties at the 1976 TUC with invective against the national liberation movement: 'I am sure that the voices and ideas that have been expressed from this rostrum will be heard in Northern Ireland and the people on the streets in Northern Ireland will conquer the maniac and the gunman who have been shooting down so many trade unionists' (*ibid*, p567). The TUC's call for people to 'conquer the maniac and the gunman' is an open invitation for the army to crush resistance in Ireland. At the same time the official labour movement asks the state which has waged a barbarous war on the Irish people to create 'peace, jobs and progress' in the Six Counties. The utopian schemes of the TUC play a useful role for British imperialism; the influence of the trade union leaders wins working class consent for the continuation of military repression in the north of Ireland.

The CP is an ardent supporter of this modern version of positive colonialism. It supports the Better Life for All Campaign because it 'places the struggle to end sectarianism and violence in the context of the movement for democracy and social progress, it offers much the best vehicle for campaigning on for peace' (*Northern Ireland*, *op cit*, p6). The CP refuses to place the struggle against sectarianism and repression in the context of the struggle against imperialism. Ignoring British imperialism, the CP appeals to the British state to modify its oppression of the Six Counties. It never asked the American government to improve conditions in Vietnam when American soldiers were ravaging the country. But when the British state is involved things are different. The CP rallies to the flag; its campaigns provide a vehicle for undermining workers' opposition to British imperialism.

The consensus behind the Irish War

State socialist policies have undermined labour movement opposition to the British occupation of Ireland. The reformist strategy on the Irish War

advocated by the TUC, the Labour Party and the CP has drawn workers into support for the bipartisan policies of the Labour leaders and their Tory colleagues. As the war has continued through a period of deepening capitalist crisis there has been an increasing convergence between the strategy of state socialism and the interests of imperialism.

It is because these state socialist campaigns place no constraints on the conduct of the war that Labour leaders have always been happy to accept their toothless proposals. In 1972 the General Council of the TUC noted that 'the Labour Party welcomed the idea of a bill of rights'. It also got a positive response from the Conservative minister then presiding over British terror in Ireland: 'The Home Secretary replied that the Government shared the concern of Congress and were determined to control growing violence and to restore law and order' (*TUC annual conference report*, 1972, pp203-4). The Home Secretary was delighted to recruit trade union support for his attempt to 'control' resistance to British rule in Ireland, although he was uncertain whether the Bill of Rights was the best means of achieving this. In 1977 the Labour Government noted the similarity between the state socialist plans and its own policies: 'The Government are in sympathy with the Trade Unions' "Better Life for All" campaign, many of the aims of which are in line with the Government's own economic and social policies for the Province' (*Labour Party annual conference report*, 1977, p132). The report continued with its announcement of a 'psychological breakthrough' in the government's attempts to revive the economy in the Six Counties: 'it has been firmly established - and universally acknowledged - that there is no question of an economic withdrawal from the Province' (*ibid*, p132). The convergence of state socialism and imperialism is shown by the labour movement's acceptance of Partition and the general agreement with the government's determination to smash the national struggle in Ireland.

Whilst the institutions of the working class have lined up with the Labour Government's policy on Ireland, the Labour Party itself has maintained harmonious relations on this issue with the Conservative opposition. When an ill-informed American senator accused the two main parties of making Ireland the focus of inter-party discord Margaret Thatcher replied for herself and the leader of the Labour Party:

'We have never used Ulster as a political football between the parties. Events there are too deeply tragic for any of us to do that.' (*Financial Times*, 21 April 1979)

The real 'tragedy' of the Six Counties for the ruling class is that the challenge from the national liberation movement comes at a time of world economic crisis. The war in Ireland is so grave a threat to British capitalism that it cannot allow dissension between the bourgeois parties to impair its military efficiency.

The survival of bipartisanship depends on the influence of state socialism in the labour movement. From Wilson to Callaghan, Rees to Mason, the Labour leadership has been explicit in its commitment to imperialism. But to win the support of the labour movement the Government needs the assistance of those who put a benevolent face on British repression - those who imply that the British state can play a progressive role in the Six Counties. The CP and the Labour left fulfil this function for imperialism; they help to forge the links that bind the labour movement to the British ruling class.

A WORKING CLASS RESPONSE TO THE IRISH WAR

On the eve of the 1979 General Election campaign a section of the Irish national liberation movement assassinated Airey Neave, chief Conservative spokesman on Northern Ireland. This event provoked a national response from the leaders of the Labour Party, in unison with their Tory colleagues. In the House of Commons, Home Secretary Merlyn Rees asserted that the republican movement could not be allowed to 'distort' the election campaign by pushing the Irish War to the centre of attention. He assured Parliament that the assassination would 'serve only to reinforce the resolve of the British people not to be divided in the face of violence' (*The Daily Telegraph*, 3 April 1979). The Labour Government used the death of Neave to appeal for national unity against the Irish menace.

While the elder statesmen of the Labour Party were issuing fulsome tributes to the man whose personal contribution to the war in Ireland was to encourage greater use of the SAS assassination squads, free rein was given to chauvinist reaction. The Police Federation called for the re-introduction of the death penalty and for further repressive measures against Irish people in Britain. The Young Conservatives, with the support of *The Daily Telegraph*, demanded hanging for 'terrorist' offences.

Although 'law and order' moved to the centre of pre-election controversy, the war in Ireland did not. After Neave's death both major parties re-affirmed their determination to keep Ireland out of party

politics. Labour's election manifesto devoted only five short paragraphs to Northern Ireland. It claimed that 'considerable progress has been made on the security front and in our efforts to bring peace and stability to the Province', and committed Labour to more of the same: 'For the present, direct rule remains the only viable alternative' ('The Labour way is the better way', *Labour Party manifesto*, 1979, p30). In an even briefer section the Conservative manifesto made no criticism of the Government's record in Ireland and restated Labour's commitment to the defeat of terrorism and the restoration of 'law and order'.

However, for all Margaret Thatcher's ranting about 'law and order' she was not prepared to make political capital out of the violence in the Six Counties. Her first major speech in the election campaign indicated the context in which the law and order issue would be discussed. Thatcher 'dwelt at length on the disruption caused by strikes last winter and on the Tory concern for law and order' (*Financial Times*, 12 April 1979). The importance of prosecuting the war in Ireland to a final solution favourable to British imperialism is such that the contentious 'law and order' issue must be kept off this sensitive terrain.

Despite the Parliamentary truce on Ireland the war still forced its way into the public eye. The Irish question today is not accorded the prominent role in British politics it played during the protracted Home Rule controversy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nevertheless Ireland played a decisive part in bringing Labour's term of office to an end. Appeasement of unionist reaction and coercion of Irish nationalism are features of Britain's historical relationship with Ireland. They are still more familiarly associated with Joseph Chamberlain and Lloyd George than with James Callaghan and Roy Mason. But far from being obsolete movements, unionism and republicanism were both important political forces affecting the last Labour Government. The concession of increased parliamentary representation to the Ulster Unionists was a device aimed at ensuring the survival of a minority Labour Government. The volatility of the fractious Orangemen was a factor in the Government's final defeat in a 'no confidence' debate. Meanwhile the repression of the national liberation movement was conducted with unparalleled ruthlessness and ferocity under the aegis of the Labour Government.

Partition incorporated a destabilising influence into

the British state. Bourgeois politicians may wish to ignore it, but they cannot escape its consequences. The intrusion of the Irish War into British political life in the weeks leading up to the election, with the death of Neave in London and a series of successful attacks on the army and the police in the Six Counties, provided a dramatic confirmation of this. It also provided an opportunity for revolutionaries at a time when the election caused a greater than usual interest in politics. Just as the election was an occasion for the bourgeoisie to put forward unqualified and unquestioned support for the British occupation, it was an excellent chance to present a working class alternative to the joint pro-imperialist approach of the Labour and Tory Parties.

This was the approach adopted by the Revolutionary Communist Tendency (RCT) in the election campaign. The Irish War, the demands for the immediate withdrawal of troops and self-determination for the Irish people were a major focus of our election forums, and our interventions in Labour Party and other political meetings. To promote the development of an anti-imperialist current in the working class in opposition to the Labour Party, we concentrated our activity and propaganda around the call for no vote for Labour in the election.

The reformist and radical left, however, saw the issue differently. Their response to the Neave bombing was uniform: to denounce and deplore it and to blame the republican movement for the reaction of the British state. This reveals both the extent of the bourgeois consensus in the labour movement and the absence of any challenge to Labour Party politics from the radical left groups which pose as alternatives.

Tribune, the voice of the Labour left, was more outspoken than many bourgeois newspapers in its condemnation of the liberation movement. It drew an analogy between the threat of the republican movement to British cities and that of the German Luftwaffe in the Second World War (*Tribune*, 6 April 1979). The distinction between an inter-imperialist war and a war of imperialist oppression does not exist for the Labour left. *Tribune's* socialism is always at the service of the British nation, whether it is in conflict with rival imperialists in Europe or engaged in smashing resistance to its rule in the colonies. The daily paper of the CP, the *Morning Star*, took up a similar theme, expressing 'utter and total condemnation of those who brutally, and cold-bloodedly

murdered Mr. Airey Neave', whilst extolling his record as a 'hero' in the war with Germany (*Morning Star*, 31 March 1979). The CP is appalled by the 'barbarism', not of British imperialist oppression in Ireland, but of those who take up arms to fight against it.

The radical left also capitulated to bourgeois public opinion. The Socialist Workers' Party deplored the assassination of Neave because it would strengthen reaction and lead to further repression in Britain:

'It will be exploited with skill and cynicism in the Tory electoral interest.

'It will be grist to the mill of the "law and order" brigade's campaign for greater police powers at the expense of civil rights.

'It will be used to justify the unjustifiable - British rule in Northern Ireland.

'One thing it will NOT do is to help the cause of the unification of Ireland. That is certain.' (*Socialist Worker*, 7 April 1979)

These socialists use the predictable bourgeois reaction to an attack on the British state to justify their own refusal to support the right of the Irish people to use violence in the struggle against British imperialism. *Socialist Worker* continued by denouncing - in the terms of the popular media - the 'political terrorists'. One thing *Socialist Worker* will not do is give unconditional support to the struggle for the unification of Ireland. That is certain.

The left is united in its rejection of the Irish national liberation struggle. Both the *Militant* group and the Workers' Revolutionary Party condemned as 'individual terrorism' the actions of soldiers in an army fighting a war against British imperialism (*Militant*, 6 April 1979; *The News Line*, 31 March 1979). *Militant*, like *Socialist Worker*, justified its spinelessness by its fears of the outrage of the bourgeoisie:

'But worse the feelings of shock and revulsion they engender provide the opportunity for the introduction of extra repressive measures, without the general outcry that would otherwise accompany them' (*Militant*, 6 April 1979).

'Don't fight back against the British state - it might make things worse' is *Militant's* advice to the movement fighting to end centuries of political oppression and ten years of direct military occupation in Ireland.

Socialist Challenge, 'open' newspaper of the International Marxist Group (IMG), joined in the reactionary refrain:

'A wave of repression, directed primarily at the Irish community in Britain but with the aim also of smearing and isolating the supporters of Ireland's struggle for self-determination, is already being prepared....

'The campaign in the press is designed not only to increase the election chances of the Tories, but to turn whole sections of the working class rightwards and tie them to the reactionary schemes of the ruling class. The National Front's campaign will be given the biggest boost it could have hoped for. Not self-determination for Ireland but "Law And Order" and possibly "Hanging for Terrorists" has (sic) become an issue. For all these reasons no support whatsoever can be given to the bombing.' (*Socialist Challenge*, 5 April 1979)

The IMG lays the blame for repression not on the British state but on the liberation movement. The world is turned upside down in this cowardly logic - the Irish victims of prejudice and repression are made responsible for the attacks launched on them by the ruling class. Resistance and revolt against the bourgeois order always provoke repression and reaction. At such moments revolutionaries must declare their solidarity with the oppressed by resolutely defending their right to conduct an armed struggle against oppression. But when the ruling class roars and threatens to stamp its foot all the radical posturing and sloganising of the left stops abruptly. The socialists of the British left crumble before the pressure of bourgeois opinion, abandon their class allegiance to the oppressed sections of society and accommodate to the common class enemy.

British fair play and the oppression of Ireland

■ The equivocation of the radical left on the Irish War is a direct consequence of its politics. These groups are *organisationally*, but not *politically*, independent of the Labour Party. As a result, their formal commitment to Irish liberation is tempered by their faith in a reformist solution. The response to the Bennett Inquiry into the interrogation techniques and use of torture in the Six Counties reveals the ideological roots of the left's denunciation of 'terrorism'. Diverse political sources responded to Bennett in a strikingly similar way.

'Either the law safeguards the rights of every citizen, whether a terrorist suspect or not, or it ceases to be the law.

'And if Mr. Mason and his civil servants do not understand that then they are not fit to hold office. (*Daily Mirror*, 13 March 1979)

'The government should sack them (Mason and Newman, Ed) as a first step. It should then follow this up immediately by repealing the unjust and undemocratic emergency legislation.'
(*Morning Star*, 17 March 1979)

'BRUTAL POLICE GIVE JUSTICE A HAMMERING
Mason and Newman must go.' (*Socialist Worker*,
24 March 1979)

The *Morning Star* and *Socialist Worker*, like the *Daily Mirror*, protested at the violation of the norms of British justice in the Six Counties. All focused the blame for these outrages on the leading personalities: the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and his Chief Constable. After ten years of war the left still retains its faith in the impartiality of British justice. Exposure of 'injustice' implies the possibility that Britain's domination over Ireland could possibly be 'just'. The CP takes this implication to a clear conclusion in its call for the British state to rule more democratically and fairly in the Six Counties - through legislative changes at Westminster. *Socialist Worker* agrees with the *Morning Star* that a change in the personnel in the repressive apparatus would be a step towards a less brutal regime. The theme that unites these responses is a familiar one in the tradition of the British labour movement. It is the state socialist positive colonial policy - government reforms to create a more benevolent administration in a country it oppresses.

The legal system, like the issue of 'law and order', does not exist above classes. For the bourgeoisie any threat to its stability becomes a problem of law and order. British justice for Ireland has a simple class character. The fact that the resistance of the people of the Six Counties comes from a region which has been forcibly incorporated into the British state makes the Irish War a major threat to British imperialism. Justice for Ireland from the point of view of the British state means more repression even if this means going beyond the limits of its own laws. After all, as *The Economist* recently explained: 'only purists would argue for an immediate return to English juridical standards in Northern Ireland' (*The Economist*, 17 March 1979, p15). While the bourgeoisie pursues its interest uninhibited by its facade of legal norms and safeguards, the left restricts itself to cataloguing 'violations' of British justice.

The defence of workers' interests cannot be reconciled with bourgeois law and order. The Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) provides a clear illustration of this.

This Act is an important legislative aspect of the apparatus of repression which has been built up by the British state to deal with resistance to its rule in Ireland. It provides the legal framework for the harassment and intimidation of Irish people in the Six Counties and in Britain. In the five years since it was implemented 3782 people have been detained under its provisions in Britain alone. Less than seven per cent were finally charged with 'criminal' offences (*The Guardian*, 21 March 1979). Merlyn Rees justified the denial of democratic rights embodied in the Act by vilifying the national liberation movement: 'Mr Rees agreed that the provisions entailed a temporary infringement of civil liberties, but they were necessary in order "to deal with the savage and dangerous minority who have no respect for the life and civil liberties of others"' (*Financial Times*, 23 March 1979). The portrayal of opponents of the British occupation of the Six Counties as criminals, terrorists or as 'savage and dangerous' is an important part of British strategy. It serves to legitimise the vicious measures required to maintain British domination in Ireland

The 'criminalisation' strategy underlies the denial of the right of political status to Irish prisoners of war detained on charges arising out of their military duties. The objective of the British government is to isolate the republican prisoners from the support of the national population in Ireland and from the support of the labour movement in Britain. This is why the campaign of the prisoners 'on the blanket' in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh concentration camp and elsewhere is of such political significance. The demand for the right to wear civilian clothes, exemption from prison work and other concessions to political prisoners under international conventions challenges the bourgeois characterisation of the national liberation movement as a gang of criminals. It asserts their true identity as soldiers in an army fighting against British imperialism. The British government is intransigent in its refusal to submit to the prisoners' demands; to concede them would undermine the carefully created image of the war as a conflict between 'peace-keeping, security forces' and psychopathic terrorists.

Class independence and anti-imperialism

■ The bourgeoisie has won maximum agreement in British society on its conduct of the Irish War. It is an issue on which it places the greatest importance as a means of retaining its ideological supremacy. The survival of British capitalism depends on the ability of the bourgeoisie to obtain working class support for its solutions. This is the message of the Concordat recently agreed between the TUC and the Labour Government: 'Britain, the country with the longest industrial and trade union tradition, can only operate successfully if there is a general and genuine consensus among our people' (*The economy, the government and trade union responsibilities, joint statement by the TUC and the Government*, HMSO, London, February 1979). British nationalism is the cornerstone of consensus politics and the Irish War is a potent stimulus to chauvinism in British society. The struggle against pro-imperialist trends in the labour movement is therefore an assault on the ideological supremacy of the bourgeoisie.

The RCT fights imperialism in relation to the day to day events in the Irish War. When the Bennett Report reveals the brutality of British rule in Ireland we show that torture and terror are inseparable from the British occupation of the Six Counties. We do not make pathetic pleas that this occupation be made more just and less brutal, but demand the immediate withdrawal of British troops. When the government renews its repressive legislation or refuses to grant the demands of the republican prisoners, we challenge the 'criminalisation' policy of British imperialism and demand prisoner of war status for Irish freedom fighters. When the national liberation movement attacks the British state or its military and political representatives, we declare our unconditional support for the right of an oppressed nation to fight imperialism by whatever means it chooses.

The anti-imperialist potential of the working class which was evident in the period around the First World War must be realised today in a movement based on a class opposition to capitalism. The more that workers make Ireland their business, the more will they weaken the hold of British imperialism over the labour movement. Anti-imperialist politics strike a blow at the very foundations of capitalism. To survive the recession every major capitalist nation seeks to preserve or extend its sphere of influence in the backward capitalist countries. Already rivalry over the redivision of Africa and the Middle East threatens to explode into military conflict. The position

adopted by the labour movement in an advanced capitalist country such as Britain has a decisive influence on the capacity of the British ruling class to resolve its crisis at the expense of workers in backward capitalist countries. The imperialist war on Britain's doorstep in the Six Counties is the crucial test. Labour movement support for resistance to British domination in Ireland would be a major step forward in the struggle against the world domination of imperialism.

British workers cannot ignore the cause of Irish liberation without renouncing their class interests. A British labour movement which is not anti-imperialist cannot defend itself against the attacks of the capitalist class. In declaring support for the Irish struggle, British workers will serve notice that class politics must prevail over the bourgeois consensus. This will be a decisive step on the road to the liberation of the British working class.

POSTSCRIPT

The election of a Conservative Government highlights the Labour Party's pro-imperialist record on Ireland. Since the election the radical and reformist left have not stopped pointing out how much worse life will be for workers under a Tory Government. But this 'change' is in large part a concoction brewed up in the editorial offices of the opportunist left: the Irish people will experience it as more of the same. The new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Humphrey Atkins, made it clear that he has no criticism of Roy Mason's approach. Under the headline 'Bipartisan tactics on Ulster will continue', *The Daily Telegraph* quoted Atkins as saying: 'Of one thing you can be sure: I shall not relax the efforts which are being made to bring to justice the violent men who are creating havoc and personal misery throughout the Province' (9 May 1979). Under Tory or Labour anti-imperialists must not cease from ruthlessly exposing the Labour Party's sordid alliance with the bourgeoisie against the Irish.

Mary Masters

Revolutionary Communist Pamphlets

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