

An End to the Troubles? Irish ‘Peace Process’

Twenty-five years of guerrilla war and repression appeared to cease in Northern Ireland at the end of last summer. In August 1994, the leadership of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) declared a “complete cessation of violence” against the British imperialist state. Two months later, the leadership of the Protestant Loyalist paramilitary groups, the Combined Loyalist Military Command, declared its own indefinite ceasefire, to last as long as the IRA refrained from hostilities.

These events, unthinkable just a short time ago, were the result of years of maneuvering between the British government and the IRA. Talks between Gerry Adams, President of Sinn Fein, and John Hume, the leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) became the catalyst for a series of maneuvers by the British government and the government of the Irish Republic, aimed at coaxing the IRA into abandoning the armed struggle in return for a place at the negotiating table. This in turn gave birth to the Downing Street declaration of late 1993, signed by British Prime Minister John Major and then Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Albert Reynolds, in which the struggle for a united Ireland was declared to be a “legitimate political goal.” It also repeated an earlier statement of the British minister for Northern Ireland, Peter Brooke, that Britain has “no selfish strategic, or economic interest in Northern Ireland.”

Since Northern Ireland is officially designated as an integral part of the “United Kingdom,” this is quite a startling admission. The British ruling class apparently now regards the sectarian mini-state, which it was instrumental in creating in the early 1920s, as a liability. The obsolescence and decay of the industries—shipbuilding, textiles and engineering—that were once strategic to the British economy, and the growth of investment from other European Union states, as well as the U.S. and Japan, in the Irish Republic, have made Northern Ireland much less important to British imperialism. With the end of the Cold War, the province also lost much of its military value as a naval outpost. Thus, the main thing keeping Britain in Northern Ireland at present is the refusal of its million and a half Protestants to join the Irish Republic, and the fear of a sectarian bloodbath if British troops were to withdraw.

The current conflict in Northern Ireland began in 1969, with the defeat of the civil rights movement of the Catholic minority. But it has its roots in more than half a century of systematic discrimination and vicious sectarian repression against the Catholic population of the province. Northern Ireland was created as a result of a treaty viewed by the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie as a way to end the War of Independence that erupted in 1918. The independence struggle was prefigured by the armed rising of Easter 1916, in which an alliance of the Irish Citizen Army, a workers’ militia led by the island’s foremost Marxist, James Connolly, and the larger Irish Volunteers, led by Padraic Pearse and other nationalists, tried to spark a mass insurrection against British rule. In the immediate sense they failed. But the bloody response of British imperialism, executing the insurgents without mercy, triggered an anti-colonial uprising immediately after the war, and forced British imperialism to accede

to a limited form of Irish independence. The Irish bourgeoisie was anxious to get the whole dangerous business over with as soon as possible. After signing a treaty that swore loyalty to the British crown and sanctioned the partition of Ireland into two states—a mainly Catholic neo-colonial “dominion” in the south, and a British-ruled, majority Protestant statelet in the north—the Irish bourgeoisie, armed by the British, fought an even bloodier civil war to suppress the more radical nationalists who refused to accept the treaty. It is in this period that the foundation was laid for the conflict that erupted in the late 1960s and has lasted to the present day.

James Connolly warned that the partition of Ireland would lead to a “carnival of reaction” that would long cripple the Irish working class, North and South. That is basically what has happened over the ensuing seventy-plus years. On both sides of the border, the unresolved national question has acted as a lightning rod diverting class antagonisms into the dead end of national hatred.

The consolidation of a sectarian Protestant statelet in the North meant the systematic oppression of the Catholic population. Catholics were historically discriminated against in employment and housing. Education was segregated, with the state schools reserved for Protestants, and Catholics attending state-subsidized church schools. Electoral districts were gerrymandered to prevent Catholics from gaining control of municipalities, even where they predominated. Pogroms by police and Orange thugs have always been an important instrument for keeping the Catholic minority in line. To this day there is not even a deformed expression of working-class political independence. The Protestant working class largely supports one or another wing of the reactionary Unionists, while the Catholic working class either supports Sinn Fein, the “radical” party of petty-bourgeois Republican nationalism, or the Social Democratic and Labour Party of John Hume, which, despite its name, is not a working-class party at all, but rather the party of the upwardly mobile Catholic middle class in Northern Ireland.

The six-county Orange fortress state has its complement in the clericalist 26-county state in the South. There, Catholic doctrine is written into a constitution that forbids abortion, divorce, and, until recently, even contraception; the Church exerts enormous influence on what in other societies would be regarded as secular affairs. The Labour Party is small by the standard of European bourgeois workers’ parties, and when it does get a taste of office, it is as a junior partner to the hegemonic parties of the Irish bourgeoisie, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, both derived from Republican organizations of the twenties.

The Revolt Against the Union: 25 Years of War

The revolt against the Northern Ireland “Protestant state for a Protestant people” in the late 1960s was part of the international wave of student and working-class radicalism. The civil rights movement centered on basic democratic questions of equal rights to vote, equal access to jobs,

housing, etc. But the radical students who first organized the civil rights campaigns, although vaguely socialist and anti-sectarian in outlook, possessed no clear political program. When the Orange reactionaries used their traditional method to combat “uppity” Catholics—the mobilization of sectarian hatred—the civil rights movement was thus programmatically incapable of making a serious attempt to shatter the Unionist bloc from within by appealing to Protestant workers on the basis of common class interest.

The result was a wave of pogroms against Catholic working class ghettos, most notably the “Battle of the Bogside” in 1969, in which police systematically attacked the main Catholic area of Derry, and its residents fought back with great courage. In response, the Labour government of Harold Wilson sent British troops onto the streets of Derry and Belfast to restore “order” and put the lid firmly back on. After a short period in which the Catholic population greeted the British troops as saviors, the inevitable clashes between soldiers and the Catholic working-class led to the re-emergence of traditional Republicanism as the only force that seemed able to defend the Catholic population against the state and the murderous Orange pogromists.

The old, “Official” IRA had in the preceding years come under the ideological influence of the British Communist Party, and thus de-emphasized armed struggle in favor of a more standard Stalinist reformism. Hence, when Belfast’s Falls Road Catholic ghetto came under attack in 1969, the “Officials” were unprepared—and nowhere to be found. (Many walls in the Falls Road bore the legend, “IRA = I Ran Away.”) As a result of this humiliating failure, the “Officials” were soon eclipsed by the Provisional IRA, which had split in August 1969 from the parent organization in opposition to the latter’s new-found “Marxism.” Pledged to uphold the historic nationalist and “physical force” traditions of Irish Republicanism, the Provisionals became the dominant group among radical Catholics in Northern Ireland for the next quarter century.

Twenty-five years of “armed struggle” have proved that, while British imperialism has been unable to defeat the nationalists, the IRA cannot defeat the British either. Throughout this period, the Northern Ireland statelet has been unstable. In 1971, the province’s prime minister, Brian Faulkner, abridged the right of *habeas corpus* and introduced the hated policy of internment, under which individuals could be imprisoned without trial merely for having been accused of Republican activity. Amidst an international outcry after British troops shot fourteen civil rights marchers dead on “Bloody Sunday” in January 1972, the Protestant-sectarian administration that had governed the province for half a century was abolished, and replaced by direct rule from London. An attempt to restore home rule in Northern Ireland on the basis of “power sharing” between Protestants and Catholics, called the Sunningdale Agreement, was sabotaged in 1974 by a reactionary general strike of Protestant workers.

In 1981, repression against the IRA backfired badly. Republican prisoners in Belfast went on hunger strike in response to an attempt by Margaret Thatcher to deprive them of their political prisoner status and reduce them to “common criminals.” The “Iron Lady” sat with arms folded while ten IRA prisoners died. The result of her policy, echoing the executions of 1916, was to provoke a huge outpouring of support for the prisoners. The leader of the hunger strikers (and the first to die), IRA volunteer Bobby Sands, was elected shortly before his death to the British parliament at Westminster in a by-election. Other hunger

strikers were elected to the Dail (Republic of Ireland parliament). This dramatic demonstration of massive sympathy for Republican aims (if not always their methods) among the Catholic population compelled the British government to seek a way out of the Northern Ireland impasse.

Their first attempt was the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985. Thatcher signed this treaty with the rabidly anti-Republican Fine Gael government of Garrett Fitzgerald; the intention was to increase co-operation between London and Dublin in suppressing “terrorism.” A permanent body, the Anglo-Irish Conference, was set up for this purpose. But it was basically ineffective. It became increasingly clear in the late 1980s and early 1990s that, in order to find any kind of “solution” to the continuing conflict, the British government would have to find some way of conducting discussions with the Republican movement itself.

The opportunity for this came with the new international situation arising from the collapse of the Stalinist regimes. Deprived of a major source of material and moral support by the fall of the USSR, petty-bourgeois guerrilla movements in various hot spots around the world, from the Middle East to South Africa to Central America, signed “peace” deals with their oppressors in return for a semblance of power. The force of this example, combined with considerable war weariness among the Catholic population, put enormous pressure on the IRA leadership to seek a “solution” to the conflict. The result is the current highly unstable “peace process.”

Changes in the Political Landscape

The political situation in the Irish Republic has undergone considerable change in recent years. The hold of the Catholic Church and the reactionary nationalist bourgeois parties, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, has been considerably weakened. The high birth rate of Catholic Ireland, and the decline of emigration—a major safety valve, which in the past meant Ireland’s “surplus” youth generally went abroad—has led to an increasingly young population. Over 50 percent is under the age of 25. Irish youth look enviously at the greater rights enjoyed by their counterparts in other European countries; the domination of Irish cultural life by medieval clerics has become more and more intolerable. This has caused major political convulsions: the growth in support for the reformist Labour Party at the expense of the traditional Irish bourgeois parties, which, in turn, led to the election of a well-known Irish social democrat and feminist, Mary Robinson, as President of the Republic in 1990. (Although the position is largely ceremonial, it has great symbolic significance.) Then there was the election of November 1992, in which Labour doubled its representation in the Dail, and became a major component of the government coalition.

Struggles against the Irish Republic’s oppression of women have played a major role in changing the political climate in the country. The anger of young Ireland exploded in 1992 when the Irish Attorney General, Harry Whelehan, ran to the Irish courts to get an injunction to stop a 14-year-old rape victim from traveling to England to get an abortion. This abomination unleashed a wave of anger and protest throughout Ireland, so much so that the Supreme Court was forced to overturn the lower court’s ruling and allow the victim to travel. This, the famous “X case,” shook the Irish clerical state to the core. In the sequel, a referendum upheld the right to travel abroad for abortion and the right to information about abortion services abroad, though abor-

tion is still illegal in Ireland. But, by a combination of rulings from the European Courts and protests in the street, the Irish bourgeois state has been forced to legalize homosexuality and make contraceptives broadly available. A referendum on divorce, also illegal in Ireland, is probably inevitable in the near future.

It was the brazen attempt last autumn of Fianna Fail to appoint Harry Whelehan, the tormentor of "X," as President of the Irish Supreme Court, that propelled the Tanaiste (deputy prime minister), Dick Spring, and his Labour TDs (members of parliament) out of the coalition. This defection brought down Albert Reynolds' government right in the middle of his "peace process."

The Irish Labour Party, while acting as the main political magnet for the aspirations of youth, has nevertheless been instrumental in holding them back, regularly participating in coalitions with the very same bourgeois parties that have enforced Catholic doctrine for decades. Governments containing Labour ministers have engaged in mass layoffs and privatizations of state industries. After bringing about the collapse of the Reynolds coalition, Spring took his party into yet another coalition, this time with the more blatantly reactionary Fine Gael party. Joining him in this new coalition was Ireland's other smaller reformist party, the so-called Democratic Left, a product of the evolution toward Stalinism, and now Eurocommunism, of the old "Official" IRA. Thus the so-called left parties in Ireland display a complete lack, even in a reformist sense, of any impulse to stand up for the independent class interests of Irish workers.

The social and political landscape of the North has also altered dramatically over the past twenty years. Old patterns of anti-Catholic discrimination have been partly broken down as sectors that were once reserved for Protestants have been opened up. The new and increasingly assertive Catholic middle class is composed of shop owners, professionals and public-sector bureaucrats. The situation of the Protestant working class has worsened as the province's industrial sector has contracted. This, combined with Britain's desire to extricate itself, has partially eroded confidence in the future of Unionism. While the Loyalists' "hard men" retain a considerable base, particularly among sections of the traditional Protestant petty-bourgeoisie threatened by competition from Catholics, in recent years there have been signs that Loyalist prejudice may be losing its grip on the Protestant working class. On several occasions Protestant workers have demonstrated against sectarian attacks on Catholics. The most famous incident occurred last year when shop stewards at the Harland and Wolff shipyard (traditionally a bastion of Orange bigotry) walked out to protest the murder of a Catholic welder by the Ulster Volunteer Force. Events like this, isolated as they are, demonstrate the possibility of transcending the sectarian divide and developing class-based, rather than communal, politics in Northern Ireland.

National and Social Questions

The starting point for Marxists in dealing with Ireland has to be unconditional opposition to British imperialist intervention. We are for the immediate, unconditional withdrawal of British troops from Northern Ireland. Marxists stand for the military defense of the IRA in conflicts with the British and NI state forces, and we oppose criminal prosecution and imprisonment of Republicans by the imperialists and their allies. Moreover, the existing order in

Northern Ireland, with its marginal privileges for Protestants and systematic discrimination and repression of Catholics, is something that the workers' movement is obliged to struggle against by all possible means. We are unconditionally opposed to the whole apparatus of Loyalist terror: the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the Royal Irish Regiment, the Loyalist paramilitary murder gangs. But this is only the beginning of wisdom. The question is: what program can lead a united working class to smash the entire state regime and take power in its own name?

The national question in Ireland remains a major obstacle to class struggle and social progress. While there has been a partial self-determination of Irish Catholics in the South, particularly since the twenty-six counties became a republic after World War II, the national conflict in the North still has a major impact on Irish politics. The Northern conflict is not, as Republicans and their guilty liberal apologists on the left pretend, a simple one of an oppressed colonial people fighting against an imperialist occupation. There is a major component of that, to be sure. But the existence of one million Protestants who comprise 60 percent of the population of the six counties means that any attempt to unite the island forcibly will inevitably ignite a sectarian conflict of Bosnian proportions.

The situation is one of *interpenetrated peoples*: two peoples living together on the same piece of land. Any attempt by one or the other of the peoples to exercise its right to self-determination, that is, to create its own political state, will necessarily lead either to forced population transfers ("ethnic cleansing"), or conquest and subjugation.

The Protestants are not actually a fully developed nation. Rather, they are a half-formed quasi-national grouping, whose political consciousness and identity exists as if in a time warp: they still think they are fighting the battles of the Reformation and the "Glorious Revolution" of seventeenth-century England. The ideology of Loyalism is a grotesque anachronism. But it has not been abandoned by the Protestant population. Marxists must frame their demands on the national question to undermine this consciousness, a product of the "carnival of reaction" of which Connolly spoke, and not drive the Protestant working class into the arms of the Paisleyites (or worse) by echoing the Republicans' demand for "self-determination of the Irish people as a whole." There is no such thing as "the Irish people as a whole;" the Protestants do not feel themselves to be part of any such people. If there is to be any hope of uniting Catholic and Protestant working classes, it cannot be demanded of the Protestants that they accept Catholic nationalist aims as a condition for participating in common struggle. While opposing the imperialist presence, Marxists must also oppose the reunification of Ireland against the wishes of the Protestants.

The aim of the IRA/Sinn Fein is the incorporation of the six counties into the existing Irish Republic. The Republicans know that the conflict in Ireland is extremely expensive for the British ruling class, whose power in the world has been declining for most of this century. They aim to maneuver the British into abandoning the Protestants, if necessary over a period of years. It is possible they will succeed in the long term; the British ruling class is not keen on continuing the war indefinitely. The then British Northern Ireland Secretary, Peter Brooke, stated the position of the bulk of the British bourgeoisie quite baldly in a rather sensational speech in 1991. He said:

"in no event will Northern Ireland or any part of it cease

to be part of the United Kingdom without the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland. We stand firmly by that solemn declaration and assurance. But in so doing we acknowledge that there is another view, strongly held by the nationalist minority within Northern Ireland. That is the aspiration to a United Ireland, not simply to the Republic of Ireland which exists today, but to a 32-county state covering all the territory of the island, and worthy in their view of the support of all the Irish people. It is possible to take either view with integrity. It is acceptable to uphold the one or advocate the other by all legitimate peaceful and democratic means....

“The obstacle to the development of a new and more inclusive Irish identity if people want this for themselves is not to be found in Great Britain. Partition...is an acknowledgment of reality, not an assertion of national self-interest.

“In Northern Ireland it is not the aspiration to a sovereign united Ireland against which we set our face, but its violent expression....The British Government has no self-strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland: our role is to help, enable and encourage.”

—quoted in Brendan O’Brien, *The Long War: The IRA and Sinn Fein 1985 to Today*, 1993

This speech is obviously full of cant, coming from an Anglo-Irish aristocrat representing a ruling class responsible for countless acts of violence against the Irish people. But it was a startling statement nevertheless, designed to encourage the IRA into talks. The “even-handedness” in Brooke’s speech, its condemnation of “violence and coercion” from either community, was seen by sophisticated Republican strategists as a broad hint that, if the IRA embraced constitutional politics, Britain might in some future situation be prepared to abandon the Loyalists. It thus drove the Paisleyites into a frenzy.

Similar language is used in the Downing Street Declaration of December 1993; the Anglo-Irish “framework document” of February 1995 attempts to put this into practice. Its centerpiece is a call for the setting up of a new all-Ireland body, with components from the Dail and a new “power sharing” assembly in the North, with “meaningful functions at executive level” (i.e., the power to give orders) particularly over economic questions. Although such a body would not have control over the repressive apparatus of the NI state, there is a rider in the document that:

“It would also be open to the North-South body to recommend to the respective administrations and legislatures for their consideration that new functions should be designated to be discharged or overseen by that body; and to recommend that matters already designated should be moved on the scale between consultation, harmonisation and executive action.”

—Anglo-Irish framework document,
Times (London), 23 February

The British government undertakes to amend or replace the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, which incorporates NI into the “United Kingdom,” and the Irish government in turn undertakes to amend its constitution, in particular articles 2 and 3, which contain a territorial claim to the North.

Actually the main impact of these proposals would be to create, over a period of time, a “harmonized” all-Ireland capital market. The intent appears to be to use “market forces” to drive the two parts of Ireland closer together. Economic “harmonization” would undoubtedly create the demand from business for a common currency at some

point. It could also have disastrous effects on the North’s aging industries. Northern Ireland, unlike other regions of the “United Kingdom,” receives subsidies to its industries from Westminster that in the past were large enough to shelter the province from the hurricane of mass sackings, cuts, privatization and deregulation that has swept through Great Britain over the last decade and a half. The Tories did not do this for altruistic reasons; they did it to avoid pouring petrol onto smouldering tinder. To the Tories, the “harmonization” of an all-Ireland market is (they no doubt hope) a means of gradually divesting themselves of an embarrassing and expensive problem handed down to them by previous generations of their class.

But this is a dangerous game. It may lead to a new communal war if the Protestants think they are being short-changed by the British. History suggests that the Protestants will fight if they are confronted with incorporation into the South. Despite all the short-term illusions about the “peace process,” which are strong in both communities, attempts to share out the pie more “equally” within the framework of capitalism mean that the Protestant workers, who, despite their privileges, have one of the worst standards of living in Europe, will suffer. And so the “peace process,” far from leading to a new era of harmony between Protestant and Catholic, brings with it the threat of aggravated communal hatred and war.

While the bulk of the British ruling class is committed to the “peace process,” there is also a vociferous minority, with close links to the Loyalists, who seek to sabotage it by provoking Republicans into breaking their ceasefire. This is shown by the noisy campaign of the right-wing media to free one of only two British soldiers ever convicted of murdering a Catholic (a teenage girl). It would also appear to have been a factor in the riot instigated by British fascists at the Dublin England-Ireland football game in February.

The Left and the ‘Peace Process’

No faction of the IRA or Sinn Fein leadership stands for socialism. The most left-wing among them are social democrats who offer “reunification” as a panacea for all social ills. In this they are tailed by most of the British and Irish “far left,” who accuse the IRA of having “sold out” for entering into the “peace process.” The British and Irish sections of the League for a Revolutionary Communist International (LRCI), Workers Power and the Irish Workers Group, respectively, tend to focus their attack on the IRA and Sinn Fein for “retreating” from their position of forcible reunification of Ireland. Thus they write:

“The IRA has called off its 23 year long guerrilla struggle without forcing the British army to leave Ireland and without achieving national self-determination for the Irish people or the revolutionary destruction of Protestant privilege enshrined in the Orange state. Their endorsement of the idea that a peaceful road to unity exists through negotiations with the British state, the Southern bourgeoisie and the Unionists marks an historic betrayal of Irish revolutionary democracy by Sinn Fein and the IRA....

“The IRA have sanctioned the first steps on a road that leads to complete capitulation before the oppressor and will in time see them take responsibility for imposing bourgeois order on their supporters. The IRA have signalled in their declaration that the revolutionary, anti-imperialist threat from petit bourgeois nationalism is at an end.

“Ideologically and politically, the possibility of a betrayal of this nature has always been lodged in the confused, utopian, petit bourgeois programme of Sinn Fein and the IRA.”

—“After the IRA ceasefire,” LRCI statement, in *Workers Power*, October 1994

The IRA’s program is a lot worse than merely “confused” and “utopian.” It is flatly counterposed to the interests of the working class; it advocates the creation of an all-Ireland bourgeois state, irrespective of the wishes of the Protestant minority on the island. Perhaps Workers Power (WP) thinks the programs of the Hindu and Muslim communalists who carried out the bloody partition of India, killing many thousands of the “wrong” nationality in the process, were “confused” and “utopian.” After all, many of these were “anti-imperialists” too. Marxists defend bourgeois and petty-bourgeois nationalists against imperialism in situations of colonial oppression, but without giving them *one iota* of political support. WP’s strictures about the IRA’s “historic betrayal” of “revolutionary democracy” signify in reality that the only thing the IRA has “betrayed” is WP’s illusions in petty-bourgeois nationalism.

Workers Power tries to formulate a program of transitional demands to address the question of how to break Protestant workers from Loyalism. The LRCI statement calls for “jobs for all, decent housing and social services, education and recreation,” and “building organs of workers’ democracy in struggle, workers’ control of the economy and the fight for a workers’ government.” They formulate a series of demands against the twenty-six-county clerical state, as well as the Protestant bigots:

“Total separation of Church and State. The Church must be separated from the Constitution, the universities, schools, hospitals and social services. Not a penny of state finance to any Church. For free and legal contraception and abortion on demand. For free divorce on the consent of one partner.”

This is all completely supportable, indeed obligatory for Marxists. But WP’s position of forcible reunification (and denouncing Sinn Fein as “betrayers” for in reality seeking a more roundabout way of getting to the same goal) contradicts the whole purpose of transitional demands. Transitional demands in the context of a divided working class are a means of enabling the class to transcend its national divisions and make clear to *all* sections that they have *nothing to fear* by uniting with their class brothers and sisters of other nationalities or communities in the fight for proletarian state power. The demand for forcible reunification is the opposite. It is an *anti-democratic* demand that can only drive a stake into any prospect of working-class unity. It proposes, as a condition of working-class struggle, that one section of the working class abandon its communal identity and embrace the aspirations of the other community—which it has historically seen as the enemy. A “united Irish workers’ republic,” which WP calls for, would indeed be the optimal solution. But it cannot and should not be imposed upon the Protestant working class.

The stance of rejectionism and “hard” nationalism, attacking the Republicans for “betraying” their own program, is by no means confined to Workers Power. The self-styled “orthodox Trotskyists” of the International Communist League (Spartacist League of Britain and Dublin Spartacist Group, respectively), when they are not engaging in impotently brutal neo-Healyite polemics against their more conventional centrist/reformist opponents (“pimps for imperialism” seems to be a favorite epithet), actually tail after

this “ultra-rejectionist” sentiment. For instance, an article written at the time of the Major/Reynolds Downing Street summit contains the following blood-curdling warning:

“Sections of the bourgeoisies in London and Dublin, together with their Labour and social-democratic lackeys, have seized upon the widespread fear, revulsion and despair over sectarian violence as an opportunity to foist an imperialist-imposed ‘peace’ deal on Northern Ireland. Any imperialist ‘deal’ will be bloody and brutal and will *necessarily be at the expense of the oppressed Catholic minority*. And it would not do any good for working-class Protestants either.”

—*Workers Hammer*, November/December 1993, emphasis in original

Workers Hammer denounces the IRA ceasefire with headlines like “IRA/Sinn Fein opt for imperialist ‘peace’ fraud” (September/October 1994) and generally posture as the most intransigent opponents of the ceasefire. It would be almost impossible to tell from the SL’s press of today that it was from their organization (in its healthier days) that the International Bolshevik Tendency derived its approach to the question of interpenetrated peoples in general, and to the Irish question in particular. Of course Marxists oppose imperialism’s “peace” plans just as much as we oppose their wars; the aim of all such projects is to further the interests of imperialism. But to say that whatever “settlement” is eventually cook-ed up will “necessarily be at the expense of the oppressed Catholic minority” is not “necessarily” true. It could be at the expense of the Protestants. The bulk of the British bourgeoisie regards the Protestants as a liability, and would be quite happy to wash its hands of them, and even allow the terms of oppression to be reversed, provided this does not create a Bosnia on Britain’s doorstep. This is basically what the Loyalists are screaming about. In the days when James Robertson’s international Spartacist tendency (now the International Communist League [ICL]) could still think politically, such a “solution” was regarded as quite likely. Indeed it has already been attempted once. Reuben Samuels, speaking of the Unionist general strike of 1974, observed:

“The 1973 [sic: 1974 in fact] Ulster general strike, a 14-day general strike that totally shut down Northern Ireland, demonstrated that the social power and the social weight of the proletariat is there, even if in this particular case it was used for reactionary ends. It was also an entirely anti-British strike. The British had set up the Council of Ireland, which was a scheme for a peaceful, if forcible (through economic pressure) reunifying of Ireland and dumping Northern Ireland, which has become a liability for British imperialism”

—*Spartacist* No. 24, Autumn 1977

What has changed—the political situation in Ireland or the SL? We see no fundamental change in the former, and the Robertsonites have given no indication that they do, either. Could it be that these ever-so-steadfast opponents of Green nationalism, now in a period of organizational and political senility, are getting a little green around the edges?

Such opportunist deviations show the SL its future. Like the members of Gerry Healy’s Workers Revolutionary Party, once the bureaucratic shell bursts, for much of their deeply cynical cadre, there will not be much “Trotskyism” left. A straw in the wind is the fusion of a couple of leading ICL cadre in Canada with the fairly run-of-the-mill centrists of the (ex-Healyite) Workers International League/Leninist Trotskyist Tendency, who, of course, share the mainstream centrist affinity for tailing nationalism, in Ireland and else-

where. It is worth recalling that the rightist trajectory of the split led by Alan Thorne in the mid-1970s from the Healyites was an *anticipation* of what happened to the rest of the WRP when the organization finally blew up.

Marxism and the National Question in Ireland

The IRA's current dilemmas—as to what mix of “armalite and the ballot box” is appropriate, or whether or not to give up the gun altogether—are not our dilemmas. Because we do not share the IRA's aims to begin with, we do not dispense tactical advice on how best to accomplish them. We oppose their indefensible and criminal attacks on civilians, while we defend their attacks on the repressive forces of the state. But we are opposed to their whole bankrupt nationalist program, which in the end amounts to the creation of a unified bourgeois state under the tricolor flag.

The cessation of sectarian killings for the time being by both Loyalist paramilitaries and the IRA appears to have improved the possibilities for unity between Protestant and Catholic workers around class questions. But class struggle could easily be submerged beneath a new wave of nationalism.

Only a revolutionary program derived from Lenin's method of addressing the intricate national questions in the former Czarist empire can provide the means for resolving the conflicting communal/national aspirations of the two peoples of Ireland. Such a solution requires a concrete transitional program, with demands directed at both economic and national questions. For instance, the elementary demand for equal access to employment and housing for Catholics in the North, if carried out in the framework of accepting the capitalist status quo, could give Unionist bigots an opportunity to paint it as a demand that the Protestant workers take a cut in their slice of a shrinking pie. This would only fan the flames of communal antagonism. A revolutionary organization has to be committed to the fight for *more* for the working people of *both* communities—a massive program of public works to eliminate unemployment and rebuild the infrastructure, jobs for all through worksharing at full pay within the context of an end to discrimination.

Linked to this is the need to prevent a new epidemic of sectarian killings. The working class, Protestant and Catholic, must form its own integrated defense guards to protect the workers' movement against Loyalist gangs, and any extremist Republicans who would stoop to sectarian murder, to derail an integrated working-class struggle. Each unit would have to contain *both* Protestants and Catholics to make its non-sectarian character clear to all, and would have the responsibility of defending both communities against sectarian attack. Such formations would also have a key role in combating British imperialist attacks on the workers' movement. An integrated workers' militia would naturally take a leading role in any mass insurrection against British imperialism and Orange/Green capitalism. Such a development could only come about through the successful intervention and growth of a revolutionary

Marxist party, sinking roots deep into the proletariat of both communities.

Authentic Trotskyists, while fighting uncompromisingly against British colonial rule in the six counties, seek to defend the democratic rights of both communities. Our attitude is derived from the earlier period of the international Spartacist tendency, when it was a healthy revolutionary Marxist organization:

“Ireland, like other situations of interpenetrated peoples as in the Middle East and Cyprus, is a striking confirmation of the Trotskyist theory of permanent revolution. The inevitable conclusion is that while revolutionists must oppose all aspects of national oppression, they must also recognise that the conflicting claims of interpenetrated peoples can only be equitably resolved in the framework of a workers state. We struggle for an Irish workers republic as part of a socialist federation of the British Isles. While the establishment of a united workers state of the whole island may be preferable, the above demand is algebraic, leaving open the question of where the Protestants fall. This recognises that the nature of the Protestant community has not yet been determined in history. As such, it is counterposed to calls for a ‘united workers republic’ or for a ‘united socialist Ireland’ (where this demand is not simply an expression for left/nationalist or Stalinist two-stage theories). Placing the demand in the context of a socialist federation has the additional advantage of highlighting the essential relationship of the proletarian revolution in the whole area and the virtual impossibility of the resolution of the Irish question on a working-class basis outside this framework. This, and the strong representation of Irish workers in the working class in Britain, points to the demand for a British Isles-wide trade-union federation as a method of promoting joint struggle and cutting across the divisions in the working class in Ireland.”

— “Theses on Ireland,” *Spartacist*, No. 24, Autumn 1977

This perspective could be realized in various ways. The early Soviet state under Lenin and Trotsky used a variety of methods of giving expression to the right of small nations and semi-national groupings, from fully fledged republics to autonomous regions to tiny *oblasts* (these were later emptied of their democratic content with the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet state). There could be a loose confederation between the different communities, with redrawn borders. Or even a unitary workers' state, if it comes about by consent. But such things can only be solved democratically by negotiations between workers' representatives of the two communities.

A permanent solution to the tangled national conflicts that centuries of British imperialist rule have bequeathed to Ireland can only be achieved through the revolutionary overthrow of both British imperialism and the Orange and Green bourgeoisies, and the creation of a federation of revolutionary workers' states in the British Isles, in the broader context of an all-European struggle for socialism.

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