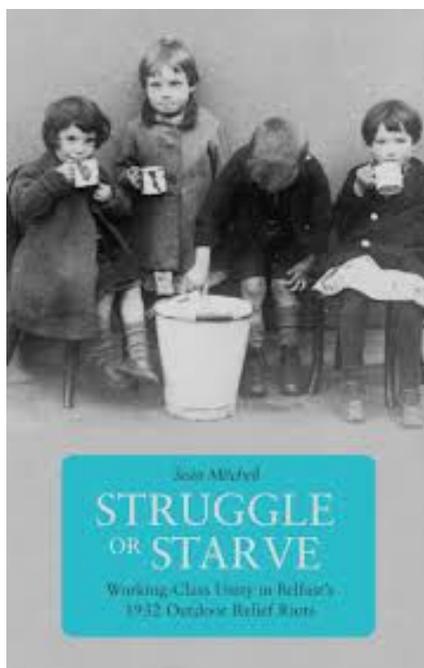


Review: Seán Mitchell, *Struggle or Starve: Working Class Unity in Belfast's Outdoor Relief Riots*

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Seán Mitchell, *Struggle or Starve: Working Class Unity in Belfast's Outdoor Relief Riots*, Haymarket Books 2017 \$ 16.95

Struggle or Starve by Séan Mitchell is an important book that deserves the widest readership among those interested in promoting progressive politics in the North of Ireland. The author provides the reader with a detailed, and even inspirational, account of a rare period in Belfast's history when the working class was united around a campaign to address matters of immediate need. More than that, through, his analysis raises questions about events of that period which still have relevance today. How possible is it to overcome sectarianism through shared struggle and can this be done within the context of a political unit as fundamentally flawed as Northern Ireland?

While the central theme of Mitchell's book focuses on the Out Door Relief campaign of 1932, it puts this struggle in the context of a six county statelet that was little more than a decade old. The au-

thor makes no bones about the reactionary, authoritarian and sectarian nature of the Northern Ireland government of the time, supported ultimately by the imperial parliament in London. To his credit, he avoids the clichéd and misleading trap of ascribing the nature of the state and its failings to flawed personality or character defects among the indigenous population. The book examines the nature and composition of northern Irish society and its ruling elite at this time. Without excusing murderous anti-Catholic violence of the 1920s, the author points to the dire underlying economic conditions that not only drove many to commit such barbarity but allowed an unscrupulous ruling class to exploit the unhappy situation.

No matter how familiar we are with the history of the northern state, it is still sobering to read of just how deeply sectarian it was and how widespread was this poison throughout the six-counties. Virulent bigotry typified much of unionism. From its Prime Minister James Craig, who infamously said that Catholics ;...breed like bloody rabbits...' to the working class Ulster Protestant Association, which according to an RUC inspector had the sole aim of exterminating Catholics by any means, the problem was widespread.

These atavistic prejudices seem to defy logic until contextualised by a commentator such as the historian John Gray who is quoted by Mitchell as saying that for Belfast's capitalist ruling class, self interest and Unionist politics were inextricably linked. To protect and maintain their holdings and position of privilege, employers encouraged sectarian divisions in order to divide working class communities and thus weaken trade union activity. Keep in mind too that in the early years of the northern state, the ruling capitalist class (a group vir-

tually indistinguishable then from the government of Northern Ireland) feared that the example of Bolshevik Russia would inspire Belfast's workers to take similar action.

Sectarian divisions within the working class inevitably resulted in a weakened and emasculate organised labour movement with the unavoidable consequence of diminished bargaining power. Unsurprisingly the outcome of this situation was that the working class in Belfast experienced worse living conditions than almost anywhere else in the United Kingdom. Consequently the northern state felt little need to provide adequate welfare protection for the unemployed and the poor.

In fact, so complacent was the northern ruling class by the end of the 1920s, that it had allowed harsh 19th century poor law provisions to remain in place after they had been abandoned in both Britain and southern Ireland. Those tasked with administering relief to the needy - the Belfast Board of Guardians - saw their primary responsibility as being to discourage, as far as was possible, the distribution of assistance. Elected by the city's rate payers, board members endeavoured to curtail expenditure by forcing the destitute to seek employment regardless of whether work was availability or adequately remunerated. Their heartless attitude towards the poor found full expression when it came to administration of Out Door Relief (ODR), a facility designed to cope with widespread poverty outside the walls of workhouses.

While the plight of the North's poor had long been dire, they had tended to suffer misery in silence in the face of an indifferent ruling elite. The Wall Street crash of 1929 was to change that, for a time at least. So great was the impact of the depression that by 1932, unemployment and poverty was widespread across every section of Belfast's working class. There was an acute need for assistance to relieve hunger and hypothermia in the city but little was provided by the state or its proxies on the

Board of Guardians.

The ruling class believed it had little to fear, having ruthlessly imposed its authority a decade earlier and protected as they were by an authoritarian legal system, an armed police force and a divided working class. Nevertheless and in spite of this, a small group of communists, organised around the Revolutionary Communist Group, set about mobilising working people in order to demand an improvement in their conditions. *Struggle or Starve* describes how under the inspired leadership of Tommy Geehan, this tiny band of revolutionaries organised the impoverished population, bringing together Catholic and Protestant workers in a heroic battle to combat poverty, misery and destitution. The author provides us with a detailed and fascinating account of the events that culminated in a strike against the punitive conditions imposed on those forced to do backbreaking work on the ODR scheme.

Attempts by heavily armed police to crush the strike led to two days of riots in both Protestant and Catholic areas. To the astonishment, not to mention alarm, of the Unionist government, the working class displayed an unexpected degree of unity. Faced with the prospect of losing control of the state, the authorities conceded to most of the strikers' demands. It was a major victory for the working people of Belfast City.

Having gained such a significant advance over a relatively short period of time, it might have been expected that the Revolutionary Communist Group and its charismatic leader Tommy Geehan would have been able to build upon their success. Nevertheless, they were unable to do so and before three years had passed, Belfast was again experiencing inter-communal rioting, houses were being burned in working class districts and blood was being shed on the streets. Tragically, this type of violent division has all too often been the norm in the decades since.

Séan Mitchell searches for answers to this heartbreaking reality. He points to the fact

that the communist cadre was tiny and exercised little influence within the trade union movement or civic society in general. Organisations such as the Orange Order or the AOH held infinitely greater sway within Belfast's working class. With the immediate issue of ODR payments apparently addressed, the RCG struggled to maintain an ongoing impact. Its organisational difficulties were compounded by the political climate of the time with both the Catholic Church and Orange institutions bitterly hostile to even moderately left-wing parties never mind an avowedly Communist group. The author also critically examines the IRA of the time and highlights the emergence of the Republican Congress, composed largely of former members of the IRA and communists.

While the book cannot be challenged as it deals with the history of the period, the author's analysis of the failure of the RCG is, by necessity, an opinion although one that is not necessarily wrong. Whether the outcome for Geehan and his comrades might have been different had other policies been followed (or could have been followed) remains a subject for discussion and debate. Would the group have fared better had it not followed the Comintern lead? Was its absolutist rejection of right-wing social democracy a mistake or its later adoption of broad front tactics detrimental? Was the building of a Workers' Republic in Ireland remotely realistic without significant input from those who defined themselves first and foremost as republican? Was it possible under any circumstances to definitively overcome sectarianism within a political entity built upon and designed to perpetuate it?

Those were complex questions then and are subjects that are still relevant today. Over eight decades have passed since those heady days when for a brief time so much seemed possible and yet still we seem as far

as ever from overcoming sectarianism.

Nevertheless, there have been important material changes in the North of Ireland in the intervening period and this cannot be overlooked when reflecting on the events recounted by Séan Mitchell. As a result of industrial decline, the North's once powerful unionist bourgeoisie is no more and consequently the basis on which many discriminatory employment practices existed has been eroded. Moreover, one beneficial outcome of the conflict of the last decades of the 20th-century has been to make it virtually impossible to sustain the previous system of sectarian privilege within the public sector. Finally, Britain's retreat from empire, coupled with contemporary technology has made Northern Ireland of little strategic value to London. However, unemployment, underemployment and poorly paid employment are problems experienced equally by the North's working class while the local middle-class is becoming ever more evenly balanced between the so-called 'two traditions'. In other words, while old attitudes may seem depressingly resilient, the underlying infrastructure has changed.

In light of this, it is important that we read Séan Mitchell's book. It offers encouragement by providing clear evidence that working class division can be overcome through organised struggle around shared concerns. At the same time, it dispels cosy illusions as it illustrates the extent and nature of the sectarianism that preceded, and in turn re-emerged in the aftermath of the ODR campaign. *Struggle or Starve* encourages us to draw lessons from the past so that we may be better informed and equipped to address the needs of the future. Best of all though, this book provides a rich but readable text to stimulate the necessary discussion, debate and deliberations that socialists and republicans must have.