

Mass subversion: How the South responded

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On the night of October 5th 1969 television screens flashed an image that sparked a revolt. An RTE cameraman, Gay O'Brien, filmed a crazed RUC man batoning the heads of Civil Rights marchers as they attempted to defy a Unionist ban on marching. The police had lined up on both sides of Duke Street and launched a charge on the few hundred people who had arrived to march. As the images flashed across living rooms, a wave of anger led to the first mass 32 county movement against partition since the foundation of the Southern state.

Here we come to an immediate paradox. From 1932 to 1968, the dominant party in the South was Fianna Fail, which had only been out of government office on two brief occasions. It not only had a huge voter base – it had deep roots in Irish society. With about 70,000 members, its activists often dominated local GAA clubs, the branches of the Irish National Teachers Organisation and local tidy town committees. After an initial display of radicalism in the late 1920s, it forged a close alliance with the bishops to run the 26 county state.

Fianna Fail was born amongst republicans who had been defeated in the Irish civil war of 1922-23. Its first national aim was the unification of Ireland and its second was the restoration of the Irish language. Yet on both counts, the party was a singular failure. Far from pursuing a genuine anti-partitionist strategy, Fianna Fail became the most vigorous opponent of republicans. It established Military Courts to try them; it allowed two republicans who went on hunger strike for political status to starve to death; in 1940 it sent in troops with live ammunition to shoot prisoners, interned in the Curragh.¹ Even as late as 1961, Charles Haughey who was Minister for Justice established military tribunals to hand down long sentence to republicans – while his

top civil servant, Peter Berry, co-ordinated 'security' measures with Stormont.²

This paradox can only be unravelled by understanding that Fianna Fail's primary concern was the strengthening of Southern state – not the achievement of a 32 county Ireland. It was in reality, a defender of partition. Its anti-partitionist rhetoric was only a token to re-hash memories of British colonialism, all the better to unite the Southern population around loyalty to the 26 county state. It sought to forge a 26 county nationalism and to strengthen the Southern state against all sorts of subversion.

By and large, it succeeded. Contrary to later mythology, the people of the 26 counties were not an inherently conservative lot. But mass mobilisations against the state had been limited and no major left party had emerged. There had been big mobilisations of workers in 1941 against a Wages Standstill Order. But, by and large, the main threat to the state came from republican militants who claimed the true heritage of the 1916 rebellion.

What Fianna Fail faced in 1969 was of an entirely different order. In the past, they could use the Special Branch to infiltrate and disorientate the small conspiratorial groups. But they now faced a mass subversive movement. The threat to Southern stability came from two sources a militant workers movement and anti-imperialist solidarity with Northern nationalists.

Workers action

Prior to 1969, there had been a growing working class movement in the South. The opening to foreign capital after 1958, had led to a degree of industrialisation and lifted the shadow of forced emigration, for a period. This in turn fed into workers confidence and an expansion

in union membership. Between 1965 and 1973, 90,000 workers joined the unions, with many of them coming from white collar occupations.³ A strike by a militant breakaway union, the Irish Telephonists Association in October 1965 gave an indication of what faced Fianna Fail. After the workers picketed the Dail, the government responded by invoking the Offences Against the State Act against them. This law was normally designed for emergency measures against republicans but the Fianna Fail Taoiseach Sean Lemass saw no reason why it could not be extended to trade unionists, declaring that ‘if they want to involve themselves in anti-state activities, they cannot expect to be treated differently to anyone else’⁴. Dublin busworkers and workers at Goulding Fertilisers walked off their jobs in response and marched to Liberty Hall, headquarters of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (now SIPTU) to shout abuse at the union leaders who refused to support the telephonists.

The following year the first efforts to unionise multinational plants began. In 1968, 380 of the 600 workforce in the EI factory in Shannon came out on strike. EI was a subsidiary of General Electric, a notorious US company renowned for squashing union rights. From the outset the largely female workforce displayed a tremendous militancy. There were strong pickets at the workplace to stop scabs and placards were held up with slogans such as ‘Yankee, Yankee, you can’t dictate’. Flying pickets were placed on petrol stations that supplied the cars of strike breakers. A CIE bus that took scabs to work was withdrawn and Aer Lingus workers in the nearby airport refused to handle cargo destined for the factory. The ICTU eventually called a general strike in support of the EI workers and this threat led to a major about-turn in state policy. Henceforth, multinationals coming to Ireland were advised by the Industrial Development Authority to engage in collective bargaining with trade unions. It was suggested, however, that they do a sweetheart deal with the ITGWU, known for its studied ‘moderation’.

Inside the ESB militant rank and file groups emerged to challenge union leaders. In response to a brief strike by fitters in 1966, Fianna Fail introduced an Electricity Special Provisions Act which imposed fines of £5,000 on strikes, with an additional £100 for every extra day the strike continued. A Fianna Fail backbencher and former IRA gunman, Martin Corry TD, summed up the party’s

attitude when he claimed opposition to the Bill only came from ‘an alliance made here in the Pale between the Freemason element and the Communist element’.⁵ However, the party was quickly taught a lesson in workers power when in March 1968 an unofficial grassroots grouping, the Dayworkers Association, called another strike. The government invoked the provisions of its new electricity bill and fifty workers were jailed for refusing to pay the fines. Unofficial pickets were placed on power stations and the country faced the prospect of a complete shutdown. The state capitulated under this threat and persuaded the ESB management to pay the workers’ fines – and also the fares for taxis to take them all home from prison. It was a total defeat for the Southern state.

Prior to 1969, there was therefore an infectious spread of militancy throughout Irish society. Thousands of people staged ‘fish-ins’ to call for the nationalisation of rivers controlled by private landlords. A Dublin Housing Action Committee, which had been formed by left wingers, staged sit-downs on O’Connell St and occupied houses. A civil rights movement emerged in Gaeltacht areas to demand real economic resources to support areas where the Irish language was spoken. A small student protest movement was also developing, limited though by the low numbers attending universities compared to other countries. When scenes of the Derry Civil Rights march flashed across the television screens there was already considerable militancy and activism in the South.

Outrage

In the two and a half years between October 1969 and Bloody Sunday 1972, the engagement and mobilisation of the Southern population in solidarity with Northern nationalists grew massively. The first jolt against Southern partitionism came with the scenes of police brutality in Derry. But a rapid series of events punctured the long standing isolation from the North. These included the loyalist and RUC attack on the Burntollet march organised by Peoples Democracy; the subsequent riots in Derry, where police murdered Samuel Devaney in the Bogside; the Orange attacks on the Unity Flats in Belfast; the introduction of internment in 1971 and Bloody Sunday in January 1972. As these events unfolded, solidarity and anger in the South grew to fever pitch proportions. Anti-imperialism and Irish

nationalism was the order of the day. The subsequent sneering and attacks on republican resistance that came to characterise RTE and the Southern media was not yet evident.

Here is how Tim pat Coogan, the former editor of the Irish Press captured that mood. There was, he recounts,

The rising passion which was manifesting itself in every town in the Republic as the (Northern) rioting progressed. From my office in Burgh Quay (Dublin) I could hear the loudspeakers which nightly blared forth pleas on behalf of the beleaguered nationalists from outside the GPO in O'Connell Street, the headquarters of the insurgents during the 1916 Rising. People got carried away at these meetings.⁶

The level of solidarity was evident at many levels – not only in the regular protests but also in the numbers of people wearing James Connolly badges; in the huge sales of republican papers in pubs, in the popularity of songs attacking internment.

The sheer scale of the sentiment became evident in the mobilisation after the Bloody Sunday massacre in 1972. The British embassy was destroyed as the Gardai stood aside for petrol bombers – a kind of safety valve to release the huge wave of anger that swept the South. On the Monday after the massacre, workers in the Cork docks walked out and were joined by those in Pzifers, Ford, building sites and bus depots throughout the city. The same pattern was repeated in many other parts of Ireland. In Galway, students joined with workers and occupied British owned buildings. In Dublin, airport workers refused to touch British newspapers; in New Ross, ferry workers insisted that the Union Jack be removed from a ship. By Wednesday the scene was set for a massive general strike that threatened to escalate into a wider boycott of British goods. The Irish state had no choice but to call a national day of mourning –lest matters get out of hand. Later the British Ambassador, John Peck, would write in his autobiography that Bloody Sunday ‘unleashed a wave of fury and exasperation the like of which I had never encountered in my life, in Egypt, or Cyprus, or anywhere else’⁷

The co-incidence of this mass solidarity movement with the existence of a militant workers movement was extremely dangerous for the Southern establishment – and they knew it. Here is part of the taped conversation between Taoiseach Jack Lynch and Edward Heath, the British Prime Minister, revealed at a subsequent Bloody

Sunday Tribunal. It accurately captures the mood of leaders of the Southern state. Lynch first apologised for ringing so late and showed little signs of anger at the massacre. His main concern about how the events might threaten the security of his own state:

‘...from reactions received from around the country at the moment it looks as if a very serious point has now been reached, and the situation could escalate... my role is becoming more and more difficult, and I am very, very fearful of what is likely to happen. I just want to tell you how gravely apprehensive I am.’⁸

The fear that stalked the corridors of power in Dublin, however, was only temporary because within a year, the political elite had stabilised the situation. The manner in which they did so, reveals much about ruling class techniques – as well as the political weakness of their opponents. Let's look at each element in turn.

How the ruling class rule

The Southern establishment deployed three main techniques to crush a sentiment that might have threatened the stability of their state. They stepped up their own republican rhetoric; they turned a blind eye while British intelligence manufactured incidents to spread fear; they pressed for a joint bourgeois solution to the Northern crisis. Let's look at each in turn.

Rhetoric

In April 1969, an internal memo to the Southern cabinet from a top civil servant summed up the Irish state's approach. Speaking of the Six County authorities, it noted that the attitude of the Dublin government ‘...continues to be one of friendly co-operation in matters of mutual interest without any sacrifice of principle. On the question of civil rights and current political developments in the Six Counties, it is considered that our policy should continue to be one of restraint.’⁹

But on 13th August, 1969, when the Fianna Fail cabinet met to discuss an upsurge of riots in Derry there was to be an entirely different approach agreed for public consumption. Later that evening Jack Lynch appeared on television to issue a special address. Here is what he said:

‘The Stormont Government evidently is no longer in control of the situation, which is the inevitable outcome of policies pursued for decades by them. The

Government of Ireland can no longer stand by ... The employment of British troops is unacceptable and is not likely to restore peaceful conditions.¹¹

The speech was followed with an order to move Irish army units closer to the border and to open field hospitals for those injured in attacks by the RUC and Orange mobs. The only reason for the public shift in rhetoric was, as Tim Pat Coogan wrote 'had Lynch not made gestures he did, there could have been serious trouble in the Republic.'¹² In other words, the Southern establishment had to rush to stay ahead of their own population to head off threats to their rule.

Contrary to conspiracy theorists, however, the ruling class and their political representatives are not one homogenous block. Like the rest of us, they suffer division, argument and in their case, sheer opportunism, and personal ambition. The shift in rhetoric had been forced on Lynch by more hard-line elements within the FF cabinet, principally Neil Blaney and Charlie Haughey. But once issued, it then took on its own dynamic. As the threat of pogroms against Northern nationalists grew, civilian defence committees travelled to Dublin, seeking arms to defend themselves. Those seeking weapons were later to become moderate politicians. They sought arms because of a genuine fear of what was happening. Haughey eventually agreed to the importation of a small amount of weaponry but before these arrived, British intelligence, monitoring the clumsy moves to import them, informed Peter Berry, the Department of Justice's top civil servant. The eventual result was the dismissal of Haughey from the cabinet and the subsequent Arms Trial.

The trial produced a number of myths that occasionally re-appear. One was that Haughey was a closet hard line republican, operating inside the top echelons of Fianna Fail. The reality, however, is that no section of Fianna Fail had the slightest intention of sending the Irish army across the border or supporting a guerrilla war to bring down the Northern state. At the very most, the strategic objective of the Haughey-Blaney wing of Fianna Fail was to create an international incident which would enable the United Nations to intervene and thus, internationalise, the conflict. This was, of course, a pipe dream as Britain was a member of the Security Council and would veto such a resolution, were it proposed. The only concern of the hard-line wing of FF was that the party's traditional green rhetoric would be

expropriated by more militant elements. They thought that some further gestures were needed to supplement Lynch's entirely tactical rhetoric. Another myth was that Haughey had imported guns in order to split away the Provos from the 'Marxist' Official IRA. In reality the IRA split because of its own internal contradictions – rather than because of any machinations by Haughey. The limits of Haughey's green nationalism were later revealed when as Taoiseach he put the maintenance of his relationship with Maggie Thatcher ahead of any concern about H Block prisoners who were dying on hunger strikes.

A strategy of tension

Even while Fianna Fail engaged in more open green rhetoric, it was strengthening the repressive apparatus of the state. In order to do this, it needed to focus the minds of the population on to an internal security threat. This involved the use of fear tactics and censorship.

In December 1970, the Fianna Fail Justice Minister threatened to introduce internment claiming that 'there was a secret armed conspiracy to kidnap Ministers and important people.'¹³ This, it should be noted, was before the Stormont regime had introduced internment without trial.

A key move was the introduction of Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act in 1971. This banned all interviews with Sinn Féin spokespersons – even when they stood for election. When one RTE journalist, Kevin O'Kelly subsequently refused to hand over tapes of an interview with an IRA leader, Sean MacStiofain, he was sentenced to three months in prison and the RTE Authority was disbanded.

Even after the Fianna Fail government called a day of national mourning for those murdered on Bloody Sunday, they quickly shifted the register to re-focus the minds of the population on the internal security of the 26 county state. Here, for example, is Lynch speaking within days of the burning of the British Embassy. He claimed that it was caused by

'small minority, men, who, under the cloak of patriotism sought to overthrow the institutions of the state, infiltrated what was a peaceful demonstration ... and fomented violence. In the days immediately ahead, there is no doubt that [they] will seek to play on the sympathies and emotions of ordinary decent people to secure support for their own actions and objectives...

Those who seek to usurp the functions of government will meet with no toleration'¹⁴

Later on December 1972 an even more ominous element was added to the strategy. Fianna Fail introduced the Offences against the State (Amendment) Act to allow for the jailing of republican activists merely on the word of a Garda superintendent. They were faced with huge opposition as a march of 5,000 people descended on the Dail. Even Fine Gael threatened to vote against it on the grounds of defence of civil liberties. As the crowd were marching, bombs went off in Sackville Place and outside Liberty Hall, killing a bus driver and conductor. The bombings led Fine Gael to drop their opposition and the draconian legislation was passed. Subsequently, it has emerged that British intelligence and loyalist paramilitaries were involved but there is also deep suspicions that the Southern state, at the very least, did little to point the finger. Later in December another loyalist bomb killed two people in Belturbet but the Garda investigation was, at best, inept and even to this day the files on their investigation remain hidden.

Later, the strategy of tension culminated in the Dublin and Monaghan bombings on 1974 when thirtythree people were murdered by loyalist bombings – probably instigated by British intelligence. Once again the Southern state deliberately bungled the investigation, closing it down after a mere four months. In the words of the Barron commission, it was 'extraordinary that the investigation into an atrocity of this scale could or should be wound down so soon'¹⁵

Through these violent and repressive measures, a shift in public discourse was inaugurated from the very top of Irish society – away from the injustice and sectarianism of the Northern state onto 'security concerns' for the Southern state.

Irish dimension

At the start of the Northern crisis, the British state held to its traditional line that it was an 'internal' United Kingdom issue. Officially, Dublin had no role to play in the internal affairs of the province. When Lynch made a vague reference to partition as the root cause of the problem, the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson assured the Unionist leader, Terence O'Neill, that he had reminded Lynch that the internal affairs of Northern Ireland fell within the jurisdiction of Britain alone.¹⁵ In line with this, British-Irish meetings to discuss the

affairs of Northern Ireland were comparatively rare when compared with today.

However faced with a growing crisis that culminated in Bloody Sunday and the subsequent abolition of Stormont in March 1972, the British and Irish governments came to align their strategies more closely. Henceforth, the Irish government was to be seen as a custodian of the rights of Northern nationalists – even though they showed little concern for their fate in the past. Their key intermediary within the North became the 'moderate' SDLP, a party that had been just been formed in 1970. Although some of the founding members had been involved in seeking guns from Dublin during the attempted pogroms a year earlier, they branded themselves as non-violent and opposed to republican militancy. The fact that they also forged a closer relationship with the Catholic Church helped in their relationship with the Dublin government.

The British government, for their part, were forced to abolish Stormont after internment and Bloody Sunday had failed to break the movement. They set about a new strategy of both co-opting the SDLP into running the North alongside the Unionist party, and as a corollary recognising 'an Irish dimension' which gave the Dublin government a role in Northern affairs.

The result of these changes was the Sunningdale agreement of 1973. This had an important effect on the South. Henceforth, Dublin could point to achievements in remedying the fate of Northern nationalists and develop a discourse about the need for 'balance' between the needs of both communities. It also helped them shift its rhetoric away from partition being the root cause of the problem to a gradualist approach of 'letting both communities live in harmony'. Through a combination of techniques, the Southern ruling class had essentially stabilised the situation by 1973 and settled itself down for a long anti-subversive campaign against the remaining IRA supporters on its side of the border.

The opposition

No matter how clever a ruling class is, it often survives crises by exploiting the weakness of its opponents. It rarely gets a free hand to simply shape events but must manoeuvre and inflict defeats on its opponents. The oppositional forces that faced the Southern state came from two main sources in the early 1970s – the Labour Party and its allies in the union bureaucracy and both

wings of a republican movement that had recently split into Official Sinn Féin/IRA and Provisional Sinn Féin/IRA. Let look at each of their strategies in turn.

Labour

Contemporary readers may be surprised that Labour is included in the category of genuine opposition. But in the late 1960s, it became the focal point for radicalisation. For many workers who were becoming politically aware through their own experience of struggle, Labour was their first port of call. The late 1960s was therefore the party's brief 'golden age', according to one historian because it was able to transform itself from a collection of rural personalities into a political machine with a distinct left ideology.¹⁷ Its membership grew from 9,100 in 1966 to 15,300 in 1970s. Its vote in Dublin grew dramatically and it came a very close second to the then dominant Fianna Fáil. Simultaneously, the two major unions, the Workers Union of Ireland and the ITGWU re-affiliated to it after a long gap from the late 1940s.

Within the party there was also a decisive shift to the left. A consultative conference in 1968 committed the party to a 'radical socialist philosophy' and the following year its policy document proclaimed that 'Labour's objective is fundamental change in society, not a mere reforming programme'.¹⁸ The party denounced the, then fashionable, notion of workers participation in management as merely 'a device ... for the purpose of exploiting for private profit'.¹⁹ If this was the language of official documents, then at rank and file level the language was even more uncompromising. Labour party delegates rejected the very possibility of coalition with right wing parties, they supported strikes and were more than willing to co-operate with left wing republicans. Famously, the party leader, Brendan Corish reflected this mood by claiming that 'the seventies will be socialist'.

Yet despite the shifts to the left, Labour was structured at its core as a reformist party. Its primary aim was winning control of parts of the state machinery to implement reform from above. It came to life when elections were called and was not organised primarily to further struggle from below. Within the party, there was a notional level of democracy that allowed for real debate at party conferences – but allocated effective control to a parliamentary party that was guided by considerations of electoral popularity. If anything, the

affiliation of the major unions added another belt of conservatism. The union bureaucracy had traditionally supported Fianna Fáil efforts to develop Irish capitalism – by whatever technique was considered appropriate at different times – and this did not change when they linked up with Labour. The contrast between the aspirations of newly radicalising workers and the traditions of social democracy soon became apparent as the crisis deepened.

The first break on radicalism came when the union leaders responded to another outbreak of militancy in 1969 when craft workers placed pickets on workplaces all over the country and won a 20% pay rise. The strike was driven from below and workers often treated union leaders with contempt. The ICTU President, Jimmy Duffy, expressed the fear of many union leaders that they were about to embark on another wave of strikes, when he denounced the 'do it yourself brand of trade unionism which treats with contempt all the institutions, practices and procedures that our trade union movement has created in this country over the last sixty years'.²⁰ The maintenance workers' victory was set to spark off another round of wage claims and the union leaders feared this would lead to further militancy eroding their control over the movement.

Fianna Fáil was well aware of these fears and they responded with a threat of legal measures to curb wage rises. At the same time they agreed to talks with the union leaders and suggested that if they could voluntarily limit or prevent another wage round, there would be no need for legislation. The result was the first National Wage Agreement in 1970 which laid the basis for subsequent social partnership arrangements. It set up an Employer-Labour Conference to monitor and intervene to stop workers seeking higher wage rises. Simultaneously, the union leaders strengthened their own control of the movement. They pushed through a new system whereby workers were only asked to respect union pickets when they contained an 'all-out' placard that had been sanctioned by the ICTU. Where such placards were not appear, workers were told to pass pickets. As the ICTU usually took weeks to deliberate, this system effectively set up a procedure to legitimate strike breaking. There was considerable opposition from within the union ranks to these moves. A Dublin Shop Stewards Committee, for example, composed of hundreds of grassroots representatives managed

to defeat a subsequent proposed National Wage Agreement. In the long term, however, the ICTU moves were decisive in helping to forge the type of demoralised union movement that we witness today. The later defeats that workers suffered contributed in turn to the growing grip of the Labour Party over SIPTU.

If social democracy was an inadequate vehicle for expressing workers militancy, it was even worse when it came to solidarity with those confronting the British army in the North. At first, Labour appeared to take a strong stance in support of the struggle for civil rights. In 1969, for example, a high profile delegation visited Derry and met representatives of the Derry Citizen's Defence Committee whom they praised as 'the de facto government of the Bogside'. They saluted the 'courage, determination and tactical skill of the Bogside (who) without outside aid, had undermined Stormont's constitutional position'.²¹ However, matters changed dramatically when the British army arrived. Labour's rhetoric shifted to one of calling for 'normalising' the situation. At one level their attitude was conditioned by the fact that the army had been sent in by a fellow Labour Party in Britain. But at a deeper level, social democracy is singularly ill-equipped for dealing with any challenge to state structures. Its whole *modus operandi* is to support states and see them as an inherently progressive vehicle. When semi-insurrectionary movements emerge, social democracy generally flees the scene. This was certainly the experience in Ireland in the early 1970s.

Labour in fact went out on a limb to support the British Army. When Fianna Fail called for their replacement by a United Nations force, the Labour leader, Brennan Corish insisted that the British Army 'instead of being an occupation force, could be turned into a peacekeeping force'.²² Barry Desmond TD argued firmly against raising the issue of partition, claiming that 'one must be content to see the unity question evolve over a number of decades'.²³ The main problem was now defined as 'extremism' which was deemed as the cause of communal conflict. Despite its long record of sectarianism, Labour opposed the abolition of Stormont. The culmination of these developments came with the ascendancy of Conor Cruise O'Brien within the party. O'Brien had once written an impressive book where he critiqued the writer Albert Camus for his failure to acknowledge the role of colonialism in Algeria. But

despite his early flirtation with leftism, O'Brien was an inherent snob who recoiled in horror when the working class youth of Derry and Belfast took centre stage in a battle against their state. In 1970, he outlined his three principles which were to guide Labour policy from then onwards. These were, first, 'to leave law and order to the British and admit that is what we are doing; second, to 'remain in touch openly and not clandestinely with the British'; and third, to support 'working with the British, really working with them in conditions of trust, not at the same time blackguarding them or nagging them'.²⁴

A crisis such as occurred in Ireland between 1968 and 1973 tests every party and exposes in a brutal fashion gaps between rhetoric and action. Labour entered the period as the voice of radicalism, and left as coalition partners with Fine Gael in a government that set out to crush every last vestige of solidarity with Northern nationalists. In many ways, the trajectory of Labour for decades after was set in this period. Social democracy had proved an abject failure as a vehicle for radical change. That in turn gave Fianna Fail, and later Fine Gael, adequate scope to manage their way out of the crisis.

The Republicans

The other vehicle for Southern radicalism were the republican organisations. In a society which only fifty years before had fought to expel an empire it is hardly surprising that republican beliefs permeated its political culture. The traditional critique of the 26 county establishment often started with a contrast between their behaviour and those who died in 1916. The words of the proclamation that 'the children of the nation should all be cherished equally' were frequently thrown back in the faces of the elite as they presided over inequality, forced emigration and bitter poverty. From this sentiment, there emerged a host of republican organisations that attracted small but significant numbers of supporters.

Between 1969 and 1970, the IRA and Sinn Féin were undergoing a split. Ultimately, the cause was the embrace by the old leadership of a 'stages' approach which insisted that reform of Stormont was the first item on the agenda. When the movement itself, however, outran the demands for reform and challenged the very existence of the state, the 'left' leadership were disorientated. The Provos emerged initially as a 'right' opposition

that emphasised old style nationalism that challenged partition and demanded an end to 'communist' influence within the movement. The Provisional IRA leadership identified left wing politics with running down the armed struggle and, therefore, blamed the Dublin leadership for the absence of weapons to defend Catholic communities. They claimed that 'Red agents' had infiltrated the IRA and 'brainwashed young men and girls into departing from the traditional republican emphasis on armed struggle.'²⁵ The way to prevent this in the future, was to put the IRA army council in charge and make the political wing subservient.

By August 1971, the Provisional IRA had grown to 1,200 members but its principal base was in Catholic working class communities in Belfast and Derry. It was weaker in the South, but the bigger problem stemmed from its political strategy. Essentially, the Provos thought in purely military terms. Even when thousands throughout Ireland joined protests after internment, the Provo strategy was based on winning recruits for its bombing campaign. The focus was economic targets in the North, such as pubs, offices and shops and the aim was to make the North ungovernable. The strategy 'was to create a fortress-like atmosphere where the north could be governed only by military means. This, in turn, would bring the collapse of Northern Ireland as a viable entity, forcing the British government into making radical political changes'.²⁶

This led to two major problems regarding the South. First, the main task of republican activists in the South was to act as a support network for the armed struggle. They were not to engage in any military confrontation with the Southern authorities and involvement in social struggle was frowned on as a 'Stickie' activity. Second, the bombing strategy played into the hands of the Southern establishment. When nationalist sentiments in the North was rising, the loss of civilian lives from the bombing campaign did not significantly detract from IRA support. Even when there was considerable disgust, there was always a reminder that the British army were kicking down doors or harassing youth. Ultimately, this led to a degree of passive support for the armed struggle. A few months after the fall of Stormont, for example, the IRA set off twenty car bombs in Belfast, killing twenty civilians in what became known as Bloody Friday. This led to a reduction in their support in the North but even then, the actions of the British army meant that

they held a considerable passive base. In the South, it was totally different. People had no direct experience of the British Army and so the bombing campaign just alienated support and played into the establishment strategy of fear. The implicit message of FF and FG to Southern workers was that they should keep away from republicans lest that carnage be brought down here.

On the surface, the Officials held out a greater potential to link the militancy of Southern workers to an anti-imperialist sentiment. In reality, this was never a possibility. The feud with the Provos meant that the Officials sought to stay ahead of them in military exploits. One result was a bombing in Aldershot military base which killed seven cleaners and discredited them in the eyes of many. As they became more isolated from the Northern struggle, the Officials took to blaming the Provos as 'fascists' and this in turn led to, putting it mildly, a somewhat ambiguous attitude to Southern repression.

Conclusion

In the pages of history dealing with this period, the reaction of Southern workers is often left out. This is partially because of a class bias which plays down working class activity as a relatively insignificant element in societal change. But it was also because there existed no force which sought to forge a connection between working class militancy and anti-imperialism.

Yet the South was the key link to the success or failure of the fight against partition. This is because the Southern establishment are among the primary defenders of partition as it helped to ensure stability in their patch. They invested heavily in their security apparatus and used the armed struggle in the North to normalise and extend their repressive apparatus. They colluded with the Northern authorities to crush anyone who opposed the partitionist settlement. None of this precluded an occasional flutter of green nationalist rhetoric from Fianna Fail. But its occasional display was only designed to encourage the population to 'put on a green jersey and accept sacrifices for Irish capitalism. The success of the Southern establishment in disengaging their population from the Northern struggle fed into a pessimism in Catholic communities that ultimately saw support for the armed struggle as their only option.

By contrast an Ireland that was forged in struggle

from below offers a far better and more attractive prospect to the million Protestants that presently look to Queen and country. There is little prospect that Northern Protestants would embrace an island that is devoid of a National Health Service or has 10,000 of its people homeless. The only way there can be a shift in conscious is with the prospect of a better Ireland that guarantees real advances to working people. That is simply an impossibility in a country that functions as a tax haven for the global rich.

At present we are witnessing the first signs of the emergence of a 32 consciousness. In the aftermath of the Repeal vote, for example, there was a spontaneous movement to carry the struggle forward to the North. After the Belfast rape trial, there was also a significant mobilisation in Dublin in solidarity. In the broader sweep of history, these are only the first tentative signs but we are entering an era when 'the national question' will return again with the crisis around Brexit.

Back in the late sixties and early seventies, there was one organisation that tried to forge links between the Northern struggle and the mass of Southern workers. People's Democracy had a vision of ending partition though a fight for a socialist republic. In 1969, they staged a march to Dublin 'to arouse the anger of working people against the Green Tories'.²⁷ But they were tiny and what they had in dramatic displays, they lacked in coherent organisation. There were very few in either Dublin or Belfast who understood the importance of linking a fight against partition to a strategy of creating a socialist Ireland. The materials for that understanding were there in the activities of working people – but there was no coherent political vehicle for their aspirations.

Next time around we need to ensure it is different.

Notes

- 1 J. Boyer Bell, *The Secret Army: The IRA 1969-1979*, Dublin Academy Press, 1979 p 178-179
- 2 C. Brady, *The Guarding of Ireland: The Garda Síochána and the Irish State 1960-2014*
- 3 W.K. Roche and J. Larragy, 'The trend of unionisation in the Republic of Ireland' in *Industrial Relations in Ireland*, Department of Industrial Relations, UCD (eds) (Dublin: UCD, 1987) p 25
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