

NORTHERN IRELAND—AN ANTI-IMPERIALIST STRUGGLE

by Michael Farrell

Much analysis of the Northern Ireland problem has tended to treat it in isolation and as a unique phenomenon. This results in distortion and caricature. The Northern situation is undoubtedly complex and has many unique features but to understand it correctly I believe it must be set against the background of events in the whole of Ireland in the last hundred years and seen within the context of anti-imperialist and anti-colonial revolutions in general.

The essential dynamic in Irish history in the later 19th and early 20th century was the struggle for self-government or national independence. The Ulster Unionist movement was formed in opposition to that struggle and campaigned against the granting of even a very limited form of self-government to any part of Ireland. They only limited themselves to the demand for Partition when it became clear that self-government for the rest of the country was inevitable. From the very beginning the Ulster Unionists upheld imperialist rule in Ireland and opposed the Irish national revolution. They were a consciously counter-revolutionary force.

They proved a useful ally to the British ruling class both during the Parliamentary campaign for Home Rule and during the War of Independence (1919-21) when they contained and eventually crushed the IRA in the North and released British forces for use in the rest of the country. As a result of their efforts the most industrialised area of Ireland which had close links with British capital remained under direct British control. This had a number of other advantages for British imperialism as well. It weakened the economy of the new Irish state and its potential for achieving economic independence. It left British troops stationed in the 6-county area posing a standing threat to any government in the South which might pursue strongly anti-imperialist policies.

Seen from this perspective the Northern Ireland **statelet** was essentially a counter-revolutionary creation frustrating the wishes of the majority of the Irish people and perpetuating direct British control in a part of Ireland. It has no democratic validity whatsoever.

This view is reinforced by the close connection between the Ulster Unionist leadership and the British ruling class and the fact that Unionist resistance to the national struggle in 1920-22 was largely financed by

Westminster and was seen as an integral and fairly essential part of the British war-effort in Ireland as a whole.

Sir Edward Carson had been a member of the British Cabinet **1916-18** and two other Unionist leaders Sir James Craig and Lord Londonderry were junior Ministers at Westminster until just before the establishment of the Northern Ireland government in June **1921** when Craig became Prime Minister and Londonderry Minister of Education. (Londonderry became a member of the Westminster Cabinet in the **1930s** and had the closest links with the British ruling class throughout the period.) Craig was frequently involved in British government discussions on policy in Ireland in **1920-1**. At the same time the Chief of the Imperial General Staff of the British Army was Sir Henry Wilson, a vociferous Ulster Unionist who became Unionist M.P. for Co. Down immediately after his retirement in **1922**.

The British government was also directly implicated in the organising of Ulster Unionist forces. Craig re-organised the Ulster Volunteer Force as an illegal paramilitary body while still a member of the Westminster government. Then in October **1920** the government decided to legalise, finance and arm it as the Ulster Special Constabulary. They continued to finance the Specials despite having direct evidence of their sectarian character, their committing murders and despite Lloyd George himself comparing them to **Mussolini's Fascisti** at a Cabinet meeting in **1922**. The subsidies to the Specials continued, significantly enough, until the Border of the Northern state was accepted by the Southern government in **1925**.

And the British Army remained on call, ready to reinforce the Northern regime's own forces whenever they were hard-pressed. British troops were on stand-by to intervene 'in aid of the civil power' during unemployment riots in **1932**. They did intervene during the sectarian riots of **1935**. They helped suppress the IRA campaign of **1956-62**, they intervened again to rescue the tottering Stormont regime in **1969** and they have been on the streets of Northern Ireland ever since.

So the Northern Ireland **statelet** was established with the aid of the British guns and British troops have remained as its ultimate line of defence ever since. And since Britain was and is an imperialist power it is evident that the existence of the **statelet** has served the interests of imperialism.

So far the pattern seems familiar: a colonial elite fights alongside the imperial power to resist a national revolution. And the leadership of the Ulster Unionists was similar to many colonial elites: a coalition of landlords, merchants and industrialists, though it was somewhat unusual in that it was dominated by the industrialists. Their reasons for opposing the national revolution were clear enough however. Their industries were dependent on the British and Empire market; indeed industrial Belfast was more an extension of the British economy than an organic development

of the Irish one. And even in the 1920s many Belfast firms were owned, financed or controlled from Britain.

The Belfast bourgeoisie feared any disruption of their relations with the imperial economy. By the time of the War of Independence when they were faced with a revolutionary guerilla struggle in most of the country they also feared—however unwarrantably—the establishment of some sort of 'Bolshevik' regime in Ireland after Independence. Cabinet papers, speeches and letters of the Unionist leaders show a constant pre-occupation with 'Bolshevism'.

Where Northern Ireland differed from some other colonial situations was that the Ulster Unionists led a mass movement containing working-class, farming and petty-bourgeois elements who commanded a majority in the 6-county area. In most of Ireland, 'Protestant' was synonymous with membership of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. The North was unique in that it contained a substantial Protestant working-class and farming population.

Historically there had been periodic tension between the Ulster Protestants, descendants of the 17th century settlers, and the Catholics, descendants of the native Irish, and some of the Protestants had developed a violently supremacist ideology expressed in the Orange Order. The industrialisation of the Belfast area caused renewed tension over competition for jobs and discrimination and intimidation established a sort of Protestant aristocracy of labour by the end of the 19th century. Protestants dominated the skilled trades especially in the shipbuilding and engineering industry. Catholics were concentrated in unskilled jobs, domestic service and other low-status occupations. The wage-differential between skilled and unskilled workers was greater in Belfast than in Britain thus widening the gap and ensuring that the Protestant workers' position was one of small but nonetheless real and tangible privilege over Catholics.

This system flourished under the Union with Britain reinforced by Unionist control of most local government patronage in the North. The Protestant workers and petty-bourgeoisie feared an end to their relatively privileged position in an independent Ireland and industrial workers, like their bosses, saw a threat to the North's industries as well. This, interacting with the Orange supremacist ideology, produced mass support for Ulster Unionism.

It was mass support in defence of Protestant privilege and supremacy however. It was in no sense a movement for self-determination and the result was not any form of independence but the continuation of British rule with a degree of local autonomy which enabled the Unionists to consolidate and extend the system of Protestant privilege. That Protestant and Catholic were not different nationalities and that the gulf between them was not unbridgeable once the system of privilege was ended was shown by the abandonment by the Unionists of some 80,000 Ulster

Protestants in Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan and their fairly easy assimilation into 26-county life.

The **statelet** established in the North in 1921 was viciously reactionary and highly sectarian. The Special Powers Act passed in 1922 provided for the suspension of most civil liberties and under it internment was in operation for 19 of the 56 years the state has been in existence. The government maintained—and used—very large paramilitary forces in the shape of the B Specials. Opposed by the majority of the Irish people and a third of its own population—for the 6-county state contained half a million Catholics who were vehemently opposed to it—the state could only survive as an armed camp and in a permanent state of emergency.

This elaborate repressive apparatus was used not only against militant Republicans but at times against the constitutional Home Rulers of the Nationalist party and against the trade union and working class movement whenever they posed any challenge to the regime.

Once in power the Unionists gerrymandered local government to deprive their opponents of any significant share in power and to consolidate their own grip. Then they carried on a policy of systematic discrimination against Catholics—and 'disloyal' Protestants—which entrenched the system of Protestant privilege so that a recent (1975) survey found that 'the typical Protestant male is a skilled worker and the typical Catholic unskilled' and that 'although (constituting) less than one third of the economically active population of Northern Ireland Catholics constituted a majority of the unemployed.*

This helped to solidify working-class Protestant support for the regime, frustrated the development of working-class unity on anything but the most superficial basis and prevented the growth of even a strong social democratic movement. The Unionist bosses remained in undisputed control for over 50 years. James Connolly had been right when he predicted a 'carnival of reaction' if Partition was implemented.

Partition produced a carnival of reaction in the South as well. It cut off the most industrialised part of the country and left the unfinished national revolution to dominate and distort Southern politics. It even strengthened the position of the Catholic church by making the South an overwhelmingly Catholic state. It is only now with the expansion of industry in the 26 counties that secularism and class politics are beginning to assert themselves in the South. In the North they can never do so while Partition remains.

*Edmund A. Auger: *Religion and Occupational Class in Northern Ireland*, *Economic and Social Review*, Ireland, Winter, 1975.

There was some change in Northern Ireland in the late 50s and early 1960s. The structure of the economy changed with the decline of traditional industries and their replacement by new outside-owned firms. Effective control of the economy passed completely into British and multi-national hands and the local capitalist class which had dominated the Unionist party was increasingly replaced by managers and executives. The transition was symbolised by the replacement as Premier in 1963 of the hard-line Lord Brookeborough by the reformist Terence O'Neill. A similar process was taking place in the South with the deliberate wooing of foreign investment by Sean Lemass after 1958 and the consequent change in the control of the Southern economy as well.

Both states were now dominated by British and multi-national capital. This seems to have led to pressure for a liberalisation of the Northern regime and a rapprochement between North and South in order to stabilise the situation in Ireland as a whole. The third IRA campaign in the North's short history had just ended.

Pressure was growing within the six counties as well. The new firms brought a temporary measure of prosperity. They were less dependent on the traditional engineering skills and did not discriminate so rigidly against Catholics. Better job opportunities, the effects of post-war free education and a more sympathetic attitude by the media gave the Catholic population a new self-confidence and the Civil Rights movement developed in 1968 initially demanding reform within the Northern Ireland state.

The Civil Rights movement became a formidable mass movement with very substantial sympathy and support in the 26 counties as well. The media and big business interests put pressure on the Stormont government to introduce reforms. But the process which gave Catholic workers more self-confidence threatened to erode the petty privileges of the Protestant working-class. A Protestant backlash had erupted briefly in 1964 and 1966 and there had been a series of backbench revolts against O'Neill even before the Civil Rights campaign began. The prospect of serious reform really frightened the Protestant petty-bourgeoisie and working-class and a full-scale backlash began in earnest.

Two Unionist Premiers O'Neill and Chichester Clark were brought down by the backlash but as the crisis developed and became an all-Ireland one and it became clear that only a really major re-structuring could defuse it, Britain had to intervene directly. In 1974 they established the power-sharing Executive, the most elaborate attempt ever to reform and reconstruct the Northern state. The Executive had the support of both London and Dublin governments, of big business, of the main Catholic party in the North and apparently of the major Unionist grouping and it involved greater concessions on the question of Irish unity than any Dublin government had ever made before. Nonetheless it was brought

down by the Loyalist backlash.

The collapse of the Executive and the subsequent swing against power-sharing by the Official Unionist party have demonstrated effectively that the Northern state cannot be reformed and that any strategy based on gradual reform is doomed to failure. Mass support for resistance to the national revolution has been based on the perpetuation of the system of Protestant privilege. Fifty years of Stormont rule has consolidated and entrenched that system until it has become synonymous with the state itself. Radically to reform the state would be effectively to demolish it as British governments have found to their cost. Unable to reform it, they have been forced more and more to defend it as it is.

In the meantime the reaction and resistance to the civil rights campaign, the assault on the Catholic ghettos in 1969, the intervention of the British Army to rescue the regime and then in a more and more repressive role combined to turn the initially reformist civil rights campaign into a direct armed struggle to overthrow the state. As that in turn became increasingly a direct conflict with British forces and as the Southern government became actively involved in aiding Britain, the struggle turned into one aimed at ending imperialist control in both parts of Ireland.

I believe that it is essentially a struggle against imperialism. I have already argued that the Northern state was a direct creation of imperialism without democratic validity. The Southern state was the product of a compromise with imperialism in the shape of the Treaty. Since then, imperialist interests have changed somewhat but I think they are still dominant.

The economic importance of the North has declined though it has become an important centre of the man-made fibre industry and there has been massive investment in its infra-structure over the last twenty years. However its economic value alone would hardly justify the cost of the current military campaign and the massive subsidies required to keep the administration going. On the other hand, however, British and multi-national investment in the South has increased enormously in the last twenty years and the South has become a full member of the EEC. The South has become considerably more important to Britain and its EEC partners. But the South's political system would be shaken to the core by a Republican victory in the six counties and so I think that preserving control over Dublin has become one of the aims of British intervention in the North.

There is also the question of stability. Turmoil in Ireland, possibly leading to the emergence of a left-wing nationalist regime, would have a distinctly unsettling effect on British and European capitalism already hard-hit in their own countries. The brief revolutionary upsurge in Portugal gave them a bad fright but for Britain at least this conflict is a good deal closer to home. And there are strategic considerations as well. Ireland

still has considerable strategic importance. The right-wing Tories who talk about a Cuba in the Irish Sea may exaggerate the strength of the Left in Ireland but they probably voice the fears of substantial sections of the British Army and the traditional ruling class.

All these amount to more convincing reasons for the British Army's presence in Northern Ireland than a desire to protect the Catholic minority or to separate warring factions. And they are why I don't believe the British government has any intention of giving up control of the North until they are forced to.

What is the present position in Northern Ireland?

The pro-imperialist line-up here is formidable. Besides the British Army, there are substantial sections of the Protestant population organised in the RUC and the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) and in right-wing murder gangs like the UDA and UVF and represented politically by the Official Unionist Party or Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party.

It is sometimes argued that the UDA and UVF are a sort of Protestant working-class equivalent of the Provisional IRA and that they are potential allies against the 'Establishment'. The parallel is based on the crudest superficialities e.g. their lower-class membership, usually **lumpen** proletarian or semi-criminal in the case of the Loyalists. It is like comparing the OAS and the FLN in Algeria. In fact, the Loyalists (the UDA/UVF) are fighting on the same side as the British Army and the British government actually drew a distinction between their pro-state violence and the anti-state violence of the IRA in its submissions to the European Court at Strasbourg. The UDA and UVF are consciously pro-imperialist and boast of their members' ex-service records in other outposts in the Empire and both have had connections with the National Front. They represent the most reactionary and sectarian elements in the Protestant population and there is no basis whatsoever for co-operation between them and anti-imperialist organisations.

Since 1972 and especially in the last two years Dublin governments have also intervened on the pro-imperialist side. The present government has mounted the biggest offensive against the IRA since the Civil War. I think the explanation is that as the Southern economy has become completely dominated by outside capital so the government has seen its interests as completely identified with those of Britain. At any rate this has been a severe blow to the IRA depriving it of a safe base in the twenty-six counties.

On the anti-imperialist side very considerable forces were mobilised in the period after internment was introduced in 1971. They were organised in a mass movement which united a wide spectrum of political groups and local action committees and represented the vast bulk of the Catholic population in the North. Parallel with the mass struggle the two wings of

the IRA mounted a formidable military campaign. In the South, there was widespread support demonstrated most graphically by the burning of the British Embassy in Dublin after Bloody Sunday.

The strength and determination of the anti-imperialist movement forced the suspension of Stormont in 1972—the most serious blow to the Northern state and to British control in Ireland since 1922. But since then the British forces have slowly regained ground though the intransigent and inherent sectarianism of their Unionist allies have prevented them from stabilising the situation with new institutions acceptable to the Catholic middle-class in the North.

There are a number of reasons why the anti-imperialist movement has slipped back. A major one I feel is its narrow and limited base. It has drawn its support almost solely from the Catholic minority in the North making little or no effort to involve the—initially at any rate—sympathetic masses in the South. Even within the Northern minority the struggle has had no clear class base relying instead on emotional nationalism and reaction to discrimination and army brutality. It has thus cut itself off from the powerful weapon of working class action and is peculiarly vulnerable to war-weariness and demoralisation.

An important and related factor is that the struggle, especially since 1972-3, has been mainly conducted on an elitist military basis with the masses called on periodically to support the guerrillas rather than the other way round. That of course follows naturally from the politics of the leading organisation in the struggle, the Provisionals, who are basically left-wing petty-bourgeois nationalists and so fail to identify with the working class as a class or see the importance of mass action. (Though I completely reject the slanderous attacks on the Provos as 'green fascists' etc. They are nothing of the kind: in fact their programme is mildly social democratic in character and they have recently begun to develop links with Third World Liberation movements and see themselves as part of that tradition.) Anti-imperialist struggles have been successfully carried out on an elitist basis in other countries but this seems very unlikely to succeed in a fairly urbanised and industrialised country such as Ireland now is. And such a struggle would certainly not establish socialism.

Despite all this however the British have by no means been able to crush the IRA and the popular resistance or to stabilise the situation in the North and the position now is a sort of stalemate. The British appear to have abandoned any attempt at structural reform and their strategy now seems to be to contain the IRA by a slow process of attrition and gradually return power to the Official Unionists with a few purely token concessions to the Catholic middle class represented by the SDLP.

I believe that there is a genuine anti-imperialist struggle going on in Ireland and that socialists in Britain and Ireland should support it as an integral

part of the struggle for socialism. In particular, Partition has created a carnival of reaction and until it is ended there will be no end of the bloody sectarian conflict in the North. History has shown us that campaigns for a Bill of Rights or the local trade union leadership's 'Better Life for All' campaign are doomed to failure because the Northern state is inherently sectarian and unreformable, apart altogether from the fact that these campaigns ignore the question of imperialism.

Socialists in Ireland of course should also work to make the class-conscious working-class the leading element in the anti-imperialist struggle and to build an independent marxist party to eventually lead the class and the struggle.

I think the struggle will be a fairly lengthy one as I don't believe it can succeed until it involves the Southern masses and especially the working class and that can only be done on the basis of working class policies which in turn means that there will be little progress until there is a strengthening of the socialist element in the overall movement. That is not an impossible dream however. There is a clear connection between fighting the class struggle in the South which now involves direct conflict with economic imperialism and fighting the more direct struggle in the North. In the meantime, although I believe the anti-imperialist movement will have to be rebuilt on a working class basis, I also believe that there can be no let-up in the day to day fight against repression, army brutality etc.

Regrettably, because of the in-built system of Protestant privilege, there is little prospect of involving more than small sections of the Protestant working class in the anti-imperialist struggle though a larger section, especially under the impact of the recession, may develop a sort of trade union consciousness which would leave them effectively neutral on the national question.

In Britain I believe Socialists should support the demands for the immediate withdrawal of British troops and self-determination for the people of all Ireland. By withdrawal I mean not just a pull back of British troops to be replaced by the British financed and armed RUC and UDR. I mean complete severing of the link with Britain.

The most common argument against the Troops Out demand is that it would be followed by a bloodbath. Firstly this suggests that the troops play some sort of impartial peace-keeping role in the North. That is simply not true. Almost all their operations are directing towards disarming and crushing Republican resistance. They only act against the Loyalists when their activities jeopardise their common aim of defeating the IRA. Meanwhile behind the shelter of the troops the local security forces are being armed to the teeth. The longer the troops remain the more they strengthen the Loyalist position.

Secondly if once it were known that the British were going to pull out completely that would force a major re-think by many, possibly the bulk

of Protestants who would then be prepared to come to terms with the majority in Ireland as a whole leaving only a minority prepared to fight. A process like this occurred in 1972 when Irish unity appeared to be fairly close. It would reduce considerably the likelihood of civil war etc.

Thirdly resistance to the Troops Out demand is only putting off the evil day. This is the fourth IRA campaign in the North's history. The struggle to overthrow the state will inevitably continue until it succeeds. In the meantime more and more people will be killed.

Fourthly the best safeguard against a massacre of Catholics in the North is the use of barricades, and the formation and arming of mass defence organisations in the ghettos. The British Army prevents this by breaking up all self-defence groups and constant raiding for arms whether held for defence or offence. The British Army props up the sectarian statelet of Northern Ireland and allows it to retard and poison Irish political life. It should be withdrawn.

There is another very compelling reason why Socialists in Britain should fight for immediate withdrawal from Northern Ireland. This prolonged war is poisoning their own political life and undermining democratic rights in Britain which were very hard fought for. Already the Prevention of Terrorism Act has introduced detention without trial, deportation and the widespread harrassment of political activists, not all of them Irish. Beatings and third degree methods against suspects have become commonplace. Political prisoners have been subjected to horrifying brutality. The Special Branch has been greatly expanded. The British Army has become highly politicised and large numbers of ex-soldiers brutalised by service in the North have been thrown on the streets and often into the arms of the National Front. The repercussions of the Northern war have already turned the South of Ireland into a near police state. British Socialists should act quickly before it does the same to their country.