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TOWARDS A UNITED IRELAND

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According to estimates presented to the "New Ireland Forum", the troubles that have wracked "Northern Ireland" over the past thirteen years have claimed 2,300 lives and caused 24,000 non-fatal casualties. The total "extraordinary expenditure" on military, police, judiciary etc, added to a figure for economic destruction and disruption, gives a sum estimated at £11,900,000,000, prodigious by any standard. The loss to the British exchequer is now running at about £2,000 million a year, that is to say £4 a week for every family in Britain.

Why have successive governments tolerated this vast and mounting drain of wealth? In order to protect investments in the six counties? Hardly. British investments are safe in the Republic and would be as safe in a united Ireland. Class solidarity with Tory Unionists who have links with financial and landed interests? This factor might have counted seventy years ago; today the six counties' economy is in the firm grip of the transnational corporations.

Only one explanation makes sense. This £2,000 million is regarded as defence expenditure. The Irish must not defend their own country; this would be predicated on peace and neutrality. Britain must do it for them as part of the integrated system that protects "western" interests and the multi-million investments scattered throughout the world. Strategic considerations demand at least a foothold on the neighbouring island.

Britain is a country on a permanent war footing. Great tracts of country are reserved for bombing schools, tank runs, missile sites, and air bases. There are vast arms dumps. Sophisticated warning systems and spy centres dot the landscape. Scottish lochs house nuclear submarines. Low flying planes skim the tops of Welsh mountains with thunderous noise from dawn to dusk. Repeated alerts testify to the menace of deadly plutonium manufactured on an ever increasing scale by nuclear power stations and waste processors. England, Wales and Scotland are available for these purposes. The Republic of Ireland is not. Northern Ireland provides a minimum British military presence in Ireland.

This is the core of the Irish question unchanged in essence through centuries. It is really a "British question" intimately linked with fundamental questions of peace, imperialism and class power in Britain. It is not, as establishment propagandists try to present it, a sordid sectarian conflict in Britain's back yard; and to the small extent that it is, British Toryism created in north-east Ireland the conditions that are used as an excuse for remaining there.

Seen in this light two fundamental alternatives stand out clearly. A government based on imperialism and constantly risking the possibility of war, will hold on to the six counties at all costs and even try to recover the twentysix. A government dedicated to socialism and peace would negotiate the handing back of the six counties to the Irish Republic, and then withdraw.

This is admittedly easier talked about than done. But it is essential for people to see the alternatives and take sides. The partition of Ireland is part of the Versailles/Munich line of foreign policy which caused the second world war and which, continued after 1945, reduced Britain from her status as a world power to one of an economic, political and military appendage of the USA. The partition of Ireland is not an isolated issue but part of a constellation of issues, the resolution of which means life or death to the British people.

When in 1945 a Labour government was returned there was as much rejoicing in Dublin as in London. The "winds of change" had already begun to blow. But instead of freeing the colonies and making friends, thereby maintaining Britain's position in the world, Mr Attlee heeded Mr Churchill's siren voice from Fulton. The object was to enlist American support for British colonialism as part of a "cold war" against the USSR. That "American support" hanged the British Empire. All-party representations against partition were disregarded. So were the massive demonstrations of the Anti-partition League throughout Britain and Ireland. Two years after Fulton a disillusioned inter-party government took Ireland out of the Commonwealth and the "Ireland Act" in effect made partition permanent.

Labour's failure to solve the Irish question when it was at its strongest was due to the cold war. After over thirty years the leaders now hesitantly detach themselves from the bipartisanship that was sealed in 1949. They are also hesitant in detaching themselves from the second cold war, and it helped to lose the 1983 election. It is clear that the discussion of the full implications of the Irish question is a vital necessity for the Labour, trade union and peace movements in Britain. They must estimate it for themselves and demand a solution not for the sake of the Irish but as part of their own essential interests.

Opinion polls have shown a majority of English people in favour of withdrawal from Ireland. One daily newspaper has consistently advised it. To a certain extent this simple demand reflects exasperation rather than sympathy with the Irish... "let them go to the devil and see how they get on without us". It can nevertheless be the beginning of wisdom. An immediate unilateral unprepared evacuation à la Belgian Congo would of course invite chaos, and receive little thanks from Dublin. The principle of withdrawal is perfectly correct, but it needs to be accompanied by the handing of the territory to its rightful owners. It is not sufficient for the squatter to leave and lock the door; he must let the rightful householder in. Nevertheless, the desire is important, and can be embodied in a declaration of intent.

It may be asked "who is the rightful householder?" According to the constitution it is the Irish Republic. British law says Her Majesty the head of state of the United Kingdom. But it is not generally appreciated how near Parliament has come from time to time to resolving this antinomy. The predecessor of the Irish Republic was the Irish Free State. Its original constitution, approved by the British Parliament, defined its territory as that of the whole of Ireland, though it was temporarily debarred from exercising its powers in the six counties.

The Free State came into existence on December 6th, 1922. Its nominal territory was 32 counties for one day. On the 7th the Parliament of the six counties petitioned for secession and this was automatically granted. Yet even then provisions for voluntary reamalgamation remained in force. When the Parliament of Northern Ireland was suspended in 1974, all its powers were held by Westminster. They could be restored but there has been no attempt to restore them. The procedure adopted has been to seek alternative arrangements. Westminster could continue to hold them, or could restore them to the successor of the Irish Free State on negotiated terms. This would involve their no longer being part of Her Majesty's dominions. There is a precedent for this in the Ireland Act, 1949, which withdrew the claim to sovereignty over the twenty-six county area, that of the de facto Republic. The above argument is not intended to offer a blueprint but to show that no unthinkable innovation is required.

It is perhaps worth remarking that the position that would have been reached if the Northern Parliament had not petitioned for secession would have been that the Parliament would have continued but that matters excluded or reserved from it would have been transferred from London to Dublin. On several occasions the late Mr De Valera stated his willingness to take this position as a starting point.

There is a regrettable tendency in much of the literature concerned with Ireland to ignore or belittle the role of the Dublin government. Yet this is the body which for all practical purposes must be dealt with. It is the official claimant to the disputed territory. It is not a socialist government, but what business is that of anybody in England? Moreover the state in which it governs is actually more democratic than that of Britain. Its head of state is elected. Its Prime Minister and Government are elected by Parliament. It has no honours or titles, hereditary or otherwise. No religious test restricts its choice of president. There is an unwritten constitution only alterable by referendum, and acts of the parliament contrary to the constitution are null and void when so designated by the courts. There is no appointed Privy Council, therefore no "Orders in Council", and all Members of Parliament have equal facilities for catching the Speaker's eye. Yet for sixty years there has been a virtual conspiracy on the part of quite influential parties in Britain to represent the Republic as a backward "theocratic" or "priest-ridden state" and the suggestion is made by people who should know better. It should be noted that whenever the British government has advised or urged the government of the Republic it has always been in a direction of reducing democracy.

As part of the general trend of British public opinion the Labour Party is now officially on record in favour of the principle of a united Ireland. This is welcome. But the principle is subject to an important derogation; reunification must await "consent" by the six county Unionists. Though this is not said to give them a "veto on constitutional change", whether it does so or not depends on what is meant by constitutional change and whether measures are taken to ensure "consent". There is grave danger inherent in this approach. The main question is "how can Britain be persuaded to drop her claim to Irish territory". To

concentrate on "consent" removes the struggle to a smaller theatre where reaction is at an advantage. The question becomes "how can we persuade the Unionists to consent to something that Britain can do at any time without their consent?"

There is no suggestion here that Unionist consent is not worth having or that it should not be sought. But it should be sought subject to the requirements of the situation as a whole. The British Labour movement must not get bogged down in the morass of "Northern Ireland politics".

There is a widespread belief in Britain, even among sections of the so-called "left" that the duty of securing Unionist consent devolves as a matter of course upon people and movements in the six counties. The six counties are the very place where very little can be done for the area lacks sovereignty. It is good that delegations should visit Belfast to see at first hand the fruits of British sovereignty. But unless they visit Dublin as well they will only learn minority views of the Irish question, for those they meet will be members either of a real minority, the Unionists, or of an artificial minority, the Nationalists.

The special peculiarity of the six counties is that the reactionary views of Unionism have afflicted large sections of the working class just as in the thirties sections of the German workers were afflicted by National Socialism. It was the late Mr T.A. Jackson who described the Orange Order as the first Fascist organization in Europe. If some think this exaggerated, the principle is the same. There is no Unionist Labour Party. The only Labour Party is the "Social-Democratic and Labour Party", like the British Labour Party affiliated to the Labour and Socialist International. It is open to Protestants but very few of them join it because of its advocacy of a united Ireland, in relation to which it would certainly aim for Unionist consent. The Trade Union movement contains both Unionist and Nationalist workers and owing to the need for unity on industrial questions is compelled to adopt what is in effect an "economist" position. Its possibilities in relation to the question of sovereignty are very limited.

Some British observers start from this limited six-county position, dreaming of a reunification of the workers along class lines if only the SDLP would not raise this "divisive" issue of the border and "if only" the IRA would put away its bombs and guns. Such people, invariably well-intentioned, do not understand the connection between economism and terrorism. When the Labour movement as a whole is debarred from raising political issues, these are raised in a destructive way by so-designated "terrorists". The unity of the six county workers along class lines is only possible when the national question is out of the way. Clearing it out of the way is the first task of socialists. Economism in practice becomes accepting things as they are. And it must not be forgotten that when the Labour Party accepts the principle that there should be a United Ireland this is a clear implication that the Nationalists are right and the Unionists are wrong.

To leave this struggle to those able to conduct it in the

six counties, when Britain is the sovereign power in that territory, would be to abandon the principle of internationalism. If Labour has adopted the principle that its government would not legislate for Irish unity without Unionist "consent" then if the commitment to a united Ireland is to have any meaning there arises a clear necessity of active intervention in order to obtain that consent. This principle was adopted in the case of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, and it worked.

Let us suppose a Labour government issued a declaration of its intention to work towards a united Ireland and accepted that, subject to consultation with the government of the Republic, it would work to secure Unionist consent. It is obvious of course that IRA violence would drop sharply and, since there would be substantial savings, money would become available. The Emergency Powers would become unnecessary. Large numbers of troops could be withdrawn. Fewer policemen would be required. The Prevention of Terrorism Act would become a superfluity. Diplock Courts, interrogation centres and the building of new jails would become things of the past. The six counties would no longer exist as a laboratory in which recipes for reaction could be cooked up for future use in England. The situation would be transformed.

Some of the money saved by liberalization of the regime could be devoted to positive measures. One possibility is industrial investment to reduce unemployment and encourage reconciliation. High employment tends to bring Unionist and Nationalist workers together in industrial enterprises. High unemployment tends to segregate them.

Subject to the need to discuss procedures with the government of the Republic, further measures could be taken. The British government could guarantee that state employees would be secured against loss as a result of transfer to the employment of the government of the Republic. This would of course have to be subject to transitional arrangements. Cultural work could be encouraged with a view to helping the Unionist workers and lower middle class to recover their identification with the rest of the Irish people. Two centuries ago their ancestors led the struggle for independence and the tradition has not been totally obliterated. Chairs of reconciliation could be established in colleges and polytechnics. Irish music and dance could be encouraged. The teaching of the Irish language could be encouraged; after all its accent and idiom survive in the speech even of Unionists who have never heard of it. The study of local history and archaeology could be fostered. Irish national history could be taught in state schools. Television and radio could be encouraged to highlight the patriotic unity of Catholics and Protestants in 1798, 1881, 1896, 1907 and 1932. Perhaps some public spirited person would erect in a safe place a statue of Lindsay Crawford the Orangeman who stumped the USA with De Valera in favour of an Irish Republic. School parties could be encouraged to visit the Republic and learn about the other part of their country.

The purpose of the above paragraph is in no way to set out a blueprint. It is to show that it is simply not true that the British government has no alternative but to sit idly by while alleged religious factions exchange hatred.

But what of the Trade Union movement? Undoubtedly there is a strong tradition of nonintervention, even of "know-nothingism". Again and again we find leaderships discouraging, indeed going so far as to prevent discussion of the rights and wrongs of the Irish situation by their members.

What is happening? Toryism holds six Irish counties and is busy militarising them, while using the hope of national unity as a bait to secure the militarisation of the Republic and an end to its neutrality. This would be a blow against the peace forces in Europe. The majority of Irish trade unionists are for a united Ireland. An overwhelming majority are for neutrality. Are these facts of no concern to British trade unionists? Not even when every one of their families pays £4 a week in taxation necessitated by Tory policy? Far from agreeing tamely not to disturb the idyllic relations that prevail in the six counties should they not be transmitting the message that the British movement has a duty of solidarity with the majority of Irish trade unionists as well as reflecting the fundamental interests of the British people which demand the ending of partition with its concomitant repression, violence, intimidation and blackmail.

It is sometimes said that Britain would like to withdraw from the six counties. Enough has, one hopes, been said to show that this is at present not the case. For that reason a simple "troops out" appeal, while right in sentiment and useful as a rallying cry, is not sufficient. British public opinion needs educating to a higher level before it will insist on the changes in aims and policy that will be required for the realisation of that well-intentioned slogan. The withdrawal of British troops will mark final victory in what will inevitably be a long and complicated campaign. One of the first priorities of that campaign should surely be to encourage the trade union leaderships to discontinue what is in effect a ban on the discussion of the Irish question at their conferences. For after all this serves as an exact parallel to the Unionist veto on legislation. Let's bring the whole subject out into the open. To do this it will also be necessary to break the barriers between London and Dublin. Delegations should be sent to the Republic as well as to the six counties. Delegations from Dublin should be invited to Britain. Organizations like the Connolly Association and the Labour Cok Committee on Ireland which already cooperate closely, should try to draw others to cooperate in a campaign of enlightenment and education, and the establishment of a body of well-documented critical literature designed to counter the flood of misrepresentation from state and academic sources. The Irish question must take its place in the policy-making of the Labour and peace movements of Britain.