



I B R G

LAMBETH

IRISH IN BRITAIN REPRESENTATION GROUP

TRADE UNIONS AND 'NORTHERN IRELAND'.

FACT SHEET 4.

It is probably a good indication of the bankrupt bi-partisan policy adopted by British political parties and successive British governments toward 'Northern Ireland' that the majority of British people are still unclear as to the origins of the border and the root of the problem. And yet, without this information, it is impossible to view any incident there in its true context and outside of the influence of British government parameters i.e. no Irish unity; internal domestic problem of Britain; no troops out, etc.

There is an allegation made against the Irish people that they never forget history and that they live in the past and yet this is hardly surprising when you consider that the country has been occupied for over 800 years, rose up in arms against the invader at least once in every generation, had its people massacred, tortured, persecuted, their language almost totally annihilated and only gained partial independence approximately 60 years ago. The partition of Ireland, therefore, by the 1920 British government, against the wishes of the majority of Irish people, just ensured the continuation of the struggle for freedom and independence. Democracy and majority rule, hailed by recent British governments as the yardstick by which to measure Irish unity and 'protecting' northern Irish unionists was totally ignored in order to create the statelet with its built-in false 'majority'. Even counties whose inhabitants were clearly against partition were forcibly included in the statelet in order to achieve a semblance of economic viability. So there can be no doubt that Britain chose to maintain a presence in Ireland. Centuries ago she semi-colonised Ulster by a people culturally, religiously and politically different from the native inhabitants and she laboured as a matter of policy to ensure that these colonists remained separate from the indigenous population for only in this way could she maintain a dominance over the whole island. Six decades ago she created the Unionist veto by agreeing to support a minority against the wishes of the majority. The repressive measures used since then by successive 'Northern Irish' gerrymandered assemblies to maintain the Unionist ascendancy guaranteed the violent reaction of 1969 as inevitable. And Britain, out of touch with the purpose, extent and effect of her own colonisation policy, gave too little too late in civil rights reform.

But it is too simple to think of 'Northern Ireland' purely in terms of civil or political reform - or indeed in terms of Trade Union organisation. Could any country occupied or controlled or oppressed by an alien culture/people remain a stable society indefinitely? Look at Poland and Solidarity as a clear example, or the Basque 'problem' or even the Palestinian/Israeli struggle. Give total civil or political reform to 'Northern Ireland' tomorrow and the reasons for the war will remain. The longer Britain refuses to face the real problem the more difficult and complex the inevitable conclusion will become.

Naturally, the reporting of any conflict depends upon your political standpoint. The Polish leaders view Solidarity somewhat differently than does Britain. The Russians view the Afghan fighters differently than does America. And Britain viewed the fighters in Aden and Cyprus - both of whom exacted a heavy toll in Army deaths - as terrorists ... until they won ! The British Army, this most up-to-date, well-armed, electronically equipped army, has reached stalemate with the IRA, and recent governments have had to content themselves with merely containing the situation. We have seen intelligent young men starve themselves to death, wrapped in just blankets inside freezing, excretia smeared cells. We have seen grief displayed in the media to win a political point. We have seen young British working class kids forced by recession and government propaganda into the Army and killed or crippled in defence of an immoral statelet of which they know very little. We have seen this statelet

being used as a testing ground for all kinds of sinister authoritarian activities. And still we hear Trade Union leaders say that the situation is most dangerous there and they could not support proposals for any precipitate action ! Are they kidding?

How long must the war continue before it is considered that the casualties have reached blood-bath proportions? How long must it continue before the numbers of dead outweigh the potential risk of withdrawal and a 'spontaneous' blood-bath? (And remember that the predicted violence during the French withdrawal from Algeria only happened when the colonists felt there was a possibility of altering the French decision.)

Must we really proceed first along the cul-de-sac of trade union organisation - of the British type - in 'Northern Ireland'? Workers rights, the organisation of labour against capital, the protection of human rights, democracy, conferences, delegations, etc are only relevant in a free, independent and sovereign state and mean absolutely nothing in an occupied country. Unless the foundations are firm the structure will fall ! The claim that the unemployment map could be superimposed on areas of violence is true. It would appear to be a strong argument for a simple civil reform type of solution until you realise that the areas of mass, consistent and almost no-hope unemployment are the areas containing the nationalist 'minority'. Equally, it is easy to claim that the 'Northern Irish' trade unions are non-sectarian when the vast majority of jobs are held by Protestant Unionists. The Catholic Church has a similar approach to the priesthood and women !

Trade Unionists have a duty to be concerned about the rights of fellow workers and their living conditions. But they do NOT have the right to impose their organisation and structure upon the working class of another country. The responsibility for building an organised working class movement in those Irish north-eastern six counties rests with the Irish Trade Unions and the British Trade Unions should assist them in every way possible - including supporting the formation of an integrated, united Ireland as the only permanent and solid basis on which to build.

Economic aid from Britain is vital. But only to a united country and only in the form of reparations for the damage, death and hardship caused by British policies over 800 years of occupation.

There is no doubt that many Unionists feel threatened by the idea of Irish unity. This is hardly surprising when you consider that the whole structure of the statelet they grew up in was based on a negative - that of opposition to unity. There is no easy solution to this problem but equally there is no merit in allowing it to act as a built in, self-perpetuating and never ending veto. Too many working class lives, both Irish and British, have been lost for us not to grasp the dilemma by its horns and make the only decision possible. Ireland must be re-united because the prospect of another 14 years of slaughter is too depressing to even consider.

The Irish (Unionist, Nationalist and British based) have suffered considerably from Britain and her policies. The prevention of Terrorism Act has been used against the Irish in Britain both indiscriminately and unjustifiably, and as a tool to stifle any real political debate. In 'Northern Ireland' it is just one more repressive weapon. Plastic bullets, condemned by the European Parliament, have killed 16 people (including 7 children) even though they are supposedly non-lethal. There has been torture, murder, injustice, the denial of civil liberties and repression worse in some ways than that of Russia. And all of this in the name of the British people who have known little about it and, regrettably, cared even less.

It is important for British Trade Unions to look objectively at the situation in 'Northern Ireland' and for them to make their voices heard quite clearly on the repression and the immorality of that statelet. What they do not have the right to do is formulate policies which encroach upon or do not recognise the right of a free people to self determination.

Call upon your Trade Union to pass Resolutions at Branch and National level:

- a) condemning the use of plastic bullets, the PTA and all other such repressive measures and demanding their immediate withdrawal;
- b) demanding the immediate withdrawal of British troops and the dismantling of the British state machinery in that statelet, political, economic and military;
- c) recognising the right of the Irish people to self-determination.