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Northern Ireland – the crisis deepens - Postscript

The above was written before the May strike organised by the Ulster Workers Council. This event serves to confirm the analysis made in the article. The strike has at one and the same time shattered the strategy of the British ruling class and completely undermined the assumptions on which the Provisional IRA have based their policies and actions.

The strike was historical retribution for all the past crimes of British imperialism in Ireland. They created the sectarian monster - they taught Catholic and Protestant to hate each other. In the past they urged on Protestants to military rebellion to prevent a united Ireland. Now the sectarian monster refuses to lie down at the bidding of the British master.

The UWC organised the strike by recruiting the support of a minority of the Protestant working class in key industries like the power stations. All the evidence showed that there was considerable opposition from the Protestant working class at the onset of the strike. Thus 90% of the Protestant working class of Derry were at work on the first day of the strike and only 'responded' to the strike call when threats were made to burn out their families. In the giant Harland and Wolff shipbuilding yard - employing 10,000 workers - only 500 attended a 'strike' meeting and only 100 voted in favour of coming out. Support for the UWC call was gained by threatening to burn the workers' cars. The same pattern of massive intimidation was repeated at Mackies, Sirrococ and other workplaces.

At the same time once the effectiveness of the strike was demonstrated, it gained support from the Protestant working class. The five years of bombings and violence, together with the fear of being incorporated into a capitalist united Ireland, fuelled their support for the strike. Above all, it was the speeches of Gerry Fitt, with his sweeping characterisation of all supporters of the strike as 'fascists', and Wilson, with his infamous 'spongers' speech, and the use of the army in the petrol stations, which served to unite practically the whole of the Protestant population behind the UWC call.

But the strike was organised for reactionary ends. There were genuine fears on the part of the mass of the Protestant working class that they were to become the new minority - discriminated against and permanently subjugated - in a capitalist united Ireland. But the leaders of the UWC - with their diatribes against 'communists and Trotskyists' - and their political allies, Paisley, Craig and West, played on these fears in an attempt to turn back the wheel of history to the pre-1969 situation. They wished to re-establish the Protestant Ascendancy - their own Ascendancy.

The strike was aimed not just against 'Sunningdale' and the 'Irish dimension', but in order to force back the Catholic population into the position they occupied before the Civil Rights campaign.

Nevertheless, the strike also demonstrated in a distorted form and on a reactionary issue, the colossal power of the working class when it moves into action. The whole basis of life in modern society depends on the working class. Nothing moved in Northern Ireland without the permission of the working class. Even bourgeois commentators, hostile to the aim of the strike, were forced to comment on the power and ingenuity displayed by the working class. Thus the Times correspondent commented on the situation in the Protestant Sandy Row district of Belfast... "Between fifty and a hundred men have operated a rubbish clearance service, going round in the backs of lorries while others swept the streets. At the weekend, brown paper rubbish bags arrived and 22,000 have been given to families in the past three days." Connections were made with sympathetic farmers who supplied the areas with cheap food.

The significance of the strike - the enormous potential power of the working class - has been remarked on by the spokesmen of capitalism. Faulkner has warned the rulers of Europe of the implications of the 'political strike'. The English Times has had editorials on the same theme. The semi-official organ of Fianna Fail, the Southern Tories - the Sunday Press, remarked... 'it (the strike) is more insidious than open rebellion with gun and bomb, because on present thinking and because of the implications for legitimate strike, military force cannot be used against it... there is no escaping the implication that if a people elect an administration.....that irritate trade unionists..... then [the] temptation will be to over-ride the electoral decision by general strike.' (2/6/74) The conclusions drawn by the strategists of the Southern bourgeoisie is that 'if that weapon (the strike) is bent for political purposes...then it is surely finished as an economic weapon...the community, in order to protect itself against the greater evil will have to outlaw them.' The Southern capitalists cannot cancel out with a stroke of the legislative pen the hard-won rights of the Irish working class. But they understand, along with their Northern and British counterparts, that the working class throughout these islands will have noticed the power of the May strike. It will not be lost on the British workers that the Protestant working class were able to use their industrial might to topple a government. When the need arises, they will seek to emulate this example, only on a progressive class basis.

The Executive, the British government and the 16,000 troops in the province were powerless against such a movement. In the aftermath of the strike, the Southern Irish capitalist press have interpreted the reluctance of the army to move against the Protestant workers and break the strike, as a modern version of the Curragh mutiny. Nothing could be further from reality. Generals King and Freeland, the army commanders in Northern Ireland, have opposed even the use of troops in the petrol stations because they understood the army were incapable of running even 'essential services'. At the same time, the Army tops were afraid that in a shooting war - a definite possibility if the army would have moved against the strike - they would not be able to hold the Protestants, who had 100,000 guns ready to put in the field.

A New Partition

This in turn is a crushing answer to the leadership of the Provisional IRA, and their attorneys in the ranks of the quasi-Marxist sects in Britain and Ireland. The Marxists, around Militant Irish Monthly, have consistently argued that the Protestant population would resist with arms any attempt to bomb them into a capitalist united Ireland. Moreover, we pointed out that it would be the catholic workers of Belfast which would bear the brunt of any backlash. The Provo leadership characterised the threat of Protestant resistance as an 'Orange bluff'. They maintained that it was the presence of the British army which was the only cause of the conflict. Remove the army, they said, and the 'Orange bully boys would face reality and draw in their horns.'

Yet in the wake of the UWC strike, Rory O'Brady, head of the Provo's political wing, has stated that they would like to see 'a phased withdrawal of British troops over a number of years, in order to avoid a Congo situation.' But if the Protestant population will just come to heel in the event of a British pullout, why call for a 'phased withdrawal'? Why mention a 'Congo situation'- a clear reference to possible wholesale attacks on Catholics in the Belfast area and the prospect of civil war - if a withdrawal of British troops will call the 'Orange bluff'?

It is clear to all with eyes to see that the awesome power displayed in the strike is a guarantee of determined Protestant resistance to incorporation into a bourgeois United Ireland. On a capitalist basis, religious civil war is guaranteed if British troops are withdrawn and nothing is put in their place. Perhaps there are some in the ranks of the Provisional IRA leadership who believe that out of the ashes of such a civil war will be born a united Ireland. In reality, a new partition would be the

result. As in India in 1947, mutual indiscriminate slaughter would be inevitable. The Catholics would be driven out of Belfast, the Protestants from the border counties of Fermanagh and Tyrone and parts at least of Derry. In the past few weeks, 'doomsday' schemes, whereby the British Army would hold 'corridors' to allow Catholics to escape from Belfast, have appeared in the capitalist press. More than in 1922, a rigid line of demarcation would be drawn between Catholic and Protestant. An exclusively Protestant statelet would be left in the North. The prospect of a united Ireland would be postponed for decades. Even worse, from the standpoint of the labour movement, a new partition would blunt the class struggle North and South. It was James Connolly who predicted that 'a carnival of reaction' would result from partition. And so it proved to be. But the reaction which followed the 1922 partition would be as nothing to what would follow a new division of Ireland. The situation would be analogous to the conflict between Israel and Palestinian people. The displacement of the Palestinian people, the setting up of the Israeli state and the consequent guerrilla attacks have tended to blur the class issues in both Israel and in the Arab world. An exclusively Protestant state in the North could come only into existence by creating Catholic refugees. This in turn would provide fertile soil for recruitment of guerrilla forces to be used against the North. The labour movement in the South would be bedevilled by the tide of nationalism which would engulf the country. The Protestant workers, in the face of the inevitable guerrilla attacks would be driven into a bloc with their own capitalists.

The British bourgeoisie, despite the threatening noises in the aftermath of the strike, would only withdraw its troops when it has exhausted all other possibilities. It is paying a heavy price for maintaining its presence in Northern Ireland. It has been forced to foot the bill for the £65 million damage to property, the £7m for death and injury, in addition to the yearly subsidy of £430m. But this would be as nothing to the cost - economically and socially, as explained above - in the event of a civil war.

Its first attempts at 'power sharing' have collapsed as the Marxists predicted. The historic cross-currents which dragged down this attempt to put together a coalition of Protestant and Catholic middle class politicians, was revealed by the dilemma which confronted Wilson on the use of troops during the UWC strike. Wilson could only keep the SDLP in the Executive if he promised the use of troops. But the use of troops led to the shipwreck of the Executive! Now the British ruling class is weighing up the possibilities of fresh Assembly elections and some further attempt at 'power sharing', this time between the loyalist coalition, or parts of it, and the SDLP. This will be combined with a continued drive against the Protestant and Catholic ultras. It cannot be excluded that some kind of coalition can be established temporarily paper over the cracks in Northern Ireland society. But there can be no solution to the violence, the murders, the sectarianism, which pervades society in Northern Ireland.

Only the labour movement can show a way out of the impasse. Only through their organisations, the trade unions, can the working class dispel the threat of sectarian holocaust which hangs over the ghettos of Belfast, Derry and the towns and villages of Northern Ireland. For five years, the trade union leaders left the field free for the bigots. Only with the 'Back to work march' was some kind of serious stand against sectarianism attempted. But this went ahead without any real campaign - mass meetings in the factories, etc - amongst the workers, to explain the issues involved. Or were any steps taken to provide adequate defence for any workers to participate in the demonstration. Workers were expected to brave barricades, UDA pickets and threats to their families in order to reach the starting point of the march. The march could only have been guaranteed of success if it had been coupled by a clear call to the working class to take a class stand. At the same time, only a trade union defence force could have provided the means of defence to withstand the intimidation against workers wanting to participate in the demonstration.

In the aftermath of the strike, the very existence of the trade unions as a body cutting across

sectarian lines is endangered. The UWC, fresh from its victory over the Executive, in the aftermath of the strike has spoken about 'clearing out the communists and the reds', in the trade union movement There is only one way to guarantee the defeat of the right wing attempt to split the trade union movement on religious lines and that is by posing a clear class solution. This would link the low wages in Northern Ireland - £6-£8 less than in Britain - together with the appalling housing, social services., etc. and the sectarianism, with the existence of capitalism. The purpose should be to drive home to the working class that even their meagre living standards are put in peril if they allow themselves to be duped by the bigots on both sides of the religious divide. A Trade Union Defence Force , starting from the need to defend the working class from the sectarian maniacs and assassins, could lead to untied class action on the other social issues affecting the working class.

A sectarian catastrophe cannot be ruled out in Northern Ireland; particularly if the trade union movement fails to act now. But Marxists reject the siren voices who speak and write of the 'inevitability' of religious civil war. Events in Britain and Southern Ireland can exercise a profound effect in the North of Ireland. The worsening economic situation in Britain and its effects in Britain will provide the opportunity for cementing a class movement of Catholic and Protestant workers. But as in the past, these opportunities can be missed if the lessons of the last six years are not learnt. The bitter religious divisions between the working class, will not be bridged by Christian homilies. Sectarianism will not evaporate if the trade union leaders act as if by ignoring it, it will go away by itself. The working class of Northern Ireland have demonstrated their colossal power during the May strike. They were using that power for reactionary aims and to assist their own worst enemies, the Craigs, Paisleys and co. Let them use it together with the Catholic working class - and they will be an invincible force. Irish Marxists - gathered around the *Militant Irish Monthly* - are the only tendency in the Irish labour movement, on the basis of a Marxist programme and perspective, capable of furthering the process of re-arming the Northern Ireland workers on class lines.

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