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WRP Explosion – Chapters 5 and 6 on Ireland

by GERRY DOWNING

The Sabotage of an Opportunity to Regenerate Trotskyism 1985 - 1991
Where We Stand

WE STAND WITH KARL MARX: ‘The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves. The struggle for the emancipation of the working class means not a struggle for class privileges and monopolies but for equal rights and duties and the abolition of all class rule’ (The International Workingmen’s Association 1864, General Rules).

The capitalist state consists, in the last analysis, of ruling-class laws within a judicial system and detention centres overseen by the armed bodies of police/army who are under the direction and are controlled in acts of defence of capitalist property rights against the interests of the majority of civil society. The working class must overthrow the capitalist state and replace it with a workers’ state based on democratic soviets/workers’ councils to suppress the inevitable counter-revolution of private capitalist profit against planned production for the satisfaction of socialised human need.

We recognise the necessity for revolutionaries to carry out serious ideological and political struggle as direct participants in the trade unions (always) and in the mass reformist social democratic bourgeois workers’ parties despite their pro-capitalist leaderships when conditions are favourable. Because we see the trade union bureaucracy and their allies in the Labour party leadership as the most fundamental obstacle to the struggle for power of the working class, outside of the state forces and their direct agencies themselves, we must fight and defeat and replace them with a revolutionary leadership by mobilising the base against the pro-capitalist bureaucratic misleaders to open the way forward for the struggle for workers’ power.

We are fully in support of all mass mobilisations against the onslaught of this reactionary Con-Lib Dem coalition. However, whilst participating in this struggle we will oppose all policies which subordinate the working class to the political agenda of the petty-bourgeois reformist leaders of the Labour party and trade unions.

As socialists living in Britain we take our responsibilities to support the struggle against British imperialism’s occupation of the six north-eastern counties of Ireland very seriously. For this reason we have assisted in founding the Irish Republican Prisoners Support Group and we will campaign for political status these Irish prisoners of war and for a 32-county united Socialist Ireland. We reject all ‘two nations in Ireland’ theories.

We oppose all immigration controls. International finance capital roams the planet in search of profit and imperialist governments disrupts the lives of workers and cause the collapse of whole nations with their direct intervention in the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan and their proxy wars in Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, etc. Workers have the right to sell their labour internationally wherever they get the best price. Only union membership and pay rates can counter employers who seek to exploit immigrant workers as cheap labour to undermine the gains of past struggles.
Chapter 5: Chauvinism on the Irish Question

“History has turned its backside on these gentlemen and the inscriptions they read there have become their programme. An island position, wealth, success in world politics, all this cemented by Puritanism, the religion of the ‘chosen people’, has turned into an arrogant contempt for everything continental and generally un-British. Britain’s middle classes have been long convinced that the language, science, technology and culture of other nations do not merit study. All this has been completely taken over by the philistines currently heading the Labour Party.” (and the WRP too, GD) Trotsky: Where is Britain Going? (P 39 New Park edition.)

Seventh Congress

The outright chauvinism of the Labour bureaucracy that the SLL/WRP reflected and displayed towards Ireland had come under increasing pressure from party members during and after the miners’ strike. This was a reflection of the inspiration which this great struggle was to the most oppressed sections of society. Chief among the opponents of the line was Stuart Carter. He pointed out that the documents for first session of the Seventh Congress in October 1984, did not mention Ireland. This was subsequently included in the second session, in December.

His stand was most shamefully betrayed by the passive acceptance by everybody of assaults on him by Healy and Banda on the CC as explained earlier. When Mike Banda wrote his ‘27 Reasons he trawled the world for instances of Trotskyist betrayals yet could not spare one word for the most serious betrayal of all, which indeed revealed the true class character of the Healy organisation and reflected all the other betrayals; the betrayal of the Irish revolution by the British WRP. As the LIT prepared to break from the Preparatory Committee, it accused the WRP of re-adopting the perspectives of national Trotskyism. This was undoubtedly true. The fact that the LIT defined Internationalism as those who supported them did not take away from a correct observation.

Such was the paranoia with security that all Irish recruits were double checked, and refused membership for long periods to discourage them from joining. The disgraceful condemnation of ‘all IRA actions on the ‘mainland’ and characterising the Brighton bomb as ‘an outrage’ set the scene for a real reassessment of the previous relationship of the Party to Ireland. The chief motivator of this movement after the split was Simon Pirani and soon I and many Party members, like Charlie Walsh, a Kilburn branch member with a history of disagreement with the WRP’s position on Ireland, Phil Penn, Lynn Beaton, who was from the Australian section, were involved in the struggle.
Irish Trotskyists

The first contact we made after was with a man called Lacy who had a group in Belfast. He was a very unstable character who left the Special Congress on 25 October 1985 to support Torrance declaring that what he was hearing was not “Marxist terminology”. We then encountered another rival Belfast based group, the Irish Socialist League [ISL] and their leader Felix Quigley during the 70th anniversary of the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1986. Also there we met for the first time one of the comrades from Dublin who were later to found the Irish Workers League in response to the call for an Open International Conference put out by the WRP. The ISL held a public meeting in Trinity College after the demonstration where we met the Irish Workers Group (IWG) the Workers Power Irish co-thinkers. They were a very serious group and I felt their work on James Connolly, in particular, was very good in most respects but did reflect a tendency towards Legal Marxism’ an over-emphasis on the need to renounce all aspects of the armed struggle as ‘guerillaist’. I attacked them for their refusal to support the line of armed defence of the nationalist community in 1969. They did not see this cowardly abstention from the real physical confrontation with the fascist B-Specials and the Orange state in August 1969 as one of the reasons for the demise of the SLL Belfast group. Their later position on the Enniskillen bomb in November 1988 confirmed for me that analysis.

They concentrated their attack on the IRA and condemning the bombing, thereby joining the hysterical anti-IRA reaction in Ireland. This was too much like the response of the WRP to the Brighton bomb for me. Workers Power, in contrast, correctly defended the IRA in their paper as a prerequisite for their criticism of their methods. However, Workers Power did not disown the IWG’s position and after an internal struggle the conflict was fudged by an adaption to the reactionary position of their Irish co-thinkers.

We were absolutely overcome to meet Irish Trotskyists, whom we had heard existed but were never allowed to communicate with by the WRP. Quigley had a deep suspicion of Slaughter, with good reason, as I found out later. Unfortunately, his response to the split was to side with Banda because he was opening up all the historical questions. He failed to detect the basic Stalinist nature of Banda’s ‘27 Reasons’ and the ISL became the only international group to support him. When Banda denounced Trotskyism, and also by implication Quigley, he was devastated and his group of young comrades broke up.

Correct points

He made some correct points about the initial Eighth Congress resolution on Ireland being too soft on Sinn Fein, but after the previous history of chauvinism it was quite understandable if we bent the stick a little in the other direction. This softness did reflect, however, an important, if less repulsive, part of the IC/WRP tradition, which was unable to find the alternative, Trotskyist, line. The capitulation to petit bourgeois nationalism was the other side of the coin to the previous, and subsequent, sectarianism, based on chauvinism. Little of contention emerged on Ireland that year after the split with Quigley,
though Slaughter did indicate some disagreement with my position on the abandonment of abstentionism by Sinn Fein in my report of the 1986 Sinn Fein Ard Fheis. A delegation from Dublin attended the WRP November Conference and were so outraged at being treated as the ‘Dublin branch’ by Standing Orders that one of their comrades spoke in Gaelic to emphasise their opposition to this attitude of patronising chauvinism. It was the first indication for me that among a section of the members at least a long struggle still lay ahead to overcome this legacy from the past. The Dublin comrades had responded to the call for the International Conference by forming the Irish Workers League. They had been in the leadership of the old IC Workers League and were militant workers’ leaders who were badly burned by the experience, like us all. There was a tendency to over emphasise the opposition to sectarianism over opportunism but this was the general response to freedom from the stifling sectarianism of the old IC.

**Reaction on the Ascendant**

I was elected secretary of the Irish Commission after the March session of the 8th Congress and we felt work was proceeding well during the year with public meetings and involvement in the Guildford Four Campaign and visits to Belfast. Pirani was doing some good work in Scotland and was building up contacts in Ireland. That was bringing the Party into the mainstream of Irish solidarity work, though this area was troubled too by the lack if perspective in terms of concrete interventions in the Labour movement, as Nick Davies of the RIL, pointed out in a letter to *Workers Press* on 31 January, 1987.

The third and perhaps most important stage of the attack on the progressive drive of the WRP to redress its reactionary history came on the question of Ireland. It took the form of a sustained assault on my position as Secretary of the Irish Commission. By the beginning of 1987 reaction was well and truly on the ascendant in the WRP. In early January I had been invited to speak at a three way public meeting on Ireland by the Socialist Organiser and Workers Power.

Simon Pirani refused to raise the matter on the Political Committee and Mick Gentleman ‘forgot’ to raise it on the London District Committee, as requested. However, the 30 January meeting was advertised in *Workers Press* for a few weeks prior as a ‘Debate jointly called by Workers Power, Socialist Organiser and *Workers Press*’.

I was then told by Sean Matgamna during the meeting that he had been informed by
Dot Gibson, when he phoned the centre, that the WRP was not supporting the meeting. Only two WRP members turned up to a packed meeting of some 150 youth.

I had first come across a rounded estimation of the role of the IC in Ireland from Dermot Whelan’s document, ‘The SLL and Irish Marxism (1959-1973) – a Disastrous Legacy’, handed out by the SLG outside the June session of the 8th Congress. It has been republished by the Workers News, paper of the WIL, in September 1989. Whelan had been a leading member of the Irish group and details the appalling attitudes of the SLL, in particular Slaughter and Healy, to Ireland.

Slaughter’s intervention in the League for a Workers Republic (LWR) in the early 70s is revealed as unprincipled. He organised a secret faction which then split to form the Irish section of the IC rather than engaging in political debate and struggle, as he had been invited to do by the LWR. Whelan spells out in great detail the appalling sectarian methods ‘party building’, divorced from the class struggle, the internal regime of constant crisis and the constant factional manoeuvring of Healy and Slaughter.

Letters from Brian Pearce and Cliff Slaughter

The initial vehicle for the onslaught was the despicable Brian Pearce, an ex-member, famous translator from the Russian Trotsky’s works and one of the ‘old boy network’ of Pilling Slaughter and Peter Fryer (the first Editor of The Newsletter and a radical author), most of whom had joined from the CP in the late fifties. He had the racist, ‘Boys with the rosaries and armalites’ letter, sneering at the IRA and glorifying William of Orange printed in Workers Press on 17 January:

“It appears that some members of the Workers Revolutionary Party are opposed to celebrating the events of 1688 in England because this might give offence to the boys with the rosaries and armalites... Thanks to the ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688 we had the agricultural revolution. The industrial revolution, the modern proletariat, trade unionism, Chartism and the whole 19th am 20th century development of the British labour movement ... Nobody, I’m sure, in the WRP would be against celebrating the English revolution of the 1640s and 1650s. Yet, of course, James II, backed by Louis XIV of France, raised troops among the Irish Catholics to carry through his counter-revolution. If they were defeated at the battle of the Boyne, was that such a bad thing from the stand point of world history?”

This was an appalling racist and chauvinist diatribe. Perhaps US Trotskyists should celebrate the defeat of the Red Indian Nation at the battle of Wounded Knee or South African Trotskyist celebrate the defeat of the African tribes in the Zulu Wars - from the stand-point of world history?”

It drew a strong reaction from many WRP members. This document by Whelan was never discussed in the WRP and leaders made strenuous efforts at preventing members obtaining it when the SLG handed it out. I also obtained copies of The Newsletter, the SLL newspaper. Those from August 1969 where the political line of the SLL on Ireland was spelled out, were particularly devas-
tating. I was therefore in possession of quite extensive details of what the SLL/WRP was up to in Ireland in the past. It was just as well because Slaughter pressed home the counter attack in *Workers Press* of 24 January under the nom-de-plume of ‘J Upward’:

“...One feature of Cde Downing’s article (I had written a review of David Reed’s ‘Ireland, the Key to the British Revolution’) puzzles me. From the Popular Front and the Civil War in Spain, he leaps 33 years to 1969-1970. What about the role of the IRA in the intervening years? How did the bourgeois nationalist movement confront World War II and the struggles of the post-war periods? (Brian Pearce was soon to give us the answer to that. Treason! GD) ...Comrade Downing tells us that the ‘excellent’ Reed makes biting comments on the role of the British middle class left (including the Socialist Labour League, Workers Revolutionary Party under Healy). I believe Gerry Downing is member of the Central Committee of the Workers Revolutionary Party. Has he discussed and found agreement in that Committee that the SLL/WRP was part of the British middle class left or is he making this attack as an individual in the columns of the WRP’s paper? I defy him to show how the policies of the SLL on Ireland or on any other question were ‘middle class’. In 1969 the *Workers Press*, in front page lead articles, in editorials, in features and reports written by several comrades who went to the North and participated in the struggles, stood alone in fighting for the withdrawal of Brutish troops, (This is an old lie. Both the Militant and the IMG opposed the sending in of troops and called for their withdrawal, as did the USec.GD) while the middle class left, including the Socialist Workers Party, welcomed those troops in as the ‘lesser evil’. In the years between 1975 and 1985 Healy’s policy of avoiding any clash with the British state produced the reactionary line in the WRP of outright condemnation of the IRA bomb attacks in Britain. That was a manifestation of the way Healy’s regime introduced middle class politics into a proletarian organisation, the SLL/WRP. In 1985 the process of degeneration involved in that was arrested and Healy and his allies defeated by the WRP. This dialectic Downing ignores preferring simply the label ‘British middle class’. He thereby slanders the work of hundreds of comrades who fought to build the proletarian revolutionary party (foremost of these was C Slaughter, no doubt, GD) always against that ‘British middle class left’. That light eventually had to be fought inside the WRP, against Healy, Redgrave and company. And we won. Don’t forget that”.

The Post Script to the letter was even more disgraceful:

Brian Pearce, (1915 – 2008): his reactionary and pro-imperialist views on Ireland were pandered to so outrageously by Pilling and Slaughter to reassert their own similar views on the WRP.
“PS. The caption under a photograph accompanying Cde Downing’s article says: ‘Many of the best fighters of the Communist Party perished in the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. This group includes Frank Ryan. This may lead some readers to think Frank Ryan was killed in Spain. So far as I know he was taken prisoner and then taken to Germany. Perhaps Comrade Downing can tell us what happened to him subsequently?’

This said in effect: ‘and wasn’t Frank Ryan a Nazi collaborator?’ This was a British Imperialist inspired smear against Ryan, a leading IRA activist and Socialist Republican. Captured in Spain, fighting for the Republic, he was spared the firing squad and died in Germany of his wounds and of TB. It was, of course, quite correct to seek arms from Hitler to fight British Imperialism. This, together with the question on what the IRA had been up to during World War 11, revealed the pro-imperialist attitude of Slaughter, which is that of the English middle classes. It cannot be a coincidence that what was hinted at so broadly by Slaughter in this letter was spelled out so explicitly by Pearce in the issue of the paper where my reply to the ‘J Upward’ letter also appeared, two weeks later on 7 February.

Replies to White Anglo Saxon Protestant supremacism

I had not only been appalled at the WRP’s chauvinism towards Ireland, so clearly revealed after the split, but also at my own political cowardice in not fighting it. I vowed to myself that, as a Trotskyist and an Irishman, I would never again tolerate that chauvinism masquerading under the guise of Marxism or Trotskyism or in any other form. In the next issue, 24 January, I replied with a letter attacking the basic racism of Pearce:

“Yes, I’m sure the WRP would be against celebrating the Cromwellian revolution of the 1640s and 1650s despite its great progressive nature. Cromwell may have cut the head off Charles 1 to popular acclaim but his butchery of the Irish nation and his suppression of the Diggers and Levellers (the left wing of his army) confirmed the bourgeois nature of the new order...History has transformed Puritanism from the revolutionary bourgeois ideology of the 17th century into the racist, fascist expression of white Anglo Saxon Protestant supremacy from the north of Ireland to the Southern States of the USA to South Africa. It is sad to see a former Trotskyist, who has obviously become totally alienated from the struggles of working class people, giving credence. Even “from the stand-point of world history” to so repressive an ideology”

In the same issue Brian Dempsey, from Scotland, also attacked Pearce:

“If Pearce wishes to contribute to our developing understanding of Irish issues and is concerned about the relationship between religion and the class struggle he should prepare a sober contribution on the subject. If, however, all he can do is produce cynical and bigoted remarks he would do well to keep them to himself.”

Simon Pirani, too, joined the attack, though respectfully:

“We don’t need a fine Marxist scholar like Brian Pearce to tell us that the English bourgeois revolution was a great step forward for history... I never heard of anyone celebrating 1688, but every 12 July tens of thousands of Orangemen celebrate 1690. Does Brian Pearce think it strange that WRP members don’t participate?”
In *Workers Press*, 31 January Aine Devlin’s reply to Pearce was short and sweet:

“If Brian Pearce ever wants to visit Ireland we can fix it up for him to meet some people without rosaries”.

Now, however, the issue was no longer Pearce but the reactionary letter from Slaughter. Not everybody knew, of course, that Upward was Slaughter. My reply was published on 7 February:

“...In the Newsletter in 1965 an article from ‘a Dublin correspondent’ stated: ‘Nationalism is as poisonous to the Irish working class as racism is to the British working class... in issue 676 (15 August 1969) ‘our own correspondent’ wrote the lead article: ‘Spectre of Unity in Belfast Riots’ about what could happen if Catholic and Protestant workers united. But in issue 677, 19 August, it had already happened. A lead story by David Maude reported that: “Defence guards had been formed in the majority of Belfast districts and estates following Thursday’s bitter street fighting”. Similar moves involving both Catholic and Protestant workers are underway in Londonderry (sic). On Belfast’s Grosvenor Road tonight Republican elements (sic) tried to order Protestant families out of their homes... Workers quickly formed a mutual defence patrol”. I can only say that no one else in the world noticed this latter. Whilst calling to ‘to withdraw troops from Northern Ireland (sic) now and ‘Unity of Catholic and Protestant workers’ issues 676, 677 and 678 put the perspective for the Irish Revolution: “For a Workers and Farmers Government breaking with Westminster posing unity of action immediately with the workers of the South (sic) and of Britain”. No doubt about what that means: a ‘two nations’ theory, under which a withdrawal of British troops would leave the Orange Order in control. As there was not even a call for the disbanding of the B-Specials (the Orange Order fascist reserve force then murdering and burning Nationalist homes at will, GD) it was clearly a Walkerite appeal to Protestant prejudices against nationalism - the ‘pure class’ line so brilliantly demolished by James Connolly in the ‘Connolly-Walker controversy. This chauvinist position was detailed by Dermot Whelan in, *The SLL and Irish Marxism 1959-1973: A Disastrous Legacy.*

Together with branches in Belfast and Londonderry (sic) we had a Dublin branch fighting to bring down the Tories. No amount of struggle and self-sacrifice, most of it ‘party building’ abstract from the real class struggle could save the Irish movement from extinction in the face of such wrong policies.”

**Pearce warms to his task**

In that same *Workers Press* of 7 February Pearce now warmed to his task. Taking his cue from Slaughter, in a letter entitled, ‘The IRA and the Nazis’ Pearce let it all spew out. This is just some of it:

“I was in the North as a soldier for a whole year during what was called in the Republic ‘The Emergency’. (An Interesting period that was. We could listen into Radio Athlone’s news bulletins. From North Africa they read both sides communiqués - the German came first, of course). From the Eastern Front they
read only the German communiqués: no platform for atheistic communism. In the Summer of 1942 it became known that the Nazis were planning to invade the Republic in order to be able to invade Britain from that direction. At that time the IRA became hyperactive in the North, trying to steal arms and money, to commit acts of sabotage and above all to collect military information on behalf of the German Embassy in Dublin. (These were obviously dastardly acts of high treason to the British Empire, in Pearce’s view, GD).

I said to one of their lads who had been caught on the job: ‘You people are always talking about freedom. How can you bring yourselves to help the Nazis who would enslave the world if they could?’ He replied, ‘England’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity. In any conflict we take the side opposed to England. To which my rejoinder was ‘But isn’t that, in effect, letting England determine your policy? At which he gave me one of those ‘The English will never understand’ smiles before being led away.”

He then got a good kicking, presumably, if he was not actually done to death, as is the good old tradition in the British army when dealing with Irish rebels. The sole objection raised by Pilling, the editor, to this drivel in a note at the end of the letter was to mention that the Workers Press does not use the name ‘Londonderry’ in normal circumstances (as Pearce did later in his letter).

In fact the Dublin government fully cooperated with the British war machine in secret. If they remained publicly neutral it was because it was politically impossible to get the mass of Irish people to support Britain during the war while the six north eastern counties were occupied. Official papers released in January 1991 revealed what really happened. This is The Guardian report by Joe Joyce on 3 January:

“The Irish government passed information about German craft and submarines to Britain during the second world war in spite of its policy of neutrality according to official papers released by the national archive in Dublin yesterday. A foreign ministry memo dated May 1941 listed 13 ways in which Britain was being helped to wage war. The extent of operation surpasses what had been known already including joint planning between the British and Irish armies to counter a German invasion.”

So we are left with a simple racist diatribe from Pearce against the (backward?) nationalists who would not submit to British imperialism. Even Churchill knew that to have any chance of getting the south to join the war you had to offer a united Ireland. If de Valera refused it was because he did not trust the word of Perfidious Albion. All this reveals Pearce’s attitude to Ireland; somewhere to the right of Churchill’s.

In a letter in the same issue, Geoff Barr, from Exeter, solidarised with the anti Pearce letters and pointed out that the National Front were the main organisers of the 1988 celebration of King Billy’s landing in the West Country in 1688. In the issue of 21 February Dave Bruce
weighed against Pete Fryer and ‘P Upward’ for their arrogance to members (Nora Wilde, Richard Goldstein and me) and defended our rights to our views:

“For example Cde Downing was attacked in a recent letter from J Upward (he might adopt the nom-de-plume of Step Sideways) because he called the policies of the SLL on Ireland ‘middle class’.

I chanced to read that letter at the same time as I read Cde Sara Hannanigán’s account of how Mickey Devine left the SLL because of its chauvinist line on Ireland only to die later in the 1981 Hunger Strikes. He also attacked Fryer for abusing his ‘Personal Column to attack Richard Goldstein and Norah Wilde. Norah Wilde defended my democratic rights too in that issue and pointed out that ‘Upward’ was attempting to halt all re-examination: “Since October 1985, freed from bureaucratic repression Workers Press and the WRP through its internal and public discussions have deepened and clarified our understanding of the past, another dialectic with which J Upward appears to b unfamiliar.”

Frank Fitzmaurice from Liverpool also denounced Pearce’s chauvinism. But Pearce was given two more bites at the cherry. On 14 March, we had from him:

“... As for the matter of Londonderry you may prefer ‘Derry’ (why not, though, go all the way and write ‘Doire’) but it would have been ridiculous for me to avoid the form ‘Londonderry’ in the context of what I wrote. It was mainly owing to the Ulster Protestants that we were able to use the base in World War II, and they prefer the longer name. In saying which I do not forget the contribution to the crushing of Nazi Germany made by Irish Catholics from both sides of the Border, who volunteered to join the British armed forces regardless of the attitude of the government in Dublin - sorry Baile Atha Cliath. (Does not this sound like something you would hear from the Queen? GD). If Northern Ireland were to be annexed to the Republic this would mean that the majority community in the North would have imposed upon them not only the ideology of the Roman Catholic Church but also something which is alien to their culture, namely the Irish language.”

Pearce can hardly have been ignorant of the fact that Derry returned a unionist majority at every election despite the fact that some 70% of the population were nationalist”. Never mind what they wanted to call their own city. What’s a little gerrymandering among friends eh?

**Barrage of letters**

This drew a barrage of letters from members. Sue Gwyer, Simon Pirani, Geoff Barr and Charlie Pottins attacked Pearce’s chauvinism in the next issue (2 March). But some members did not wish to leave it at the level of attacking Pearce. On 4 April Paddy Winters, from the North London branch, attacked Pearce and also the decision of the Editor, Pill- ing, to publish these letters:

“It is ironic that at this time, with talk of internationalism the Party in Britain would impede the possible progress of our Irish comrades, for such letters as those written by Pearce will certainly have such an effect. The ideas inherent in these letters, and by association the act of publishing them, come directly from a class position: they come from a petty bourgeois fear and hatred of oppressed peoples in struggle, which brings with it a philosophical bankruptcy. Only a charlatan would still hold to the backward ideas expounded in B Pearce’s
writings. I feel that those who allow such garbage to be printed today will - philosophically speaking - have to sweep it up tomorrow or he buried by it”.

**Pilling is smoked out**

That smoked Pilling out. In a footnote to Winter’s letter he says:

“Whatever our disagreements with Brian Pearce the stand-point of the above (unsigned) letter. (Winters had forgotten to sign the letter but quickly made it known that he was the author GD) must be rejected. Pearce has raised some issues of great importance for Marxism issues which are not settled by abuse. If Pearce’s letters stir some comrades into sending contributions which tackle these problems that would be splendid – Editor.”

You could, of course, say that about Mein Kampf.

David Gorman from Liverpool, on 18 April wrote:

“Cliff Slaughter has claimed that what North described as a nationalist and opportunist tendency was arrested and driven out of the Party with the expulsion of Healy in October 1985. The privileged position granted to Pearce’s odious national socialism in the letter pages of *Workers Press* raises a question mark.”

Charlie Walsh also made clear, in a letter in that issue, that he totally supported Winter’s criticism of the *Workers Press* for publishing the letters. But the Paddy baiting was now reaching a climax. Again Pearce appeared in print in the very same issue of 18 April and spewed out yet more reaction. This letter contained three themes: (1) Support for Loyalists reaction in the north of Ireland and opposition to Irish unity:

> “Liberation is the work of the masses; it is not possible against them, writes Geoff Barr. Well the masses to Northern Ireland are predominantly Protestant, and strongly adverse to the aims of the IRA. What conclusion are we to draw from that fact? Perhaps they are not masses at all, but - wait for it - settlers’ (settlers still after 300 years and more)?” (2) Support for the partition of India by British Imperialism and (3) Condemnation of British war-time Trotskyists for sabotaging the ‘war effort’ by promoting strikes: “It was disgraceful of the Stalinists to call them (the Trotskyists) agents Hitler but might not Hitler have said about them: ‘with enemies like these who needs friends?’”

Finally, the following week, 25 April, Pilling was forced to call a halt. But the basis on which the Editorial Board did so made it clear that they had no regrets for the outrageous insults offered to Irish people and to principled Trotskyists:

> “… In its apparent defence of the partition of India, and its suggestion that Trotskyist opposition to Imperialism in the last war helped Nazism we think the letter went beyond the bounds of socialist controversy. We do not regret our publication of Pearce’s previous letters. However much we may disagree with his position on Ireland Pearce raised a series of important issues. We feel in some cases
these were answered with mere abuse. On further consideration, however, we think that last week’s contribution should not have been published. *Workers Press* Editorial Board”.

That was the end of the affair, apart from a letter of support for Pearce and Pilling from another of the academics, lecturer Terry Brotherstone from Edinburgh. He referred approvingly to: “Pearce’s provocative and stimulating letters”. Both the Editorial Board statement and Brotherstone’s letters summed up for me the whole rotten essence of the WRP. They said, in effect, “What’s up with you blokes, what’s wrong with a bit of Paddy bashing anyway?”

When Pearce started insulting war-time British Trotskyists and supporting the partition of India he had gone “beyond the bounds of socialist controversy”. He was, of course, free to use the pages of *Workers Press* and later the pages of ‘Marxist Forum’, the journal of the WRP’s loyal(ist) Irish co-thinkers, to support the partition of Ireland and spew out chauvinism towards the war-time IRA and racist insults at the Irish as long as he wished. The message to any principled internationalist could not be mistaken: either swallow this crap or get lost.

The struggle for Trotskyism in Ireland was cynically betrayed by Healy and Slaughter, Slaughter’s intervention in the IWG was thoroughly dishonest. It involved forming a secret faction whilst pretending to have discussions with the leadership. The purpose was to set up a client Irish section of the ICFI to get an extra vote when it split in 1971. The British SLL and the French OCI were the main opponents in the split.

### Chapter 6: Break with the Irish Workers League

The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and that changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing forgets that it is men that change circumstances and that the educator himself needs educating. Hence this doctrine necessarily arrived at dividing society into two parts of which one is superior to society (in Robert Owen, for example). The coincidence of changing circumstances and of human activity can be rationally understood as revolutionary practice.”

*Marx, Theses on Feuerbach.*

Or how Cliff Slaughter rationalised reactionary Loyalism as ‘objectively anti-capitalist’ (revolutionary) with the old Healyite ideology; objectivism based on crude mechanical materialism.

### Turn of the Screw

As part of a further turn of the screw on the Irish question, Cliff Slaughter had an article from the Workers press of October 1969 reprinted in *Workers Press* in May 1987. There were at least two replies, none of which were published. Slaughter wrote it to justify his own role on Ireland. Stuart Carter had a piece in Internal Bulletin no.27 objecting to these articles.

The fact that no public criticism was allowed of this appalling article signified to what extent a clique leadership was now imposing a new position on Ireland over the heads of the membership. As Norah Wilde had pointed out in her letter to the *Workers Press* of 21 February, Slaughter had no more right to claim the WRP’s policy
on Ireland was not middle class than I had to claim it was as no committee had decided on this issue. Two double-page spreads with no replies permitted, not even from the Secretary of the Irish Commission was how the issue was decided.

One of the letters was from Bill Stevens in Australia. It tackled the way Slaughter blamed all the past errors on Healy in the foreword he had written for the reprinted article. It analysed what ideologically lay behind this. The other letter was from me and it is dated 4 June 1987. This is the full text:

**On Slaughter’s ‘Incorrect Things’**

The two double-page spreads by Cliff Slaughter on 16 and 23 May set out to prove that the politics of the SLL/WRP degenerated in the 1970s and 80s due to Healy’s ‘more and more one man leadership’ when we began to condemn the IRA for ‘bombings and other actions’. Is this not a ‘cult of the individual’ theory as used by Khrushchev to cover up his own actions under Stalin? However up to 1972 and the Workers Press, ‘We condemn the Bombings’ response to the bombing of the Aldershot barracks (the IMG had the courage to identify it as a legitimate military target in the wake of ‘Bloody Sunday’) things were OK, apart from a few ‘incorrect things’, minor peccadilloes excusable in a Trotskyist organisation under the pressure of capitalist ideology.

The only ‘incorrect thing’ discovered is the slogan ‘For a Workers’ and Farmers’ government, breaking with constitution (sic) (this should read ‘Westminster’ presumably) posing unity of action immediately with workers of the South and with Britain. In the present situation such a fight would have the support of workers throughout Britain (?) who would make impossible the intervention of the hated Wilson.

Just how wrong this is, is barely analysed. It gives the political parameters for the whole outlook of the Party. It legitimises the partition of Ireland and therefore perpetuated imperialist rule, on Slaughters own admission (1). This apparently ‘is not a capitulation to imperialism’

Is this some form of doublethink? You could scarcely get a more incorrect position. A few minor observations on the slogan. Why breaking from Westminster and not Britain? Is this a weasel formulation to hide the real intention? Why is it deemed necessary to win support of workers throughout Britain and only ‘pose unity’ with workers in the South? Was the mobilisation, on a revolutionary programme, of Irish workers of such low priority that they must rely on British workers to win their struggles for them? They would be waiting still.

All the later positions of the party arc present in the two articles and some positions
are worse. At least in later years we formally acknowledged the right of Ireland to self-determination due to the struggles of the IRA and the nationalist community. We could hardly have a pro-imperialist attitude on all issues and still claim to be ‘Trotskyists. This raises a question for C Slaughter. You admit you said incorrect things to cover up for the real path of the Party between 1970 and 1985, at least. Are you doing the same now by reprinting these articles? Does this not characterise a centrist organisation and method? The policies of the SLL/WRP had a real effect on the struggle in Ireland as we had large forces on the ground on occasions. With a correct programme we could have built a Marxist party. But the vacillations and downright reactionary politics acted as a block on the building of such a leadership. The patronising capitulation to Orangism ensured that there would be no unity of Catholic and Protestant workers, the role now played by the ‘Militant’. This is centrism that can point to ‘correct things’ to cover up for ‘incorrect things’ and learn nothing from our history. Thus did Trotsky characterise the role of the POUM in the Spanish Civil War.

I must take issue with the ‘false conception’ theory that in the 70s and 80s the building of the Party in Britain took precedence and that the taking of power could come first in Britain and then the International could be built in other countries. From seeking to deny the Party’s pro-imperialist positions pre-1970. Slaughter now defends Healy’s later positions. Marxists never proceed from ‘false conceptions’ to explain a chauvinist policy. What we are dealing with is the pro-imperialist prejudices of the British Labour aristocracy. This is why the articles have such a pro-found Orange flavour. Their basis is the booty of Empire, buying the allegiance of skilled workers and their representatives, the Labour and trade union leaders. Orangism rests on the same corrupt relationship. Hence the ‘British socialist’-Orange block.

The Connolly-Walker debates brought out this relationship. Walker held that he was the real socialist, working to develop Belfast Corporation’s services to the poor as against Connolly, who was dividing the Irish working class, and Irish workers from British workers by seeking to build a separate socialist party in Ireland. Connolly was a nationalist because he was opposed to branches of the British Social Democratic Federation in Ireland and was therefore anti-internationalist (remember the SLL branches of Dublin, Belfast and Londonderry). Healy was a Walker clone - his entire political career and Slaughter’s articles are true to this tradition.

I have already pointed out many of these ‘errors’ in a letter to Workers Press in reply to S Upward. As Upward has fallen strangely silent on these matters, perhaps Slaughter could take up the cudgels on his behalf besides reprinting his old articles with ‘incorrect things’, of which he mentions only one. Are there more?

Take the ‘best’ passage:

“Simon pure reformers and so-called socialists will object, of course, that those Protestant workers clashed with the troops preventing them from fighting the Catholic workers. This is, of course, what happened. But the objective logic of events expressed in these attacks was that these workers (the loyalists) have been led to express their bitterness and frustration as victims of exploitation, unemployment and bad housing by taking it out on their class brothers, the Catholics...etc.”

Us Marxists, of course, don’t have the problem of ‘Simon purists’, we must take no notice of what happened and, in place of political struggle, advance ‘objective logic’
and an argument that would equally serve as an apology for Hitler’s Brownshirts. After all they were only taking out their ‘frustrations’ on the Jews and the communists. So perhaps the Nationalist community will be able to console themselves that they are being murdered by bullets from Loyalists that are subjectively counter-revolutionary but their ‘objective logic’ is revolutionary?

Apart from other errors (what civil war in 1918?) both articles have a partitionist outlook. The maintenance electrician’s strike in 1968-69 was one of the bitterest trade union disputes in the history of the state. It ended in victory. Marxists distinguish between victory and defeat, even in trade unions. This was part of, and greatly contributed to a great working class upsurge throughout Ireland, inspired by May-June 1968 in France and the American Civil rights movement. Both these came together in the pre-revolutionary situation of August 1969. Political developments recognised no border, even if the SLL did. The Dublin working class was in ferment with the Dublin Housing Action Committee etc. and demonstrations almost every night. Jack Lynch sent troops to the border when the assault on West Belfast began and half the Cabinet were later sacked, accused of gunrunning for the IRA (including the present premier, Charles Haughey)

To counterpose a utopian unity, then, against the real forces of revolution was to oppose the revolution itself. Similarly ‘Marxism’ was counterposed to the Civil Rights Movement. Strangely we did not take this sectarian attitude to the American Civil Rights Movement.

So withdraw troops to leave a reformed Orange bastard statelet was the worst of all positions and this must be acknowledged if past errors are to be overcome. When Slaughter says: “The heritage of British imperialism ... ruled out a capitalist solution”, I must point out that there is always a capitalist solution to every capitalist crisis, even if it is a ‘final solution’. This objectivism is a cover up for capitulation to Imperialism.

Gerry Downing

Examine the Real Record of the SLL on Ireland

Carter’s article In the Internal Bulletin also denied that the SLL capitulated to British Imperialism but then says:

“Their (Slaughter’s articles) publication, and the way they are introduced show that those responsible for their appearance do not take seriously the responsibilities of Trotskyists on Ireland. If they did they would want to examine the real record of the SLL on Ireland rather than reprint a few newspaper articles in a point scoring exercise.”

Carter then goes on to further disapprove of the present methods and, drawing at length from Dermot Whelan’s document already referred to, proceeds to expose many of the worst features of the SLL/WRP record on Ireland. He thereby proves that they did capitulate to something. Since he has ruled out imperialism, to what did they capitulate?

There is an element of farce involved in exposing to people their own past crimes, that they are so desperate to cover up, in the expectation that you will force them to reform, if you intend to do nothing further about it. Interestingly the
present IC under North uncritically defends Slaughter and the pre 1970 record of the SLL in Ireland, whilst criticising the later crimes of the WRP.

Stuart Carter presented a number of amendments to Pirani’s ‘Draft Resolution for Discussion on Ireland’ at the Ninth Congress which removed some of the more objectionable formulations and ideas (including some that I objected to) and reasserted the idea of Ireland as an oppressed nation. However he was very careful not to rock the boat too much, and never indicated any direct support for my stand on Ireland or for the IWL. An this throws a new light on the big gains supposedly made by Healy after 1956 from the CP. Obviously these recruits, Slaughter, Pearce etc. bringing with them all the liberal reactionary and chauvinist views of Stalinism, were never challenged on them before and have never overcome them. It was also significant that not one of the leading trade unionists (Bevan, Temple, Gibson, Simmance, Handyside, Leicester etc.) in the Party was moved to repudiate Pearce’s views publicly or privately.

Slaughter had made his point. He and Pilling could produce any right-wing positions they liked and get away with it. Reaction was resurgent in the WIW and was sweeping all in its path. Just to prove that no real slur was intended on Pearce’s revolutionary credentials, he is now (1991) reinstated in WRP favour. The whole episode, of course, rendered relations with the IWL almost untenable, as Paddy Winters had predicted.

I failed to get the position overturned in the next congress in April. Mick Gentleman, of Standing Orders, promised me that I would get a chance to speak on my motion to congress which said:

“This congress condemns as chauvinist, pro-imperialist and anti-Irish racism the three letters (four, in fact. GD) from Brian Pearce beginning 17-1-87. It instructs the Workers Press to cease publishing these diatribes which have slandered Irish people as ‘the boys (!) with the rosaries and Armalites’, have supported British Imperialism against the IRA, opposed the re-unification of Ireland on the grounds of the inferiority of southern Catholics and given political support to reactionary Loyalism. This congress apologises to Irish people and to the fighters for national liberation in Ireland, undertakes not to publish such material in future and instructs the Workers Press to publish this resolution”.

It was manoeuvred off the agenda, with no opposition from anyone but me. It was then referred to the CC for decision. The CC postponed discussing it for several months and eventually voted it down with only three votes against. They never made any statement on the Pearce letters. This determined, without any need for detailed perspectives, what the political orientation of the WIW would be in future to Ireland and the nature of any future Irish co-thinkers.

Around this time too the Guildford Four campaign ran into difficulty, with the relatives splitting to form a right wing appeal to the establishment which required to dropping of the left wingers of the WRP and the RCG, who had set up and done all the work in the campaign up to then. Phil Penn announced after that that he would no longer be giving
this work priority. The RCG had no difficulty in seeing the drift of the WRP and told us we were going back to the old Healyite ways.

**Draft Resolution**

Pirani then produced his ‘Draft Resolution for Discussion on Ireland’ pandering to that re-emerging chauvinism. It drew an inward howl of rage from me. I never felt so politically betrayed in my life and I set about exposing Pirani’s positions. The arguments are all in the documents, though I would not now agree with some of the positions I took then in my haste to deal a blow at Pirani’s treachery. It was wrong to say that Sinn Fein are the left wing of the bourgeoisie. They are, in fact, a petty bourgeois nationalist force. However the main political point of my argument is correct.

The obligation on Marxists is to support Ireland’s right to self-determination. This includes material support for the Irish bourgeoisie in its conflicts with British imperialism, though not political endorsement, of course. Pirani’s attempt to prove that there was no longer a basis for conflict between the Irish bourgeoisie and British Imperialism, due to the capitalist development of Ireland, is a justification of his abandoning that duty.

Sinn Fein cannot, of course, have an independent non-class position, there is no third road for the revolution and they would become a capitalist government on assuming power. A Cuba solution is out of the question in Ireland.


**Objectivism**

Surely not accidentally, the argument opened on the objectivity of the struggles of the working class. The WRP’s resolution, written by Pirani, reads:

“The struggles of the last 18 years in the north of Ireland have been fought around nationalist questions and on nationalist issues but are objectively part of the struggle of the International working class for socialism.”

This was a very dangerous formulation, given the history of the IC on this question, where Gaddafi, Saddam Hussain, Khomeini and Ho Chi Min were supported, uncritically, as the objective forces of the unfolding world revolution, and the executions of Trotskyists and other people who professed to be socialists was defended. Surely it is a one sided and fundamentally undialectical view which has enormously reactionary consequences if taken to its logical conclusion. Cliff Slaughter went very far down this road in his 1969 article on Ireland and in his debate on Cu-
ba with the US SWP, as Chris Bailey pointed out in his Theoretical Foundations of Healyism, discussed in chapter four. As I wrote in my document, ‘Ireland: Revolutionary Socialism versus Chauvinism and Objectivism, written on 14 October 1987:

“Comrade Pirani insists on the objective nature of the struggle for socialism (i.e. Trotskyism) and makes believe that, this is a stand for historical materialism. Of course none of his quotes from Marx, Engels and Lenin support his childish dogma. The fact is that he makes a great diversionary noise about the objective factor to prevent us examining too closely the political history of the SLL/WRI) in the north of Ireland and the UT in Latin America, i.e. would be ‘revolutionary leaderships’ that failed to develop objectively favourable situations in the direction of socialist revolution. Instead of subjecting those failures to self-critical analysis, as a Marxist must, Pirani prefers to sweep them under the carpet with utterly vague appeals to objective ‘difficulties’ and empty promises of a real accounting manaña. He thus prepares a repetition of past mistakes and betrayals. No more than a fish can swim without water, can a revolutionary party take power at the head of ‘unconscious’ masses!

And quoting from Marx; Theses on Feuerbach:

“The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and that changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing forgets that it is men that change circumstances and that the educator himself needs educating. Hence this doctrine necessarily arrived at dividing society into two parts of which one is superior to society (in Robert Owen, for example) [and Simon Pirani – GD]. The coincidence of changing circumstances and of human activity can be rationally understood as revolutionary practice.” (End Marx quote)

“The class struggle is a materially determined, objective process. It continues with or without the existence of a Bolshevik type party as the conscious expression of that process. Recent decades, when the Fourth international has disintegrated, have borne this out. But the subjective factor of a revolutionary party, when it grips the minds of the masses, becomes the decisive factor in the class struggle.”

That is the reciprocal action between the programme of a revolutionary leadership, and first of all the political vanguard of the masses in the working class, and then, through them, the entire mass of the oppressed. It is what changes the political (objective) conditions from pre-revolution to revolution. As I observed in the document the ‘struggle for socialism’ has two meanings. One is the objectively determined class struggle, whose only progressive outcome is ‘socialism’ the first stage leading to communism after a socialist revolution, where equality of opportunity only is possible. But the meaning for Marxists is surely the interplay between that and the struggle for the minds of men carried out by a Trotskyist party using transitional programmatic demands based on the science of Marxism”. Pirani deliberately confused these two aspects.

Point Blank

As long as we remain in the realms of academic controversy the point may escape most people, so it is necessary to
put certain questions to Pirani point blank: Where do you stand on the attacks on nationalist areas by loyalist mobs which came into conflict with the British army in 1969? Do you support the view of the leader of your party, Slaughter, whom I have quoted above, that ‘the objective logic of events’ expressed in these attacks was that ‘these workers (the loyalists) have been led to express their bitterness and frustration as victims of exploitation, unemployment and bad housing by taking it out (a euphemism for sectarian murders worthy of the best British disinformation unit. GD) on their class brothers, the Catholics. The clash with the troops signified that the maintenance of capitalist rule in Northern Ireland can no longer depend on this device’?

Here is the poisonous logic of your ‘objectively’ position and the cowardly silence you have maintained on the reactionary position expressed above, and that of Pilling and his defence of Pearce, show that either you have fundamental agreement with those positions or, what is more likely true in your case, you do not have the backbone to fight those who do. Do you accept the implication in Slaughter’s piece that this is a religious conflict and that there is no material basis for Loyalist reaction?

It is best perhaps if I develop the arguments taken up by Peoples Democracy member Lemuel Gulliver in his polemic with Pirani and me. The PD is the USec section in Ireland. Gulliver supports Pirani on the question of objectivity but, whilst his is also a totally undialectical and one-sided estimation, it comes from a different tradition. It is wholly in line with the USec tradition of denying the necessity of building revolutionary Trotskyist leadership as the subjective factor because of the bourgeois-democratic nature of the revolution or because some Stalinist or nationalist force may substitute as a blunted instrument to lead the revolution. Pirani is right in his attack on Gullivers basic ideological capitulation to Sinn Fein. However Pirani’s ‘objectivism’ has a slightly different content, the object being to deny the Marxist tactic of support for

Christian Rakovsky and Trotsky; in fact it was Lenin who pioneered the rights of nations to self-determination, particularly in his last struggle with Stalin, Rakovsky is defending that in his quotes here.
national liberation and to revert to the pure class struggle ideology of the old fashioned labour aristocracy (and the SLL/WRP) so brilliantly demolished by Connolly in his controversy with Walker. This Gulliver has no trouble in identifying and his comparison with Socialist Organiser’s line is well taken. Pirani has engaged in many debates with the SOs and their influence shows Pirani also argued that the relationship between Britain and Ireland has fundamentally changed since the last quarter of the last century. This has the very reactionary content of appealing to a section of the British liberal bourgeoisie that, as no material reason exists for the occupation of the six counties, then it is in their best interests to depart. This post imperialist theory is the cover for a capitulation to Slaughter’s plea for silence on the history of the SLL/WRP’s relation to Ireland and Slaughter’s own reactionary role in it.

**National Culture**

Another of his positions is that Irish culture and language is a diversion. This is put forward merely to prove that the national question is off the agenda as the peasantry is now only a tiny minority (30% still gain their living from agriculture). In Pirani’s reply to me: ‘Ireland: Marxism versus Revisionism’, this is how he dismisses Irish culture:

“Comrade Downing says: ‘There can be no talk of abandoning Irish culture for the sake of ‘unity’ with loyalist workers.’ why does he counterpose the two? Of course we should not abandon our defence of Irish culture for anybody. But in the previous sentence he talks of Irish culture as a ‘weapon’ in the struggle against imperialism; it should be ‘abandoned’ not for the sake of loyalist workers but for the sake of the Marxists; (I must confess I had no idea at the time who these ‘Marxists’ were who could not tolerate Irish culture. GD) to struggle for power the Irish working class needs neither bourgeois nationalist culture nor unprincipled unity, but a Marxist leadership.”

The issue of national culture is of the utmost importance. Workers are not abstractions (“What does this mean?” Pirani asks in bewilderment in the above quoted document), they have a cultural history and separate traditions and cannot achieve equality with the working class of an oppressor nation by taking on the culture of the oppressor and abandoning their own. Pirani’s quote above is similar to an incident in the First International when Marx pointed out to the French delegates who wished national cultures to be abandoned that this amounted to everybody adopting French imperialist culture. Pirani wishes the Irish to adopt his own, English, culture. Perhaps we should say, with George Bernard Shaw:

“He is a barbarian, and thinks that the customs of his tribe and island are the laws of nature.”

This issue of cultural Imperialism is at least addressed in the ‘Pabloite’/PD tradition but not at all in the IC tradition. There can be no workers’ unity without workers’ equality.

**Christian Rakovsky**

It is perhaps instructive to note here that this issue was not at all well understood in the Bolshevik Party either by Lenin or
Trotsky until the crisis over Georgia and the Ukraine in the early 20s. It is to Christian Rakovsky that the credit must go for developing this aspect of Marxism on national culture. He held that national culture was the only way through which the working and peasant masses will gain access to political and cultural life:

“And hand in hand with national consciousness comes that feeling of equality which Lenin speaks of in his letter”.

Christian Rakovsky Selected Writings on Opposition in the USSR 1923-30. Speech to the Twelfth Party Congress (1923) p81 Allison & Busby

It was on this issue that Rakovsky pioneered the theoretical opposition to the rising bureaucracy and he then extended his analysis to every aspect of the problems that led to the bureaucratic degeneration. Trotsky took up his work only later. Though Rakovsky developed an idealist theory on the “Professional Dangers of Power” that took insufficient regard of the material causes of the reaction, he nevertheless pin-pointed the bureaucratic degeneration of thought that separated mechanically the political theory of Marxism from the social problems of the masses.

It is my belief that that separation has continued into the post-war Trotskyist tradition with the IC representing the dogmatic neo-Stalinist side (Marxism counterposed to culture) and the USec the reformist adaption to social problems at the expense of Marxism, despite many serious attempts to break out of this vicious circle of sectarianism and opportunism.

The new ‘Workers International’ (as the Preparatory Committee has now become) group in Ireland, the Revolutionary Socialist Group, is a re-run of these old IC policies, but as farce. It is designed to appease reactionary Orange sentiments in the Protestant working class and the labour bureaucracy. Their correspondent, John Steele, writing in *Workers Press* on 20 January 1990 gives his account of Healy’s crimes in relation to Ireland. Strangely he cannot find space to remind us of the prime betrayal of those years, the support for the border and the ‘Workers and Farmers government in Stormont slogan during almost the entire 60s decade and most criminally during the revolutionary situation of August 1969.

This almost wiped out the ‘Northern Ireland’ group and its Londonderry (!) branch and ensured that only those who were prepared to defend the nationalist communities, arms in hand, against the murderous assault of the RUC, the B Specials and the Loyalist thugs (‘victims of exploitation’?) had a right to call themselves revolutionaries. All would be revolutionaries who currently operate in the Loyalist community avoid this line, as it would go down no better there and in the labour bureaucracy than it did in 1969.

**Membership**

An incident on the editorial board of the *Workers Press* was typical of the way the reaction was setting in among the membership. Maire O’ Shea, a veteran campaigner on Irish issues, had written a letter in criticising my attitude to the role
of religion in Ireland in a piece I had published a few weeks previously. Her letter became a prominent article and my reply to her was about to become a letter. Remember I was the Convenor of the Irish Commission at the time, on the CC and the editorial board. Both Bridget Leach and Charlie Pottins were sure this was the correct emphasis to be given to the opposing views. I don’t wish to go into the merits of the argument here but my reply was sharper than it would have been because of the conflict. Pilling agreed to put my piece in as an article after the row about it, but no one on the board spoke in support of me.

Another aspect of the affair that deserves attention is the struggle within my own branch, Kilburn. It had made a certain stand against Healy before the split, though it must be said this was weak and directionless. Now, after the split, many branches were amalgamated due to the huge loss of membership and the branch was renamed the West London branch. Pilling came into the branch, though he only attended irregularly. John Simmance also was a member. It still had a core of Irish members, Charlie Walsh, J.T. and me. Another Irish J.T. Joined in 1986. Brian Dempsey, a Scot of Irish extraction, moved to the branch for a while but returned to Scotland around the start of 1987. When the period of reaction opened up certain problems were encountered. Though Pilling had no problem with L.L., John Simmance or Tom Scott-Robson, who quickly let it be known that they had no qualms adapting to the new conditions, the Irish were a different matter.

After all it was difficult to expect them to swallow the racist insults from Pearce, and Pilling’s defence of them, without some revolt, despite personal relations. Bringing in two old, inactive members and appealing to their Party loyalties solved the problem. Pathetically, one of them was Irish. It was, of course, too much to expect any of the non-Irish members in the branch to repudiate Pearce.

Tom Scott-Robson, who did the translation of LIT material, played a crucial role here. He never translated the 23 Point programmatic agreement between Moreno and the Stalinists (the Peoples’ Front), being very selective in what he did translate. He must have known, of course, what Moreno represented, but silence on
these issues was now definitely the best policy. However, when it came to witch-hunting oppositionists, he found his voice. He never entertained any doubts on WRP policies and even sent me a letter demanding ‘political justification’ for non-attendance at branch meetings on 28 July 1987 (at the height of the personal and political attack on me).

Relations with Simmance were particularly bitter. As chair of the CC that removed me from membership (of the CC) he played a particularly disgraceful role.

He, too, had become a convinced Morenaito who saw no salvation outside Argentinean opportunism and, far from acting to uphold my right to speak in defence of my views at the CC, he actually constantly interrupted and harassed me from the chair. These issues, together with the letter to the IWL comrade that never was, (discussed at the end of this chapter) made for very acrimonious confrontations in the branch in the summer and autumn of 1987.

I was removed as Branch Secretary without notice and L.L and Scott-Robson even tried to get the decision of the branch to elect me as one of the delegates to the Ninth Congress reversed (so I would not have a right to speak at the Congress) by calling another emergency branch meeting just before the Congress.

Pilling’s instructions to silence me failed because branch members were too embarrassed to come to such a meeting. Dim memories of Party democracy still lingered in places, it seemed.

**How the Letter that Never Was Broke Relations with the IWL**

This series of events was designed to rid the university academics and the aspiring trade union bureaucrats of troublesome Irish revolutionaries who might bring the wrath of the state down on their heads. The rest of the story of the break with the Irish Workers League is a series of rotten manoeuvres designed to split the group by excluding the most ‘troublesome’ member from the first meeting of the Preparatory Committee. There was series of lies and evasions to cover this up.

At a reception after the first meeting of the PreC Pirani was pressed by the IWL comrade who was in London on why the WRP had attempted to keep him from going to the first meeting. He (Pirani) said that this was not true and that he had sent a letter of invitation to the comrade. This story was defended as the truth from the Preparatory Committee on 11/12 April to the Irish School at the start of June. John Simmance said that he had the invitation but wasn’t prepared to deliver it to a squat for security reasons’. He was then unable to produce the letter when the IWL comrade asked to see it. He never came up with any letter at all.

At the Irish School the IWL member who had been in London insisted on raising the matter. Then Bob Archer disclosed that all the invitation letters had been sent out by him and he did not send one to the comrade in question. Archer’s admission created consterna-
tion. Either he was too slow to realise the significance of his statement, or he was intent on discrediting Pirani. Or maybe he just could not tell a lie.

A long silence signalled the moment of truth. Pirani said that it was the minutes of a meeting of the Irish Commission he had sent. The rest of the WRP loyalists present supported Pirani. Phil Penn in particular became very angry and had to be restrained. One of the Irish comrades was so naive as to believe that Penn was outraged at the way they were being treated. Of course Penn was angered by the cheek of the IWL in exposing the WRP’s duplicity. The School struggled to a finish with difficulty but there was no hope of any further comradely relations with the IWL after that.

Dot Gibson was quite forthcoming on the reason for the deception: “The comrade was under Gerry Downing’s influence”, she declared at the next CC meeting. The idea that I might be under his influence, or that both of us, independently, might have come to the same conclusion about the publication of the Pearce letters and other provocations did not even enter her head, it seems.

This matter, too, was fought within the West London branch and again only the Irish members showed any opposition to the treatment of the IWL. The final break came with the letter of the IWL to the Preparatory Committee on 2 July 1987, severing relations. It is a sordid tale that after doing so much damage to Trotskyism in Ireland, the Party who pledged so fervently to redress their past crimes and errors are now repeating them.

Notes:

(1) In fact I misread Slaughter’s article on this point. He did not admit it strengthened imperialism directly at all in his 1987 foreword. He said it only strengthened ‘imperialism’s ally, the Irish nationalist bourgeoisie centred in Dublin, against the workers of Ireland’.

So, supporting the border was not strengthening Orange reaction (no word of criticism of this in the foreword), not strengthening British imperialism itself (specifically denied) but the ‘Irish national bourgeoisie in Dublin’, obviously the main enemy. It must be observed that supporting the Irish bourgeoisie against the Orange Order and British imperialism is not a ‘crime’ that could be laid at the door of many British ‘socialists’.

Frank Ryan a biography by Fearghal McGarry, follows the author’s first book, Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War (1999), a work of such comprehensive objectivity that it deserves to achieve much wider recognition as the definitive text book on the subject.

By contrast, the limitations of McGarry’s second book are only partly related to its slim size of 90-odd pages. The chapter headings label successive phases of Ryan’s political life as “Republican”, “Social Republican”, “Anti-Fascist” and “Collaborator”. The overall approach itself proves defective, with a compartmentalisation that chokes off thematic continuity between one phase and the next.

Accordingly, while McGarry uses the diaries of Rosamund Jacob to give us new and very vivid insights into how Ryan responded to Armistice Day as “Republican” pure-and-simple, he tells us nothing at all about Ryan’s radically different response as “Social Republican”.

The “Anti-Fascist” chapter dealing with Ryan’s role in the Spanish Civil War is, for the most part, the most solidly based, given the achievement of McGarry’s earlier work. But there is one area where he seriously undermines his own previous high standards as a painstakingly objective historian. He now writes that “volunteers who clashed with the communists - some in good conscience” had been “in some cases (including Irishmen) executed”. There was, in fact, only one Irishman ever executed by the International Brigades. (Suggestions that there was one other result from a misreading of the evidence by McGarry’s British source, James K. Hopkins).

Maurice Ryan (no relation) had been executed for shooting at his own men while drunk in charge of a machine-gun. In his earlier book McGarry carefully presented and conscientiously weighed all the evidence, and quite reasonably concluded that “some form of personality dysfunction rather than fascism was the cause of Ryan’s behaviour”. All a far cry from now suggesting that Maurice Ryan had instead been shot for holding non-communist beliefs “in good conscience”.

The greatest problem, however, lies with McGarry’s “Collaborator” chapter, where previous problems of compartmentalisation are compounded by a teleological approach that dismisses out-of-hand all evidence challenging such a categorisation of Frank Ryan’s German years. McGarry quotes Ryan the “pure-and-simple” Republican as saying in 1931 that in another great war England’s difficulty would once again be Ireland’s opportunity, and then proceeds to the sweeping statement that there is little reason to think that Ryan’s views in this regard changed significantly
over the course of the remaining years of his life.

With one fell swoop McGarry abandons any responsibility of even alluding to, not to mind evaluating, the increasingly sophisticated analyses of foreign policy that Ryan actually wrote throughout the 1930s, not least his specific disavowal of his own earlier simplistic sloganeering now used to damn him. For damnation it most certainly is, with McGarry’s choice of the label “Collaborator”, a political term with a specific dictionary definition, one who cooperates traitorously with an enemy of one’s own country.

Such Irish collaborators did, of course, exist - principally the former Irish Minister in Berlin, Charles Bewley, sacked by de Valera on the eve of War and conspiring thereafter to try and bring about a Nazi coup d’etat against him. The same charge was explicitly made against Ryan by David O’Donoghue in Hitler’s Irish Voices (1998), as a result of Francis Stuart’s 1989 claim to have been horrified at Ryan supposedly speaking to him in 1940 of German victory.

That claim, however, is devoid of credibility, not least because O’Donoghue’s soft interview failed to confront Stuart with the fact that he was contradicting everything else he had ever written on Ryan over the previous 40 years, not to mention the documentary evidence that it had been none other than Stuart himself who had been triumphantly writing in 1940 of such a German victory!

McGarry quotes Stuart’s slander of Ryan, having himself charged Ryan with promptly responding to the August 1940 submarine death of IRA leader Seán Russell with “a conscious determination to collaborate with Nazi Germany”.

He neglects his responsibilities as a biographer to even refer to the most pertinent eye-witness account of the complete collapse of Ryan’s health in the wake of Russell’s death. In her memoirs Cé hí seo amugh? (1992), Stuart’s Berlin mistress during 1940, the unreconstructed Nazi Róisín Ní Mheara, describes how, in the months that followed, Ryan was refusing to eat, barely deigned to converse with Stuart, manifested total distrust of any Germans who came near him and in fact used his deafness to avoid communication with them.

By the end of 1940 Ryan’s health had recovered for him to become functional again. In a review which I wrote at the time of the 1980 pioneering biography by
Seán Cronin I disputed the left-wing mythology that Ryan was part of some mysterious anti-fascist conspiracy in Germany.

His role was much more specifically Irish. He was not the “collaborator” of McGarry’s contention but made himself de Valera’s de facto and most effective representative in Germany. McGarry refers to recently-released British intelligence material on the interrogation of Kurt Haller but makes poor use of it. Quite apart from checkmating Bewley in Berlin, Ryan also subverted the original Russell plan by assigning to de Valera a veto on any proposed German arms assistance in the event of an Anglo-Irish conflict.

Acting as such an Irish agent Ryan inevitably supped with the Devil but, as a British intelligence evaluation concluded: “Regarding himself as an Irish patriot and not a creature of the Germans, he refused to associate himself in any way with Hartmann’s Irish broadcasts”.

“Patriot” would indeed have been the more appropriate chapter heading for McGarry to use in respect of Ryan’s final years. In an interview with Michael McInerney shortly before his own death, de Valera himself spoke of “this great Irishman”. He continued: “Frank Ryan always put Ireland first in everything he did or said, at home or abroad. He has earned his place in history”. Dev knew how vitally important Ryan’s role had been in successfully pursuing his own strategy of safeguarding Ireland from both war and fascism. McGarry’s silence on that de Valera interview, notwithstanding a passing dismissive reference to McInerney, is one final omission from this disappointingly flawed biography. Hopefully, his next book, a biography of Eoin O’Duffy, will see him return to the high standards of the fine historian he previously proved himself to be.

END

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