Why the IRA is not revolutionary

FOR 75 years now, successive waves of Irish republicans have revealed themselves as social conservatives once they lay down the gun defining them, to themselves, as revolutionaries. These extracts are from an article by the Irish Workers' Group[1] ("Where the Hillside Men Have Sown"[2], *Workers' Republic*, Feb 1967), written when the IRA was dominated by quasi-Stalinists — who have since evolved into the "Democratic Left", part of the present Dublin coalition government.

THERE is a further contradiction within Sinn Fein, and that is the discrepancy between its basically petit-bourgeois ideal and present day reality. Despite its recent adoption of a slight 'socialist' coloration, its ideal is an image of small capitalism as it was 150 years ago, of small-island self-sufficiency. But when they find themselves in power, reality dominates, and they quickly fall in with the prevailing forces of modern society; ...they very soon emerge without their ideal as common or garden bourgeois social conservatives, merging with the top layers of society and dominating, in their interests, the lower levels of the petit-bourgeoisie.

The absence of a serious social policy in Sinn Fein really amounts to acceptance of the status quo. In denying class conflict, it tends to disguise its own class character: its inability, through a lack of any proletarian policy, to heal the bourgeois/imperialist-fostered split in the working class. In fact, the implication of such gross IRA simplifications as "British-occupied Ireland" could lead to attempting to conquer by force the northern workers; a conception which is best calculated to perpetuate the division of the country. But what unity could there ever be on the basis of their mystical, utopian dreams of a return to small capitalism? The only unifying principle is the class one, [but] they resort to "wrap-the-green-flag-around-me" Republicanism, which alienates the northern workers.

The unity of the workers of all Ireland will never be achieved by people with even a vestige left in their heads of the traditional Sinn Fein conceptions, the one threadbare idea of a mythical/mystical nationalism — nor on the basis of a spurious 'national unity' — that is, class collaboration, tying the workers to the bourgeoisie. It will be accomplished by those who destroy the beloved 'national unity' of the bourgeoisie — and of Sinn Fein — in favour of a worker/small farmer alliance within Ireland, and above all of the international unity of all workers (against both Sinn Fein's 'little Ireland' and the bourgeoisie's economic and political alliances with other bourgeois nations). It will take the form of a merciless, continuous campaign to split off and temper in all the fronts of the class struggle the truly revolutionary core of the proletarian class party, fusing it together and freeing it from all vacillators, all opportunists, all who would stop short of proletarian power. *Working class* unity will be won, not in 'unity' with the bourgeoisie — but *against* that 'unity'.

The IRA is just not revolutionary in relation to the objective needs of the only possible Irish Revolution.

[This will still be] true if 'left' slogans are grafted on to the old base, and a nominal 'For Connolly's Workers' Republic' pinned to the headmast. Such talk, of a socialist programme, a Bolshevik party, a workers' republic, demands a proper appreciation of the relationship between the [revolutionaries] and the working class, and the building up of this relationship, developing a Bolshevik skeletal structure in the broad labour movement, attempting to lead and co-ordinate struggles, making constant efforts to unite the Northern and Southern workers in their concrete class struggle. It demands a sharply critical approach to the traditional republican conceptions of revolutionary activity. Otherwise these slogans, combined with a largely military idea of the struggle against Imperialism and the Irish bourgeoisie, will produce not a revolutionary Marxist party, but an abortion similar to the Socialist Revolutionary Party in Russia, against which the Bolsheviks fought bitterly.

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There are those who fetishise 'physical force'; others who make of it a principle to oppose: those Fabians, social democrats and Stalinists who, in the words of the Fourth International's Transitional Programme "systematically implant in the minds of the workers the notion that the sacredness of democracy is best guaranteed when the bourgeoisie is armed to the teeth and the workers are unarmed".

Revolutionary Marxists, however, recognise that it is a practical question, a front of the class struggle which becomes more or less important according to the character and events of a given period. Direct action of this [military] sort is necessarily a function of the mass struggle, or it is impotent.

[In] the IRA, as in most armies, workers and small farmers form the majority of its members. What is decisive is — who dominates? Which ideology? Which tactics? Its dominating ideology, as we have seen, is a mystical, narrow, petit-bourgeois nationalism, which is entirely contrary to the workers' necessarily International interests.

People who play with Marxist phrases without reference to reality contend that the existence of the IRA has meant a state of dual power in Ireland, preventing 'stabilisation'. Actually, the only thing which has been prevented from reaching 'stability' is a genuine revolutionary movement; the 'hills' [IRA guerrillaism] have merely functioned as a twin safety valve, together with emigration, to prevent bourgeois Ireland from bursting at the seams.

Without a doubt a parliamentarian break-off from Sinn Fein will be absorbed easily by the system. Many Sinn Feiners must fear parliament *as a temptation*. But those who turn to the working class can use parliament as a tactic, knowing that a genuine revolutionary remains so whether working within the bourgeois constitution or outside it. And in reverse, [the history of] Sinn Fein itself demonstrates that a party which is *socially* non-revolutionary is no more so for being unconstitutional. The Bolsheviks managed to utilise the most reactionary of parliaments without becoming less revolutionary — it gave them a platform which, because properly utilised, made them *more*, not less, effective. The only principle involved is the general one of being able to change one's forms of struggle as the struggle unfolds.

In Sinn Fein it is not *entry* into the Dail that should be the issue — but their politics *in* parliament.

Naturally, there are dangers for the best of organisations in each and every tactic: the danger of routinism, timeserving, accommodation, etc. There is no guarantee, except the level of consciousness of the revolutionary [organisation]; the degree of democracy within it, the contact with the masses of the working class — and above all the degree of seriousness with which it continuously clarifies for itself all the steps, possibilities and forces in each situation and at each sharp turn, in the fashion of the Bolsheviks.

In Ireland, it is necessary to rechannel the energy prematurely expended and wasted on the isolated guerrilla struggles towards the labour movement.

1. The IWG included several ex-Republicans who had come over to class-struggle socialism.
2. Published pseudonymously, the article was written by Sean Matgamna.