

# Ireland and 'troops out'

by John O'Mahony

SOCIALISM,  
THE  
WORKING  
CLASS,  
AND THE  
NATIONAL  
QUESTION

Our programme for Ireland is: socialism - a socialist Ireland integrated into a Socialist Federation of Europe; thus, in passing, resolving the age-old conflict with Britain on the basis of British-Irish equality with the Socialist United States of Europe.

Only the working class can make Ireland socialist by conquering power. But the necessary unity of the Irish working class is held back and has for over a century been rendered impossible because of the chronic communal antagonism, centred in the north-east of the island. This antagonism runs through all classes in society. In politics it is expressed on one side by unionism - the desire for close links or integration with Britain; and on the other by limited - Home Rule - nationalism and by full scale - Republican-separatism.

Irish history for over a hundred years has been dominated by the irresolvable contradiction between the Irish majority's commitment to Home Rule or separation from Britain and its commitment to Irish unity. A powerful Irish minority opposed even limited Irish local government (Home Rule) because, considering itself British and being vigorously Protestant, it refused to let itself become a mere minority in a Catholic Ireland.

The combination of the minority with a section of the British ruling class led to the rupture of Irish political unity and to the partition of Ireland. In a process that began with a powerful, mainly Catholic movement for Home Rule, and then a powerful, mainly Protestant, Unionist counter movement, the people of Ireland achieved not one but two Home Rules; and for the 26 Counties Home Rule quickly evolved into real (1936/7) and then even formal republican independence (1949).

WHY  
PARTITION  
WAS  
UNDEMO-  
CRATIC

But Partition was the opposite of a democratic solution. The Protestant minority were - with the exception of most of Antrim and Down - heavily interwoven with the other Irish community. A clear separating out of the minority was not possible. Instead of a democratic solution by way of the natural Irish minority negotiating minority rights with the natural Irish majority, Partition brutally and arbitrarily cut Ireland in two - creating a new, artificial Catholic minority in the North which was bigger as a proportion of the 6 County population than all the Irish Protestants were in the whole of Ireland. This is no solution. The late 60s Catholic revolt against their condition of being second class citizens in the 6 Counties, and the IRA's 16 year long war against the British army and the state personnel of the 6 Counties, is the proof that the Partition settlement imposed on the Irish majority in 1920 is as untenable as it is unjust and arbitrary.

SELF  
DETER-  
MINATION  
FOR  
IRELAND

Against the oppression of Ireland by Britain, socialists like Marx and Engels argued for an immediate democratic programme - for the Irish people's right to self-determination. 'Socialism now' was not a sufficient answer to the national conflict in the pre-Irish secession UK. The class unity of the British and Irish workers could best be secured if British socialists advocated the right of the Irish people to secede from the UK if they wanted to - and the majority did.

Against Britain in Ireland now, maintaining the artificial and undemocratic partition of Ireland with military force, self-determination for the people of Ireland as a whole remains the central democratic programme for British and Irish socialists.

In the light of the existence of one million people in Ireland who consider themselves British, the only possible democratic version of Irish self-determination - the only version that is working class and not <sup>bourgeois or petty-bourgeois</sup> Irish chauvinist - is that which advocates a federal Ireland, in which, instead of Partition which creates two Irish minorities (one of them, the 6 County Catholics, artificial) north of the Partition border, the natural Irish (Protestant) minority will be freely able to protect its interests and identity for as long as it chooses to. Just as it was no part of serious working class politics to counterpose socialism within the old UK to the Irish majority's desire for Home Rule, so now it is no part of marxist politics to counterpose a socialist Ireland to a democratic solution of the conflict that divides the people of Ireland. The problem is to create the conditions - working class unity - that will make it possible for Irish workers to win socialism. Mutual respect and guarantees against any attempt by either side to indulge in chauvinist trampling on the rights or susceptibilities of the other - that is now the precondition for Irish workers unity on a mass scale. Immediately, the advocacy of such a programme is a precondition for advanced workers from both Northern Irish communities to be able to talk to each other and to the less advanced in their own communities about class politics.

FEDERALISM  
AS PART  
OF A  
DEMOCRATIC  
SOLUTION

That a federal united Ireland is the only viable solution to the crippling contradiction between the Irish majority's desires for unity and for independence was recognised by the Republican leaders in 1921 - specifically by Eamonn de Valera. De Valera was also prepared to retain some link with Britain outside the British Empire ('external association') in deference to the desires and proclaimed identity of the Irish minority.

Federalism was then a democratic limitation and qualification on the self-determination of the Irish majority born out of recognition and acceptance of the rights of that million people of Ireland who consider themselves British, or anyway distinct from other Irish. To refuse to accept some variant of federalism today - the approach adopted already 65 years ago by the intransigent Republican adherents of the all-Irish republic declared in 1916 and again in 1919 - is to be not an Irish republic... but a Catholic Irish chauvinist.....

# FEDERALISM AND THE PROVOS

By rejecting federalism in 1981-2 the Provisional IRA left itself no way, even notionally, of relating to the Protestants except by an attempt to conquer and subjugate them; it therefore defined itself as a chauvinist movement, socially rooted in and limited by the bitter experience and limited outlook of the second, artificially created, Irish minority - the Catholic community of the Six Counties.

# BRITAIN'S FUNDAMENTAL ROLE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Britain in Northern Ireland now has a dual role. Fundamentally it maintains the partitioned status quo, while trying to modify it by such innovations as the Anglo-Irish agreement. If the rulers of Britain had for the past 18 years been deliberately trying to prime and stoke up a sectarian civil war, then they would have done exactly as they have been doing. Their fundamental role is reactionary and repressive in Northern Ireland, because the structures they defend there are unviable and destructive for both communities in the Six Counties.

# TROOPS OUT WITHOUT A POLITICAL SETTLEMENT MEANS CIVIL WAR

But that does not exhaust the description of British rule in Northern Ireland. In however reactionary and brutally short-sighted a way, Britain in Northern Ireland exercises the state power in an area ruled from London for hundreds of years, two-thirds of whose people want to be ruled from London and will fight against being ruled from Dublin. The existence of the British state - which they consider theirs - holds back the Unionists from attempting to set up their own autonomous statepower there. If that role were to be abandoned precipitately, and the British state power in Northern Ireland were to abdicate and withdraw, then what would inevitably follow would be an attempt by the Protestants to replace the British state by their own state power.

Nothing other than defeat in all-out communal war would induce the Protestants to let the British state be replaced in Northern Ireland by either an 'IRA-state', based on the Six County minority, or a Dublin-run all-Ireland state. Northern Ireland Catholics for their part would resist and fight the Protestant state. Events in Northern Ireland would unfold according to the pattern they followed after the British state power in Palestine abdicated in 1947-8. Competing groups of armed men and women from both communities would try to fill the state vacuum, to become the state power in particular areas (and in as wide an area as possible). There would be bloody conflict between the armed groups of the two sides, competing for territory, and therefore competing to drive out or slaughter as many people as possible of the hostile community in the contested territory.

# COULD THE CATHOLICS WIN?

The idea that the IRA, based on the minority Catholic community, could fill the vacuum is preposterous. Could the IRA and the southern state fill it together? They could only do it by way of an all-out civil war involving the whole of Ireland. In fact the people of the south would have no

compelling motive, and therefore no will, for such an undertaking as the subjugation of the one million Protestants. The idea - held by some of those on the left who know enough about Ireland to realise that sectarian civil war would surely follow precipitate British withdrawal - that the IRA with perhaps limited unofficial support from the south could beat down the Six County majority, is also preposterous. Sinn Fein demands that the British state disarm the Protestants before it goes - which is already a departure from simple 'troops out now and no more' - but even if Britain did do that, nothing short of large-scale massacres could stop the Protestants rearming and rising in revolt.

THE  
LONG  
TERM  
RESULT:  
TWO  
IRISH  
STATES

So if the British state just abdicates, we are left with the certainly of sectarian civil war in the north of Ireland, perhaps spilling over to the south of Ireland and Scotland. It is equally certain that this civil war would be resolved by a new partition. The border would have moved north and east, perhaps, as the Catholic majority areas in the Six Counties were incorporated into the 'southern' state; but a border there would still be. The price would be immense in lives lost and bitterness created. The Irish trade union movement would be ruptured. Clerical reaction would probably be immensely strengthened on both sides of the border. Nothing would be gained for Irish unity, Irish republicanism, or Irish socialism. If the Northern Ireland conflict spread to Scotland - as it probably would - a section of the British labour movement would probably also be destroyed by sectarianism. Britain, the USA, and NATO could probably get any military relationship they needed with the Northern state, and quite likely with the southern one too. In sum, nothing remotely progressive could come out of this solution to the present impasse in Northern Ireland. Every likely and foreseeable consequence would be regressive and harmful to what we stand for and fight for.

Therefore troops out without a political settlement is a demand for the abdication of the existing state in Northern Ireland. It would not lead to something better than what exists there now - with all its repressions and horrors for 16 years. It would lead to something much worse: to sectarian civil war immediately, and to two Irish states, their sectarian identities newly reshaped and refurbished, for long after. Socialists give no support to the bourgeois democratic state; but we are against replacing the bourgeois-democratic state - even one whose operation involves a massive erosion of democracy, as it does in Northern Ireland - with something historically lower in the scale of political evolution. The interests of the working class cannot be served and developed in that way, only thrown further back.

Troops out is a fetish for parts of the left. It serves as a cover for a variety of programmes, such as Sinn Fein's demand that the British disarm the Protestants before they go, or the perspective of those in Britain whose private answer to the prospect of sectarian civil war is that the Protestants could be beaten and subjugated.

TROOPS OUT  
IS SUB-  
ORDINATE  
TO SELF-  
DETERMIN-  
ATION

We reject the troops out fetish. Troops out is only one possible concretisation of our basic democratic slogan for Ireland: self-determination for Ireland as a whole, with internal autonomy for the natural Irish minority.\* Whether it actually is a concretisation of self-determination is a question that 'troops out' alone cannot answer. Because of the existence of one million Irish people living in a compact mass in north-east Ireland who are determined not to be incorporated into a unitary Irish state (or, right now, into any all-Irish state), whether troops out means self-determination for the people of Ireland as a whole depends on the nature of the political settlement that goes with troops out.

TROOPS OUT  
ALONE  
MEANS  
SELF-  
DETERMIN-  
ATION FOR  
THE  
PROTESTANTS

Given the attitudes of the one million Protestants, right now troops out alone stands in flat contradiction to self-determination for the Irish people as a whole. Troops out alone is a programme that only expresses the politics of those who think that getting Britain out of Ireland is the highest goal, at whatever cost. However nationalist for 'for a single unitary Irish state' such people may think they are, in fact their version of troops out - without a political settlement - inevitably and inescapably means 'dual self-determination'. Distinct 'self-determination' for the two Irish communities would be the inevitable political settlement accompanying 'troops out without a settlement'. Troops out without a prior political settlement would liberate and allow self-determination not to the Irish 32-county majority, nor to the Six Counties Catholic minority, but to the Northern Ireland Protestants. It would set the Protestant community completely adrift from Britain to seek its own self-determination within Ireland and in relation to the Irish majority by way of bloody civil war and repartition.

In conclusion: troops out without a political settlement therefore means not Irish self-determination, but dual Protestant-Catholic self-determination; sectarian civil war as the arbiter between the competing claims for self-determination and territory in the island; and the perpetuation of division in Ireland as a result of bloody repartition into two states made more or less homogeneous by mutual Catholic-Protestant slaughter and the driving out of 'aliens'.

WHY & HOW  
WE SUPPORT  
TROOPS OUT

None of this diminishes the fact that the British Army's  
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\* 'For Ireland as a whole' because the communities are too interwoven to allow a peaceful separating out of the two Irish communities into two states more or less cleanly expressing the separate identities of both groups. We support a (federal) united Ireland for practical reasons based on the facts of the situation, and not because we subscribe to the mystical shibboleth of Irish unity as a goal in itself which is central to all Irish nationalism, left and right.

role in Ireland is brutal and reactionary, and that the struggle against it by the Northern Catholic minority is fundamentally just. Our task is not to settle for a continued British presence as a 'lesser evil', but to map out a programme for the working class. This programme must contain an answer both to the brutality and injustice of the British Army presence and of partition, and to the danger of sectarian civil war. So we advocate a united Ireland with special provision for the Protestants. We advocate troops out as part of a package together with that. We refuse to make a fetish of troops out, which is only one part of our comprehensive working-class programme, and which, outside a minimal democratic programme, implies and in practice inevitably would generate, another, antagonistic 'programme' - sectarian civil war and repartition.

Troops out is used in the British Labour movement as the main sloganistic expression of commitment to self-determination which is as yet programmatically unclear. This is so, essentially, because there is much ignorance of Irish realities in the labour movement; because the crudest Republican oversimplifications (the Six Counties as 'British-occupied Ireland') have some weight in parts of the movement; and because there is a hardened will to ignore the problem of the Protestants on the part of the romantic Third-Worldist left. Given that we believe that the analysis above sums up the true state of affairs in Ireland, and the real alternatives and possibilities there, how do we relate to the slogan 'troops out'?

WHAT WE DO  
PRACTICALLY  
IN THE  
LABOUR  
MOVEMENT

A. In the paper we always present 'troops out' as part of a programmatic package, together with our basic democratic programme as the only alternative to sectarian civil war (that is, a federal united Ireland, etc.)

B. When we put motions in the labour movement, we always make 'troops out' part of a programmatic package together with proposals for a federal united Ireland; when other people's motions call for troops out without such proposals we move amendments to add them. And we fight for those amendments in the spirit of people who know what programme 'troops out' without a political settlement implies and would bring.

C. Generally in our propaganda and explanation we make it clear that sectarian civil war - which is the inevitable result, at present, of troops out without a political settlement - is an unqualified evil from which nothing progressive could come for either Irish republicanism or socialism. It is in no way a lesser evil, or a form of self-determination which we should support. We reject the bland and suicidal spirit of those who think that getting Britain out is a self-sufficient goal, whatever it costs the people of Ireland. We denounce the thinly-covered British nationalism of those, like the RCP, on the British left, who argue that nothing in Ireland is as important as defeating the British ruling class. Unlike these people, we do care about what happens in Ireland.

D. This in no way inhibits or diminishes our exposure of the evil role of the British Army in Ireland. It only means that we do not implicitly present post-sectarian-civil-war Ireland as better.



E. If our amendments are defeated, we vote for troops out notions so long as (a) they are linked to a united Ireland; (b) the tone of the debate is not such that our vote for would make us seem reckless about sectarian civil war.

F. We recognise that the issue needs further debate among ourselves, though the above will do to guide us for the coming months. An extended NED to be held in September or October should review the position and is authorised to revise it.