

Thatcherism: all dried up

Editorial

THE TEN regional water companies were sold off by the Government in December 1989. Shares were sold at £1.00 each, with buyers having to pay an additional 70p in July 1990 and 70p in July 1991 to make the shares fully-paid.

Part-paid shares immediately started trading at between £1.30 and £1.56, giving the buyers an instant gain — for no labour, effort, risk, or even “enterprise” — of between 30% and 56%. £131 million had already been paid to banks, advertising agencies, and so on for the sell-off operation itself.

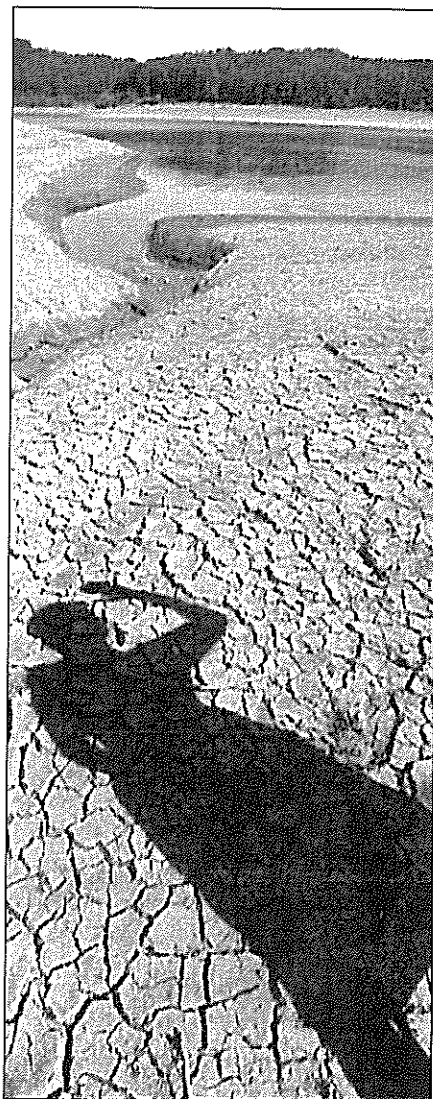
The total share value of the ten companies now stands at £14 billion (on 3 August 1995), as compared to a total of only £3.4 billion (or £4 billion, if adjusted for inflation) that has been paid to the Government for those shares. The shareholders have gained £10 billion, in addition to the large amounts paid out to them in dividends from the companies' profits. Those profits totalled over £1.7 billion in 1994-5.

And the shareholders are mostly not the small owners hailed by Tory ideologists of “people's capitalism”. Only about 15 per cent of the shares in the water companies are owned by individuals, whether of large wealth or small. About 2.7 million people did buy shares in December 1989, but most of the small buyers cashed in their gains quickly. By March 1993 there were only 1.0 million shareholders.

Assets which had been built up by the labour of public-sector workers over decades were sold off to give a cash boost to the Tory Government and a bigger payout to the new shareholders and the company bosses. The bosses gave themselves six-figure pay rises, topped up with six-figure “share options” (deals which allow them to buy shares in the companies at special low prices).

The picture all across the Tory sell-offs since 1979 is the same as in the water industry. The £61.5 billion gained by the Government from sell-offs, treated as cash for current spending and combined with its big oil tax revenues of the 1980s, allowed it to make big tax cuts for the rich, worth today between £9 and £10 billion a year. At the same time taxes have gone up for the majority, to cover the ballooning social-security bill from mass unemployment.

Share-buyers in British Telecom, the biggest privatisation, paid a total of £15 billion (at 1995 prices) to the Government; the company's share value now is £25 billion, a gain for the shareholders of £10 billion on top of their large dividends.



In June this year the small shareholders in British Gas rebelled against the huge pay-outs to company boss Cedric Brown, at the same time as the company was proposing to cut wages for showroom staff. But the shareholders' numbers had dwindled from 4.5 million at privatisation, in December 1986, to 1.8 million; and their votes were easily defeated by the big City institutions.

Many of the privatised companies — like the water companies, British Gas, and British Telecom — hold monopolies or near-monopolies over the supply of essential or important services. Handing such monopolies out to private profiteers is a throwback to the semi-feudal absolute monarchies, under which the king would grant lucrative monopolies to his friends to shore up his support.

Yet for Establishment pundits and politi-

cians worldwide — from Mexico through Italy and Sweden to the USSR and China — privatisation is the big New Idea of economics. Governments nationalist, social-democratic, Tory, and Stalinist alike join the bandwagon. Britain's Tories, who did not mention privatisation in their election campaign of 1979, and began to elevate it from a gimmick to a strategy only after 1984, now preen themselves on leading the world.

Why? Privatisation is not popular. In 1983, 49% of the British public wanted “less state control” of industry; by 1990, only 24%.

The claim that privatisation improves efficiency and cuts bureaucracy must rouse jeers when the privatised water companies impose hosepipe bans on one-third of the country, erect standpipes in Bradford, and waffle about the £400 million they have underspent on improving their pipes to cut leaks. Water meters now look likely. The vast complexity of relations between the chunks into which the electricity and rail industries have been chopped up for privatisation has expanded paperwork and bureaucracy far beyond anything the old integrated public enterprises were guilty of.

One main force behind privatisation is the changing nature of capital, now much more mobile and fluid than in the 1930s and '40s when many of the nationalisations now being reversed were carried out. British Telecom, for example, now draws only 38% of its revenue from phone calls inside Britain. Its bosses do not want to run a public service. They want to run a free-ranging profit machine.

Water companies, obviously, are more tied down. In this sector the increasing mobility of capital is shown by French water companies buying into the British industry.

Other once-nationalised once-basic industries are no longer so basic. The old USSR was able to produce more steel than any other country in the world, but its steel industry had less strategic weight in the world economy than the leaders in new industries which did not exist in the 1940s. British capitalists no longer feel any need for Britain to have its own comprehensive steel industry, or any coal industry at all.

Where fifty years ago almost every capitalist state saw its own steel industry, for example, as the essential basis for development, today every national capitalist class is telling its government that it is happy to “buy in” such things. It wants its capital as free-floating as possible in order to take opportunities in the global markets.

Another force behind privatisation is ▶

the desire of governments world-wide to break the trade-union strength of which the publicly-owned industries and services were often bastions, so as to increase their competitive edge in attracting international capital.

"Regulation" — the Labour Party leadership's new cure-all — is no answer to this whirlwind reshaping of world industry in the interests of capital. If regulation of the water companies, for example, were serious enough to force those companies significantly off the course they would choose for maximum profit, then it would cut shareholders' dividends and share prices. The City would rebel. Unless Labour were willing to face down the City — and that would have to mean renationalisation — the "regulation" would be wrecked.

The Labour leaders reply that renationalisation would be too expensive, taking money more urgently needed for the Health Service, for example. In fact no cash would be needed. A Labour government could legislate to convert privatised-industry shares into government bonds, effectively forcing the shareholders to lend the government the money for buying back the shares. If that measure, increasing the government debt, led to a "financial strike" by the City — a refusal to lend the government money — then the City institutions should be nationalised. That should be done anyway, for to pay the full current price to all the privatised-industry shareholders would be a scandal. The remaining private shareholders should be paid some minimum rate of compensation, and the big

holdings of the insurance companies, pension funds, etc. should be taken over as part of a government takeover of the commanding heights of credit.

In arguing to return the privatised sectors to public ownership — whether national public ownership, multinational (by the European Union, for example), or local-authority, depends on cases — socialists can no longer ride in the slipstream of capitalist-nationalist arguments. Equally, however, we run less risk of getting submerged in that stream, as so many socialists have in the past. Our argument should be a plain, straightforward working-class one: that the production of the goods and services we need must be regulated by democratic social control, not by greed for profit. ■

Ireland: one year after the ceasefire

AND NOW, SIR, as we approach the first anniversary of the Provisional IRA ceasefire, will you tell us please, what do you think of Britain's role in Ireland?

Should Britain just get out — "Troops Out Now" — or does it have a necessary role to play in securing a political settlement? A progressive role, perhaps? What do you think, Sir?

"We cannot make peace on this island unless the British government faces up to its historic responsibilities. They can't say you sort it out among yourselves and then we'll come aboard. The British government has to be proactively involved in creating a level playing pitch to enable us to heal all the divisions that exist among us".

Can you guess which Unionist that was, speaking his approximation to plain truth? No Unionist: that was Gerry Adams, president of Sinn Fein! He was speaking in May at the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in Dublin, during a discussion on the "framework" document issued by London and Dublin in February. But when the Labour Party finance minister in the Dublin coalition government, Ruairi Quinn, attacked a central contention of Sinn Fein's submission to the Forum — "Sinn Fein rejects the thesis that the conflict in our country is fundamentally about relationships between the people of Ireland" — Adams was having none of it. The Provisional Sinn Fein paper *An Phoblacht* summarised his reply thus:

"Gerry Adams rejected Quinn's criticisms as 'selective', and spoke of the 'myth that the British government's attitude to Ireland is benign. Let's not make the mistake of saying this is a northern problem. It is a problem created by British involvement in our affairs and divisions among people on this island". (*An Phoblacht*, 11 May 1995).

Benign or malign, Britain has a central role to play, as Adams, not quite consistently, insisted in the words quoted at the beginning of this article. But why, exactly, will the not-benign British government play

a benign role? Why will Britain assume, as the Provisionals put it elsewhere, the role of "persuaders" of the Northern Ireland Unionists (essentially, the Northern Ireland Protestants), "persuading" them to reconciliation with Irish nationalism (in modern history, essentially Catholic Irish nationalism) on terms acceptable to the Provisionals?

Why? Because otherwise the Provisional IRA will resume its war. "The Provisional IRA has not gone away", as Adams told a Belfast rally recently.

The hope that international pressure — in the first place that of the very powerful Irish-American political lobby — could force Britain to do what the Provos want was and is a main reason why the Provisionals felt that the "long war" could best be continued for now by means of political pressure, and why the Provisional leaders have, for now, been able to persuade the entire Provisional IRA to call off the "armed struggle". There have been no splits so far.

Speaking at the annual Wolfe Tone commemoration at Bodenstown on 18 June, Martin McGuinness made the same point as Adams, with the same startling candour, in his description of the Irish minority. "We want those people who live in Ireland and who regard themselves as British to join with us in building a new Ireland... Unionists will come to the negotiating table — let there be no mistake about that — but they will only do so when the British government actively encourages them to do so".

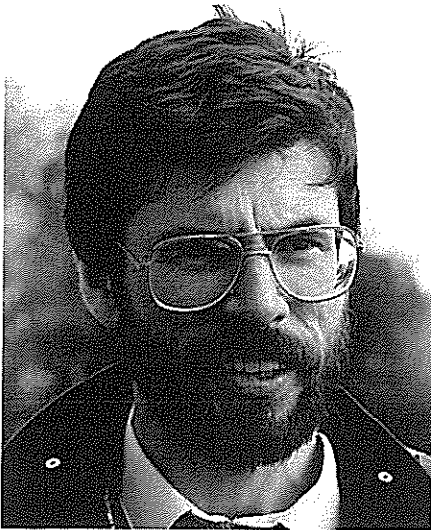
As this magazine's predecessor, *Socialist Organiser*, repeatedly pointed out during the Provisionals' military campaign, nothing the Provisionals did in that war made sense until you understood that these self-proclaimed "heirs of Tone, Davis, Pearse and Connolly" looked to the British state ultimately to "deliver" one million Irish Unionists to a united Ireland.

While fervently, and with unimpeachable sincerity, proclaiming a united Ireland as their goal — something that to most people

would seem to depend on winning the consent of the Irish minority — they conducted a military campaign that targeted mainly Protestants, right down to shooting Protestant carpenters in front of their children, because they had built cupboards in an RUC station. Everything the Provisionals did outraged the very people they needed to win over; and some of the things they did seemed as if deliberately designed to stir Protestants into conflict with the British state. That would be politically insane behaviour — and historically, from the point of view of genuine Irish Republicanism and its goal of uniting the people of Ireland, it is insane behaviour — except that the strategists of the Provisionals saw the one million Irish Protestant/Unionists as mere pawns.

The Provisionals conceive of the great Irish Republican goal proclaimed by Wolfe Tone at the end of the 18th century — "to unite the whole people of Ireland, to abolish the memory of all past dissensions, and to substitute the common name of Irish in place of the denominations Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter" — as something to be achieved not at first in the minds and hearts, in the convictions and desires of the living people of Ireland, but mechanically and formally, through an all-Ireland state, even one in which a million Northern Ireland Protestants were a coerced minority occupying the same position vis-a-vis Dublin that Northern Ireland's half-million Catholics currently have vis-a-vis Belfast and London. For them, Irish unity was something that could be achieved despite the Protestants, over their protests, and, where necessary, over their bones; something that depended essentially on an ability to deploy the necessary force, from economic arm-twisting to armed suppression.

Left to the forces of Catholic Ireland — even if all those forces in Ireland could be mobilised, and almost certainly they could not — the Protestant/Catholic, Unionist /Nationalist conflict could be resolved by



Gerry Adams unclear as to whether to describe Britain's role in northern Ireland as benign or malign

force only through open civil war, at the end of which, after Bosnia-style "ethnic cleansing" and similar horrors, there would still be two Irelands, with redrawn borders. Besides, it was and is inconceivable that Britain would just scuttle and run from a part of the UK, the majority of whose population proclaim themselves British, leaving chaos behind.

A simple driving out of the British was never a direct goal of the Provisionals, except perhaps in the naive early days of the war. The assumption and expectation — and the demand: "Disarm the Protestants" — was that Britain would, in going, first sort things out to the Provisionals' satisfaction. While getting out, Britain would be forced to act in loco parentis for the Irish minority. It would combine with Catholic Ireland to resolve the military conflict initiated by the Provisionals not in an Irish civil war and a new partition, but in a united Ireland secured by agreement between the British and the Irish majority — and enforced by the British and 26 Counties armies. It was fantasy, but it has been central throughout the long years of the war.

Now the Provisionals are discovering that their reliance on help from Britain is indeed delusion and fantasy; fantasy, too, is the notion that the international clout which the Provisionals think they have will allow them to dictate terms to Britain and to the Northern Ireland Unionists.

The best they will get — the basic frame that all the international pressure groups are aiming for — is Dublin's and London's so-called "Framework for Peace", issued in February. This proposes that a new Six Counties government be set up on the basis of permanent Catholic/Protestant power-sharing; and that the Belfast government and the Dublin government be linked together in an all-Ireland structure. From the beginning all dealings by both parts of Ireland with the all-important European Union would go through the all-Ireland structure, which would thus immediately assume major all-Ireland governmental functions. London and Dublin mean, for the foreseeable future, to preserve the existing

structures in North and South but to enmesh them in a network of all-Ireland, British-Isles and European-Union structures that would, over many years, transform all existing relationships. Their model is the European Union itself, which has evolved over four decades to its present level of European integration.

Such plans have been put forward before, differing only in detail. Without Unionist agreement nothing comes of such plans. So far they do not agree. If this one is viable, it may take a long time to bear fruit. Even in the best development, it would not satisfy the demands the Provisionals have fought 23 years of war for — British disengagement, for example.

II

ONE YEAR after the ceasefire, the signs are that, despite the strains, it will continue for now. What is remarkable is the seriousness with which the Provisionals have continued to pursue the political campaign for "peace" despite the fact that "peace", which seemed a year ago to be another name for a slightly-deferred victory, is now revealed to be something else. They continue to have faith in the power of the pan-nationalist alliance stretching from Irish America through Belfast to Dublin.

The Provisionals plausibly claim that they have been cheated. A year ago the British were offering the Provisionals a place at the "conference table" after a "suitable period" of ceasefire had elapsed. That "suitable period" was publicly talked of as three or four months. The Provisionals declared their ceasefire on 31 August 1994, but so far — publicly anyway — Sinn Fein has been allowed only limited "preliminary" talks with the British government. (With which it had three years of secret talks before the ceasefire).

No sooner was there a ceasefire than the stakes were raised: talks were made conditional on a further move by the Provisionals — the "decommissioning" of their weaponry, or a portion of it. This requirement was initially raised by Unionist politicians; the British picked it up and made it central in a way it had not been in the negotiations for the ceasefire. Albert Reynolds, who was Taoiseach (prime minister) in Dublin last August, has stated publicly that he would never have agreed to such a requirement and never did.

Why did the British raise the stakes? When Unionist politicians made "decommissioning" a precondition for even thinking about all-party talks, pressure was generated on Britain to stay in step in order eventually to lead them into discussions; but there is more to it than that.

The British know that they cannot immediately concede any of the core demands of the IRA/Sinn Fein, who represent something like a third of Northern Ireland's half-million Catholics, without utterly alienating, and in some circumstances driving into revolt, most or a large part of the 1 million Protestant/Unionists. They know that it is inconceivable for "all-party talks" to lead to all-party agreement acceptable to the Pro-

visionals and the Unionists.

For the British, securing the ceasefire, and a durable return to "politics", are the immediate goals; for the Provisionals, the ceasefire is a means to a different goal, all-Irish unity, the goal they used to pursue arms in hand.

The British probably believe that the longer the ceasefire goes on, the more difficult it will be for the Provisionals to go back to war. It will be more difficult, though not impossible — there was a ceasefire all through 1975, but that came to an end when the political hopes to which it was linked collapsed early in 1976.

The "decommissioning" demand, apart from its being raised after the ceasefire, has very much about it of an "impossible" demand, a spoiling demand. Provisional leader Martin McGuinness has said: "... If the British government continues to insist on the unilateral decommissioning of IRA weaponry before substantive political dialogue, this represents an *absolute* obstacle to political development" [emphasis added]. Boasting that John Major is "alienating Irish and world opinion", and that (unlike the Provos) he has "no allies" apart from the Unionist leadership, McGuinness explained: "However, it is equally obvious and inevitable that there would be a universal decommissioning of arms — British arms and Irish arms — once an all-encompassing political discussion and framework is agreed upon" (*An Phoblacht*, 22 June 1995). History's various IRAs, at the end of their wars and military campaigns, have always "dumped" arms — put them into storage — and never given them up. Thus it was at the end of the civil war in the South in 1923, and at the end of the Border Campaign in 1962.

The British will, if it suits them, soften their attitude on decommissioning, and they have already done so, calling for "some" decommissioning. They have made concessions — announcing cuts in the jail sentences of Republican prisoners to mark the anniversary of the ceasefire, for example — without any IRA arms being "decommissioned". Some international decommissioning body may be set up that would save faces and leave the Provisionals with their guns.

Despite the frustration of the best expectations of a year ago, the Provisionals have resumed not the shooting war but the political war, the sort of political campaigning that built up the forces for launching the military campaign early in 1971.

The Provisionals are now a movement engaged in a multi-faceted series of political campaigns, not one primarily fighting a guerrilla war. A network of "residents' committees" has been set up in the Six Counties, and an organisation, Saoirse (Freedom), to campaign across Ireland and Britain for the release of Provisional IRA prisoners. Provisional Sinn Fein's links with Fianna Fail — which is in opposition now, but has been the main party of bourgeois rule in the 26 counties for the last 63 years — and the Northern Ireland SDLP give its campaigns not only added resonance and power, but respectability too. On May Day (which in ♦

Ireland is 12 May, the anniversary of the British killing of James Connolly in 1916), Sinn Fein representatives spoke on labour movement platforms in Dublin. A number of national trade union leaders already are Sinn Fein supporters (one of them, Phil Flynn, is an ex-Trotskyist: there are in fact a lot of ex-Trotskyists in and around Sinn Fein). Now Sinn Fein has a new "in" with the establishment — from Northern Ireland to Dublin, from bourgeois parties to the labour movement.

At the heart of these activities is a dedicated and disciplined military organisation, and it is a formidable force. Much agitation is directed against the RUC, and controlled clashes are being staged to back the demand for the disbandment of the RUC, and other demands.

The Provisionals kept the Catholic demonstrations which they organised and orchestrated round the recent Orange marching season within strict boundaries.

In Derry on 13 August — it was there, on 13 August 1969, that the large-scale fighting broke out that led to the British Army occupying the streets of Northern Ireland — Catholics and Republicans made a sit-down protest to try to stop the "Apprentice Boys" (an elite Orange Order) from marching adjacent to Catholic areas in their traditional parade around the walls of Derry City, one of the holiest places in Orange Ireland. When the police used force to remove them, Martin McGuinness was there to tell them not to resist.

In this way the Provisionals are preserving and rebuilding the political potential for a resumption of war, should that prove "necessary" — just as the campaign around the hunger strikers in 1981 built up not only the political but also the military wing of the movement; just as the escalating campaign of demonstrations and stone-throwing against the British Army in 1970-1, and British Army retaliation with CS gas and rubber bullets, prepared the way for the military offensive after March 1971.

But aren't the Provos now locked into a peaceful strategy? There is no reason to think they are. An element in the ceasefire was probably war-weariness in the Catholic community, and, maybe, a dawning realisation by the Provisional leaders that they could not win. Decisive, however, were the dazzling prospects of pan-nationalist constitutional political action which seemed to open before them. What they got was the February proposals. If the Provisionals are willing to mesh in with the proposals of the February document — they grudgingly welcomed it — and if the Protestants can be got to mesh in too, then the ceasefire will continue, broken at worst only by a Provisional IRA splinter. If not, then growing disappointment may lead to a new round of military activity. Preparations for that contingency are already being made on the streets of Belfast and Derry and in the less visible activities of the British state there.

III

NORTHERN IRELAND politics are dominated now by double-talk and obfuscation.

Socialists need to disentangle the issues. The Provisionals' press would be the worst guide to follow here. It is full of communal egocentrism and chauvinist double standards, combining for example insistence that on no account can Sinn Fein be excluded from talks with the demand, in effect, that "all-party" talks proceed without the representatives of the Unionist majority. They engage in "anti-sectarian" incitement to sectarianism. The end of Martin McGuinness's oration at Bodenstown on 18 June is a good example of their typical double-talk, communalism and sustaining delusion.

"British rule must end so that together Catholics, Protestants and Dissenters can unite Ireland. Pax Britannica has failed... Catholics, Protestants and Dissenters will resolve their differences and learn to live together in peace in the land of their birth. As we work towards that goal we can take heart from our greatest strength — the unity of our courageous intelligent people. We are unbreakable — and the tide of history is with us".

"The demand for immediate all-party talks is, in the circumstances, a demand on the British government to ride roughshod over the Protestant/Unionists."

The Provo demand for all-party talks is on the face of it a reasonable demand, and such talks would indeed be a welcome development. In fact, though, this "demand", addressed to Britain, is one of a number of "impossible" demands — like the British/Unionist call for IRA "decommissioning", or the Provo call for British demilitarisation — which, though desirable in themselves, are not immediately "Real Politics" and therefore not quite what they seem.

Because the Unionists demand Provisional "decommissioning" of weapons as a precondition for talks — but if they got that, they would then find other reasons not to sit down with the Provisionals: in a recent poll 75% of Protestants said that their organisations should not talk to the Provisionals — and because the Provos will not decommission, "immediate all-party talks" would be "all-party talks" which have no representative of the Northern Ireland majority. The demand for immediate all-party talks is, in the circumstances, a demand on the British government to ride roughshod over the Protestant/Unionists.

It is only a variant of the demand for Britain, backed by Dublin and Washington,

to coerce on behalf of the nationalists. It is the technique of the long war translated into "let Britain do it" fantasy: it is the very opposite of the necessary search for dialogue and agreement between the peoples of Ireland.

The attitude socialists should take if Britain tries coercing the Protestants — or starting "all-party" talks without them, and trying to force them to come in — should depend on what they are being coerced into accepting, and how, and whether it would have a reasonable chance of making things better all round, and bring the unity of the Irish working class closer. A mixture of coercion and trickery in 1974 blew up in everybody's face; and the memory of the Orange General Strike of May '74 will make Britain inclined to caution. But the Provisionals' demands are always, ultimately, variations on the demand for Britain to act against the Protestants. They are destructive fantasies, destructive especially to the cause of a united Ireland, which must first be the cause of uniting the Irish people, and, for socialists, of uniting the Irish working class.

There are real moves towards a united Ireland, a federal united Ireland. They are being made by London and Dublin and Brussels, not by the Provos. They are embodied in the spreading and strengthening intervention of the European Union, in which both parts of Ireland are enmeshed, and in the proposals of the February document. The overwhelming majority of Catholic Ireland, so polls and elections tell us, is happy to be so enmeshed, while Ian Paisley, the "leader of the Ulster people" thinks the European Union is a Papist conspiracy; Sinn Fein is not for the European Union, but agitation against it, even though it is removing the very possibility of Irish independence as traditionally conceived, is notably absent from the Provisional Sinn Fein paper An Phoblacht.

No other road to a united Ireland now exists, federal or otherwise. Any sort of revolutionary unification of Ireland is inconceivable. A "revolutionary" unification that consisted of subjugating the one million Protestants and turning them into the sort of discontented minority in an all-Ireland state that the half-million Catholics have been in the Six Counties, would not be a progressive revolutionary development, nationalist, Republican, or socialist, but an anti-Republican and anti-socialist act of Catholic chauvinism: it is as inconceivable as it is undesirable. It is a fantasy.

The actions of the Provisionals which are ultimately guided by such fantasies, and designed to bring them into existence, are in fact as disruptive of the real developments towards a united Ireland as they are of the potential for Northern Ireland working-class unity. All the Provisional's 23 year campaign has achieved is to restore the Catholic-Protestant divisions in Northern Ireland to their fullest power of communal venom.

Many of the things the Provisionals campaign for, in Ireland and in Britain, are in themselves reasonable. No socialist can have any brief for the RUC or the British Army; the



The core of Sinn Fein/PIRA is still a military machine dedicated to forcing through a united Ireland

Provisional IRA prisoners should be released; all-party talks, if they really were a consultation between all the forces in Ireland, would be a good thing. But all these issues are being agitated as part of a drive to build up the Provisional organisation, and thus also to build up its potential for reviving the senseless and counter-productive war which ended just a year ago. Rather than give the Provisionals credence — even for demands good “in themselves” — in the labour movement, socialists should explain openly what they are and what they stand for. We should explain that the way forward in Northern Ireland is peace and the building-up of working-class unity around mutual agreement to respect each community’s concerns on the constitutional issue — Northern Ireland union with Britain or the 26 Counties — and around the recreation of a Labour Party by the trade unions in Northern Ireland, a party able to appeal to both Protestant and Catholic workers. Unless such a party had not only working-class social policies, but also a clear democratic plank on the disputed national/communal issue, — some variant of a federal Ireland in which the Irish minority would keep autonomy as long as they wanted to — it would be doomed to fall apart at the first test, as Northern Ireland labour parties have fallen apart before.

There is good ground for believing that a — federal — united Ireland would be much closer now if the Provisional IRA had never existed. It is a misrepresentation of history to present their campaign as a logical or necessary or “defensive” development of the Catholic civil rights movement: it was shaped by the politics of a Republican sect committed *on principle* to guns as the way to unite Ireland and self-hypnotised by such idiotic dogmas of the Catholic Irish nationalist middle class as the description of Northern Ireland as only “British-occupied Ireland”.

Today the Provisional movement is greatly changed from the archaic sect that launched the war in 1971. It is led by politically sophis-

ticated people, highly skilled at the game they play, using mildly leftist and populist politics with which to appeal for broad support. It is making a new effort to become a force in the South, agitating around Saoirse and basking in a new acceptability. Dublin’s severe broadcasting restrictions against Sinn Fein have been lifted after two decades.

Yet at its core is still the military machine, dedicated to forcing through a united Ireland soon, irrespective of opposition — that is, dedicated in fact to activities that, if the Provos are strong enough, will lead to sectarian civil war and Bosnia-style repartition. Even if their effort were not counter-productive — which it is — it would not, as we have argued above, make democratic, Republican or socialist sense. Despite the intentions of its militants, many of whom have given their lives, their health, and their liberty in its activities, this is not a movement helping forward a united Ireland, still less helping to create a united working class. Politically, it is a source of a newly-reinvigorated nationalist and populist confusion in the whole Irish labour movement.

If the ceasefire holds indefinitely, the Provisionals will become a narrower communally-based Northern Ireland reproduction of Fianna Fail — which, from origins very like the Provos’, became the main party of bourgeois rule in Ireland — or of the smaller, more left-wing, splinter of the 1940s and ‘50s, Clann na Poblachta. Whatever socialist rhetoric it uses, it will embody and propagate communalist, Catholic-chauvinist, and mainly reactionary politics.

Its leaders’ present easy junketings with Fianna Fail and with Irish-American bourgeois politicians will make some of the Provo militants who took their socialist pretensions seriously think afresh. They should conclude that the priority for serious socialists and for Wolfe Tone Republicans is not the mechanical unity of an all-Irish state, in fact a bourgeois state, but the unity of the Irish people, in the first place of the Irish working class. They should understand that

in every progressive respect, Irish nationalism is a spent force. It was, in terms of its progressive potential, a spent force before the Provo war began. The 23 year war is another proof of that. It is apposite now to recall the words of the manifesto of the Irish Workers’ Group issued shortly before the resurgence of “Republicanism” in Northern Ireland:

“The one serious progressive act of imperialism and Irish capitalism has been the creation of an Irish proletariat capable of putting an end to capitalism’s futile existence, and capable, as part of the world revolutionary class, of realising the age-old dream of the people of Ireland for freedom. The best traditions of the old, bourgeois, republicanism have passed to the socialist working class, the only class in Ireland today capable of transforming society and the subordinate relationship with Great Britain — the only unconditionally revolutionary class. The only genuine liberation of Ireland will be from the inexorable — uncontrolled — pressures of international capitalism.

“All the essential goals of all the past defeated and deflected struggles of the Irish people over the centuries against oppression and for freedom of development and freedom from exploitation, can now only be realised in a Republic of the working people, as part of the Socialist United States of Europe and the World.

“We stand for the revolutionary combat against imperialism and national oppression in every form, whether that of garrison imperialism, neo-colonialism, or the glaring economic domination of the small nations by the super-powers which is inevitable where the capitalist world market remains the sole regulator of relationships. But we denounce those who, in the name of ‘Republicanism’ and ‘anti-imperialism’, attempt to subordinate the working class to any section of the bourgeoisie and who counterpose a defunct petty-bourgeois national narrow-mindedness to the socialist struggle of the workers for power.

“National unity will be achieved, if not by the coming together of the Irish capitalist class under the auspices of the British imperialist state and the capitalist drive towards West European federation, then as an incidental in the proletarian revolution. The possibility of any other *revolutionary* reunification is long since passed. The only revolutionary republicanism is the internationalist-socialist republicanism of the proletariat.

“To socialists we say — the only viable socialism is the Marxist programme of class struggle and workers’ power. To Republican activists we say — the only conceivable Republic that is other than a mockery of all the past struggles is the Workers’ Republic”. (*Towards an Irish October* September 1967).

We repeat: neither pseudo-revolutionary military campaigns, nor their chauvinist political surrogates, offer a way forward. That lies in the building of mutual respect, the extension of mutual concessions by the peoples on the island of Ireland, and a drive to unite the working class to fight for socialism. ■