

To stimulate discussion on Ireland, particularly on the British Left, *Workers' Liberty 5*, gave over most of the second half of its issue to a Platonic (that is, fictional) discussion of a variety of northern Irish Socialists, representatives of two former wings of Socialist Organiser, and in the latter part, myself.

The most basic criticism that has to be made of this exercise is that the energy put to inventing this mythical discussion would have been spent better in setting up a real one. Apart from 'Mick', the staunch supporter of Socialist Organiser's current line (and I think there are some points on which he could feel misrepresented), none of the participants come across as more than gramophone records repeating lines which, I accept, *Workers' Liberty* regards as fair summaries of their positions but which cannot really do them justice.

On this point, I can say only that had I been invited, I would have tried hard not to arrive two-thirds of the way through the talks, I would have said more and tried to avoid or answer briefly extraneous matters like John O'Mahony's nationality (pp.44-45), or the question of what happened at Ballinahinch or in *Workers' Fight* in 1969 (pp.52-55). I would also have asked questions particularly of the Protestants. I am sure that the real 'Jackie' would not have run a discussion group with the former UWC leader 'Jimmie' without discovering pretty soon what the latter felt about what must have been, for better or worse, the most momentous political event of his life (p.29).

This confusion is enlightened somewhat by the fact that, to a certain extent, positions given in the discussion can be checked in the articles reproduced in the first part of the magazine. From my own contributions, readers will be able to see that my doppelganger's summary of my position is gravely flawed. 'Mick' may be correct in saying that my historical statements were 'taken up' in *Socialist Organiser* (p.54), it does not appear in the first part: still less that they were refuted. Nor did I describe the Ulster Protestant community either as a 'national minority' or as 'colons'. I would not have used the latter term myself (p.452) and I would have corrected 'Mick' when he ascribed the former to me (pp.45, 46, 48). As to the first, I don't see how you can be a national minority without being a full nation or a separated part thereof. On the second, I disagree with John O'Mahony ten years ago when he described the Ulster Protestants simply as 'colons' (and not, as 'Jackie' claims, merely four centuries ago).

On page 19, John O'Mahony gives a rule of thumb description of the Protestants as being 'a distinct community', and I agree with him on this. We separate, in part, because of his analysis (or, rather, lack of analysis) as to what distinguishes that community from its neighbours, particularly the Irish majority.

I would have challenged 'Jackie', too, when he claimed (p.54) that I argued 'at the beginning of the 1970s...that the Ulster Volunteer Force of 1912-14 was just an army of scabs'. My actual statement was rather different. In *Workers' Republic* 26, I wrote 'In the north east, the Ulster Volunteers had as their *hard core*, (italics added now, for 'Jackie's benefit), the armed scabs that had been sent out against the unskilled workers' organisations since the arrival of Larkin in Belfast in 1907'. 'Jackie's' misrepresentation is just one example of a tendency given him by his creator to over-project assumptions from what has been said, well beyond any normal logical projection from A to B. (It might be said: he goes straight



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from A to C, or D). My doppelganger was correct to protest against this, unfortunately, not being me, he could not answer it.

But though I may improve the details, the overall judging of my analysis of the Irish question remains. The summary on Page 45 (middle column) is alright as far as it goes in stating the process. The trouble is that it is not (and would not have claimed on page 55, nor anywhere else that it was) 'striding ahead'. Its potential has to be realised by the correct strategy and a more correct organisation.

So had I been at a real discussion in July 1983 I would have said something like the following, if not at once then drawing out through the discussion process:

Historically partition was imposed on Ireland by Britain because it could not trust the Irish to govern themselves in its interests. It has worked quite well; while British imperialism had a base in the Six Counties, it could allow the twenty-six a larger run (for example, the 1930s economic war and neutrality) than it could have otherwise.

The world has not changed so much since 1921 that the rulers of Britain can abdicate, that they can or will surrender their control over a sizable part of Ireland. Their interference began eight centuries ago with its need to secure its western shore and, even more, if modern technology has weakened its need to maintain its base it still needs to deny that base to anyone else. It still does not trust the twenty-six county governments, particularly those of Fianna Fail, the territory's largest party. In the past twelve (by now sixteen) years the Irish have burnt the British embassy and have been the only EEC government not to support its neighbour's "crusade" to the Malvinas.

On this matter, the bulk of the evidence does not support 'Jackie's suggestion (pp.47-48) that "Britain was moving towards trying to shed responsibility for Northern Ireland in the '60s". Of his examples, the Anglo-Irish Free Trade agreement and the O'Neill-Lemass talks are purely circumstantial; they prove nothing more than that Britain and its client government wanted better relations with the Republic after the strains of the '30s and the '40s to say nothing of the positive neutrality of the late fifties. This had a long term logic that eventually Britain would move, if successful to end partition; it does not seem to have planned such a daunting task. As for the promise to agree to a united Ireland if the Northern Irish majority does, it does not belong to the sixties but to the Sunningdale period. In any case, it is agreed; partition itself gives a reason for the majority to vote against unity. And while that exhausts 'Jackie's' evidence, the case against is far stronger.

Neither Terence O'Neill's memoirs, not the memoirs or diaries of any Minister of the '64 Wilson government (and more of its ministers than perhaps of any other British government published such) mentions any sort of pressure to democratise, let alone liquidate the six county territory before the balloon went up in October '68. Nor is there much sign of 'piecemeal democratisation' in O'Neill's record up to that date. In this period, his only democratic move was to abolish the Queens University Constituency and give his own party one or two extra seats as a result. His government's plan for local government reform would save money on its and the British exchequer, it would have done so by abolishing all six county local government placing under full Unionist rule even the Newry Nationalists whose local autonomy could not be gerrymandered out of existence. Those who describe me as fantasising from the standpoint of belief in a British democratic strategy are pots calling the kettle black.

This fact has been masked by first the apathy and then the opposition of most Unionists to any democratic reform of their territory, and fact that this opposition has had to take more impressive forms (most obviously the 1974 strike) than the pressing for change, let alone Irish unity. I am surprised 'Jackie' did not use this as an argument for his case; it is certainly more impressive than his actual points. However, it is, on examination, equally incorrect.

Indeed, the failure of the mass of Ulster Protestants to use their 60% of the Northern Irish population to reverse the gains made by the Provos with their 15% base is due to weaknesses inherent in the Loyalist community. The relatively advanced industrial base which gave Loyalism's colon ideology its new base of life contracted. The native bourgeoisie has long been comprised of merely agents for foreign capital. The landed gentry survive but have been shunted aside politically. At the other end of the scale, the territory's unemployed rate is higher than that of the Republic. The Loyalist community and its politics are now overwhelmingly petty-bourgeois: with the exception of the remaining shipyard workers, they are a right wing mirror image of Sinn Fein's. The point is that they are a right wing image and are bound to be so as long as they act as a community politically. Though the decline of the industries that revived the colon ideology, the long term logic of economic decline and reduction of resources kept it as strong as ever. Today Ulster Protestantism is bonded by an outlook composed negatively of the urge to defend colon privilege, pride in an historic industrial supremacy and the industrial centre's

(Belfast's) traditional mistrust of the governing centre (Dublin). More positively, it includes the idea that it is for individual liberty. Its overall synthetic bent is one less of Protestantism than of anti-Catholicism (identified as Orangeism). This gives it for strategic options: even UDI would mean narrowing its territorial borders. If Northern Ireland is to survive as an Orange entity it has to stick with Britain, depending, as in 1974 and, to a certain extent in 1977-1979 on the weakness of that country's government to gain concessions. On the whole, Britain's rulers know this as well as its own leaders. (By 1987, this lesson would be reinforced by the aftermath of the Hillsborough Agreement — D.R.O'C.L.)

It is not hindered by the capitalists of the twenty-six counties. Not only are they uninterested in completing the bourgeois revolution's classic territorial claim (Irish Unity) but also in its traditional secularising

role (Unmentioned by 'Jackie' in his assumption that the revolution is completed (p.38), this is what Tone meant by replacing the old divisions with the common name of Irish). Though moderately successful in building their own industries, they do not have the confidence to invest in the six county area. Nor do they look forward to integrating into their rule some 200,000 revolutionary nationalists and 1,000,000 reluctant (to say the least) Protestants. In particular, the latter would threaten the cozy Catholic ethos that has helped keep the twenty six counties quiet since 1922.

'The twenty six county working class is less hostile to Irish Unity than its bosses. Still, it does not connect this aim to its members' material needs. In fact a link does exist. Positively, successive capitalist governments through the '70s have found it necessary to restrain any revitalising of profit levels through welfare cuts in order to forstall the southwards spread to revolution. This is no longer economically possible. Whether new austerity politics can be aided by the trade union bureaucracy against the rank and file is an open question. On the other hand, the economic mess has been worsened further by the requirements of border security. Security, too, has helped the area to move towards a police state.

'The question is whether these obvious opportunities, and ones linked less obviously to the national issue can be taken by Sinn Fein. This is the only mass revolutionary body in Ireland, perhaps in the British Isles, tho' its strength is spread unevenly. Not revolutionary Socialist, but revolutionary nationalist (tho' with a vaguely socialist programme), its base is a classic petty bourgeois one, centred mainly on areas around both sides of the border, but also in Nationalist Belfast (courtesy of Gerry Fitt's organisational incompetence) among small farmers, some (decreasing) small businesspeople and permanent unemployed. It is to win, this base must be expanded in one of three ways: 1) It can attempt to parallel the Workers' Party, postpone Irish unity to the never-never and woo the Unionists with an economic line. Without a clearer Socialist line, this is a revival of the policy of the first Dail which had much backing, but collapsed in 1920. Even with Socialism, it would do no more than parallel the Workers' Party and probably lose its existing. 2) It could try to expand itself within its present class backing, appealing to the followers of the constitutional Republican, Neil Blaney and even to within Haughey's Fianna Fail. At most, this would consolidate but not quantitatively improve its strength; any Irish national bourgeoisie is happy enough with Haughey's symbolic Republican gestures. 3) It can seek, even despite itself, to operate a strategy of Permanent Revolution, to complete the tasks of the bourgeois revolution over and above that of Irish unity by combining then with Transitional Demands. The first involves taking a leading role in the struggle to achieve a fully secular State (again nobody else mentioned this task, but it was what Wolf Tone meant when he talked of uniting Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter); there is probably not a majority for it, but it's a larger minority than the revolutionary nationalists. The second involved an appeal to the working class, as a revolutionary socialist body.

'Of course this would mean a real change for the Republican movement. Moreover, though similar moves have been attempted before (most recently with what has become the Workers' Party) they have succeeded only in

turning revolutionaries into reformists. The central problem seems to be the traditional idea (for 'Patrick's' (p.52)) benefit the real "neo-Republican" idea vis-a-vis the United Irishman, if it does go back now, a century and a quarter) that armed struggle is the sole principled criterion of revolutionary action rather than a necessary weapon to be used sparingly and decisively. It may avoid this yet; the example of the stickies is close enough to be an obvious warning. On the other hand, while it is starting to take elections seriously (a lesson from People's Democracy, by the way), this move towards politics will also be one towards reformism unless supported by active agitation for democratic and Socialist aims. Seeing itself as the rightful government of the Irish Republic, the Movement has always been slow to lower itself to do this. It remains true that if it doesn't, it will abandon any revolutionary perspective. If that happens, either the struggle will be defeated or it will find a better leadership to give it victory. Whatever does so will do this by mobilising the Irish Workers and oppressed on a secular socialist basis, not just for a few strikes in sympathy with the six county minority as 'Mick' suggests, but as a revolutionary force striking to build a new Ireland in its image and with the aid of Ireland's Protestant minority.

(Four years since I would have made this scenario it has not been confounded, though it is developing more slowly than is desirable. The amount of support for the Republican Movement can be quantified at 6% of the whole population (15% in the Six; 2% in the twenty six counties). Though the 1986 Ard Fheis diluted its predecessor's policy of Free Abortion on demand, it left Sinn Fein's line on this issue more democratic than any other mass Irish party. In a number of constituencies, its members worked to amend the twenty-six county constitution to allow the right of divorce, despite politically sectarian hostility from the liberals and two nationalists who dominated the campaign. In 1985, Sinn Fein won a corporation seat in working class Dublin: its first since 1924. But the Movement remains wedded to the principle of armed struggle, merely downgrading it slightly in favour of electoralism; it has still to see the revolutionary role of mass agitation).

'At this point it is, perhaps necessary to ask: what if the Republicans fail without being replaced by something better, so that the struggle is defeated? Clearly 'Jackie', almost certainly 'Jimmy' and 'Robert' and, I suspect 'Patrick' would seem to see such a prospect as a merciful release. I have some sympathy with 'Jackie's' fears. I do agree that, up to now, the prolonging of the "armed struggle" has not helped unite, has, indeed, probably helped drive further apart, the two Ulster communities, as it has also, more importantly in the short run, helped reduce twenty six county working-class enthusiasm for Irish unity. Yet if it is ended and not replaced by a political revolutionary strategy, the partitioned capitalist state power in Ireland will be strengthened. At first the British imperialists and their allies of the former national bourgeoisie will have a picnic. But with pressure gone from the revolutionary left, the Loyalists will be able to make a more powerful claim to change conditions in their favour, a far more careful leadership than that have could not prevent triumphalism or attempts to restore Loyalist hegemony. After all, the objective cause of Northern Ireland's continuing divisions is the allocation of inadequate resources, and these are less adequate now than they were before 1968. Though the majority may rise again, it will be hampered by its

previous failure. 'Jackie's' fear will by realised; there will be 'sectarian civil war, the massacring and driving out of populations and the terrorisation of those not driven out' (pp.46-47). Only it won't end in any sort of united Ireland, but in repartition, and it will have been caused not be the armed struggle, but be its failure.

So, if the way is by secularism and Permanent Revolution where does this leave Federalism? The answer is in tactics rather than principle. By elevating it to the latter, John O'Mahony and *Socialist Organiser* have counterposed it in effect to the true democratic principle of secularism. This means that the Catholic sectarian (but federalist) Republicans of the 1970s are portrayed as more democratic than their secular dispossessors. This gives weight to the idea that any revolutionary attempt to unite Ireland is probable regressive and helps justify the rationale that it is only an attempt to do, crudely, and brutally, what British imperialism would like to see done. In Britain, this reduces *Socialist Organiser's* call for "Troops Out" to one of symbolic rather than practical validity. In Ireland, it makes a possible appeal to the northern Protestants a priority over winning the 26 county workers.

'Nor is it backed by Marx, Engels or Lenin. The first two were scathing, in the 1850 First Address to the Communist League, about the result of federalism between nationalities in Switzerland, tho' Engels, later correctly, praised the purely geographical autonomous local units of the French Revolution. Lenin denounced the national autonomy proposals of Rosa Luxembourg. These attacks concerned bona fide nationalities. There can be no doubt that they would have been even more dismissive of special autonomy being given to a "distinct community" defined by a common religious attitude and a rather negative religious attitude at that.

'These errors are made possible by the denial of Permanent Revolution as a process relevant to Ireland that will guide the country's revolutionary strategists.

'However nobody really knows how Ulster Protestant consciousness will respond to an Irish Socialist Revolution. One can say that it may be necessary to bargain, to allow the community some form of autonomy for their territory over and above the local councils allowed everyone. The point is that a secular state is probably a better guarantee of equal rights to all religious communities.'

So I would have argued. There remain, however, some loose ends that cannot be tied into the above. Firstly, I do not consider John O'Mahony "British" purely and simply. I do consider him a British revolutionary. He has chosen to make his priority revolution in Britain before that of Ireland. I have chosen the opposite. Our respective choices inhibit each of us in our approaches to each other's chosen country.

I was surprised, too, that neither myself nor the *Socialist Organiser* comrades challenged, as distinct from expostulating at 'Jackie's' casual, almost frivolous, linkage of Kim Il Sung and Mobutu (p.51), and worse still, of Castro with Khomeini (p.52).

It was surprising also to see *Socialist Organiser* supporters, however internally opposed, being allowed to bicker with such personal rancour in front of at least one former Stalinite ('Jimmie') and one open Social Democrat ('Robert').

And to end on a personal note, it is at least six years since I wore the long overcoat described, and, certainly never wore one in July (pp. 29,44). Nor did I ever see (p.52) the film *Never on a Sunday*.