

# The struggle in Ireland

Chris Harman

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An International Socialists pamphlet 15p



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## Introduction

THE British press has a simple explanation for the troubles of Northern Ireland in the past five years. They blame it all on 'extremists' and 'terrorists', usually-meaning by this members of one or other wing of the Irish Republican Army. In this way the press hopes to justify the behaviour of the British army in Northern Ireland, the use of arbitrary arrest, imprisonment without trial, the use of dictatorial powers by British governments.

The truth is rather different. The origin of all the present problems facing the people of Ireland lies in a history of more than 300 years of domination by Britain's ruling class, of which the use of troops in Northern Ireland today is but

the latest example. There can be no solution to these problems until that domination is ended.

The aim of this pamphlet is to give a brief history of this domination, to show its effects on Ireland today, and to indicate the way in which it can be brought to an end.

## **The conquest of Ireland**

THE history of modern Ireland begins with its conquest by the rulers of England 300 years ago. The purpose of the conquest was to seize the wealth of Ireland for the advantage of the English ruling class and to prevent Ireland ever developing into an independent nation in its own right.

In the early 1600s there was great resistance to British rule, particularly from the population of the north eastern province of Ireland, Ulster. The response of the English government was systematically to drive the native Irish from the province. Estates of 1,000 to 2,000 acres of land were offered to groups of Englishmen and Scotsmen-known as 'undertakers' – for a nominal rent to be paid to the English crown. The undertakers had to promise to clear out the Irish population and take as tenants only English and Scots settlers. The native Irish were eligible only for the smallest group of holdings and had to pay rents twice those paid by the undertakers.

The County of Derry was handed over to a group of London companies. It was afterwards called Londonderry.

This first 'clearance' of Ulster was not fully successful. There was a great rising against the English and Scots settlers in 1641. Eight years later the then ruler of England,

Oliver Cromwell, crushed the rebellion. His army set out to exterminate as many of the Irish people as possible in the east of the island and to drive the rest into exile. At the siege of Drogheda Cromwell massacred the 30,000 defenders of the city. His slogan became 'Death or Connaught' as he attempted to drive the Irish population from the land of the east and into the south-western province of Connaught.

The Irish made another attempt to resist the conquest of their country in 1689 by allying themselves with the attempt of James II of England to recover his crown after the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 had replaced him by William III. But they were defeated.

It was from this time that the religious question became so important. The English conquest had originally nothing to do with religion. It was started in the middle ages by the Catholic King of England, Henry II, and had the blessing of the Pope. Even in the final conquest of 1689–91 the Popes of the time, Innocent XI and Alexander VIII, did not support the Catholic Irish against the Protestant King Billy. They were allies of William III and England against the French King Louis XIV who supported James II.

But the *effect* of the conquest was to identify the Roman church with the hopes of the native Irish, for along with the foreign landlords, a foreign church was imposed. The Church of Ireland, an Anglican establishment, became the state church. It was supported by tithes, compulsory taxes of one-tenth of the produce of each Irish peasant.

A whole hierarchy of Anglican archbishops, bishops, deans, rectors and curates was imposed on a country where more than 90 per cent of the people were either Catholics or Protestant dissenters. The full power of the state was used to enforce tithe payments to pay fat salaries to these alien priests.

Moreover, in order to give a monopoly of power to the English and Anglo-Irish landlords – who were practically all Protestants – the so-called Penal Laws were introduced. These disqualified Catholics from voting or sitting in parliament or on town councils or becoming officers in the army or navy or holding senior jobs in the civil service. They imposed economic restrictions too. Catholics could not lease land or buildings for longer than 33 years, they could not manufacture books or newspapers or arms of any kind.

The effect of all this was to make the greater part of the Irish people a legally inferior caste, like the African people in South Africa today. In these conditions the Roman Catholic Church, as the only legally tolerated, nationwide, Irish institution left, came to enjoy a degree of enthusiastic popular support unknown in officially Catholic countries.

The Protestant settlers in the north-east of the country were given special rights – the so-called ‘Ulster custom’ which permitted tenant farmers a security of tenure not known elsewhere, although they too were deprived of political rights if they were not members of the Church of Ireland – and most were not. The overall result was that the religious differences between Protestants and Catholics became the source of economic advantage to the Protestants.

But although the Protestant colonists gained at first from British rule over Ireland, this was not its primary aim – which was to ensure that the wealth of Ireland went into the pockets of the British ruling class and that Ireland never developed as a commercial rival of Britain. The British were prepared to attack Protestant as well as Catholic interests to ensure this.

The Protestant colonists became sheep and cattle farmers on a large scale and the export of livestock to England soon led to a fall in agricultural prices and rents there. So the

English parliament passed a law banning the import of livestock. This wiped out the Irish livestock trade in a few months. When the Irish farmers attempted to sell their produce to countries other than England, a second law followed banning that too – the English did not want the Irish economy to develop independently from English influence.

Further laws were passed which forced wool produced in Ireland to be sold to England, while preventing the Irish from processing that wool themselves. The aim was to restrict Ireland to supplying raw materials for English industry and to crush any industry in Ireland which competed with British goods. A whole series of measures followed as the English parliament issued laws to cripple the Irish cotton trade, the glass trade, sugar refining, brewing and fish curing.

Effectively British rule meant the economic development of Ireland was prevented so that British industry could prosper. When the Irish – Protestant or Catholic – protested, repression was used to keep them in subordination.

Until 1800 all this took place with a nominally independent Irish parliament in Dublin. This parliament was totally Protestant and dominated by the landowners and the better-off sections of the middle class. But it began to put up resistance to the stunting of Irish industry and trade and to press for full independence.

By 1800 most Irish industry was in decline. There was no possibility of it competing with the more advanced industry of Britain and the British government was now prepared to drop the special laws deliberately holding back Irish industry. The Irish parliament was united with the British, and free trade between the two countries established. What this meant was that the remnants of Irish industry – with

the exception of linen – were threatened with extinction by competition from more advanced British industry.

The main source of livelihood for the mass of the people remained the land, and the land continued to be owned by British landlords. After paying rents to these landlords and tithes to the Church of Ireland, the Catholic peasants were left completely impoverished.

The English traveller Arthur Young summed up the situation in Ireland at the end of the 18th century:

‘A landlord in Ireland can scarcely invent an order which a servant, labourer or cottier dares to refuse to execute. Disrespect or anything tending towards sauciness he may punish with his cane or his horsewhip with the most perfect security. A poor man would have his bones broken if he offered to lift a hand in his own defence.’

Figures given in the Irish Poor Law Commission Reports of the mid-1830s indicate the scale of exploitation that went on. The total value of Irish agricultural production was £36 million, but the working tenant farmers and farm labourers only received £5 million of this. The landlords took £10 million in rent, and middlemen, merchants and money lenders £20 million. (Quoted in Eleanor Burns, **British Imperialism in Ireland**, page 21).

At the same time, more than half the agricultural population were out of work for more than half the year. ‘Out of work and in distress during 30 weeks of the year: not less than 585,000 persons, which, with those dependent on them, will make a total of 2,385,000 persons requiring support for 20 weeks in the year,’ wrote the Commission.

Isaac Butt, Professor of Political Economy in Dublin, described conditions as ‘a hideous and appalling mass of

misery and destitution,' and said:

'The evidence collected by the Poor Inquiry Commission, if it proves anything, proves this, that generally throughout whole districts of Ireland penury and almost starvation are the general conditions of the classes who are called, by a mockery of their misery, the labouring classes – which means the classes that are willing to labour, and can get no employment; it proves that the labourer cannot, by the utmost exertion of his industry, procure sufficient to support himself and his family throughout the year.' (Letter to the secretary for Ireland on the Poor Law Bill.)

Landlords and their agents enforced ruthless evictions against anyone who got behind with the rent, pulling down their cottages and joining their holdings into large farms. Evidence before a committee of the House of Commons showed that old people and children, the sick and the dying were driven with equal callousness from their homes. According to one witness more than a thousand people were evicted from two neighbouring parishes, among them a great many old people, who 'became beggars and a good many of them died of want'.

What happened to tenants who resisted the demands of their landlords was shown in the 'tithe war' of the early 1830s, when peasants refused to hand over tithes – a tenth of their produce – to the Anglican church. The British army was on hand to back up the exploitation.

'In April 1832, the parish of Doon, County Limerick, witnessed a spectacle. A cow, seized from the [Catholic] priest [in default of the tithe payment], was brought to the auction ground by an escort composed of a strong body of police, one troop of lancers, five companies of Gordon Highlanders and two pieces



of artillery. Amid deafening uproar, the cow was sold to the priest's brother – a constable acting under orders – for £12.'

'At Newtonbarry, in 1831, 12 tenants were killed and many wounded in a clash with troops employed to confiscate cattle in default of tithe payment. At Carrickshock, in the same year, 11 policemen were killed and 17 wounded in a similar clash.' (T.A. Jackson, **Ireland Her Own**, page 220).

The results of this pillaging of Ireland for the benefit of the British ruling class were catastrophic. On top of the ruin of Irish industry came the ruin of Irish agriculture. People were driven from their homes and could only gain any sort of livelihood by emigrating to become cheap labour for British industry.

In the early 1800s, the population of Ireland was about half that of Britain. Today it is only about a twelfth. Fewer people live in Ireland today than 150 years ago. Such figures indicate how the systematic removal of Ireland's wealth by Britain's ruling class forced the Irish people into misery and emigration.

The biggest single contribution to this catastrophic process was the Irish famine of 1845–49, when more than a million people died and another million were forced to emigrate.

English history books speak of the famine as a natural disaster. True, the potato crop failed. But the famine itself was man-made. There was enough food in Ireland to feed the population – if they had the money to buy it. At this time the country was still a major exporter of wheat and in 1845 the official records show that 515 people died of starvation and 3,250,000 quarters of wheat was exported. By 1847, when 21,770 deaths by starvation were recorded, wheat

exports were still over two million quarters and even in 1848 when nearly 300,000 died of hunger 1,826,132 quarters of grain was sent out of Irish ports. The sacred rights of property were resolutely upheld by the British government.

Ireland after the famine was a ruined country. Except for the north-east corner, where the linen industry was expanding and shipbuilding was soon to be introduced, the whole country became a vast reservoir of surplus labour, barely kept alive by subsistence agriculture and available when required by the expanding industries of Britain and North America.

The history of the years of British colonial rule and economic exploitation of Ireland are the key to understanding any of the problems facing Ireland today. The deliberate stunting of the Irish economy in the 17th and 18th centuries and the spoliation of the countryside for rent in the early 19th century are directly responsible for the fact that today Ireland is the most economically backward country in Western Europe, with living standards half the West European average, and with the highest unemployment and emigration anywhere outside Southern Italy.

The roots of the present conflict in Northern Ireland also lie in the past. For the sectarianism which plagues that province was deliberately created to back up British rule.

## **Republicanism**

ECONOMIC exploitation and political domination by Britain did not go unresisted. There were repeated movements which aimed to put control of Ireland's destiny into Irish hands.

The first great such movement arose towards the end of the 18th century. The deliberate curtailment of Irish industry by the British aroused opposition at that time even from the well-to-do Protestants who owned most of Ireland's wealth and dominated its parliament. In the 1770s and 1780s they began to demand the complete independence for the Irish parliament as the only way of breaking Britain's economic stranglehold. When Britain tried to curtail the few concessions they had won in the early 1790s, a still more radical movement, the United Irishmen, grew up.

The United Irishmen were Ireland's first Republicans. Inspired by the French Revolution, their aim was to break the link with Britain completely and to set an independent Ireland along the path of development again. The movement's leaders were from the Protestant middle class but as it grew it gathered support from sections of the impoverished Catholic peasantry.

The British authorities resorted to the crudest brutality and terror to crush the movement. Troops were let loose on the people of Ulster.

'To extort confessions of concealed arms they resorted to flogging ... Picketing, a variety of crucifixion, crowning the victim with a linen cap filled with hot pitch, roasting the soles of the victims' feet at a turf fire – these were the methods fashionable with the troops engaged in dragooning Ulster.' (**Ireland Her Own**, page 158).

A special Act of Indemnity guaranteed against prosecution anyone committing crimes in the repression. As the terror spread south the United Irishmen were forced, in 1798, into a premature rising. It was widespread but the rebels, most of them peasants, were badly armed and poorly directed. They

expected French assistance but it did not arrive in time. The repression that followed its defeat was correspondingly savage. The British Commander in Chief, Abercromby, himself described his auxiliary troops as 'A licentious and brutal banditti'.

The brute force of the British army was not the only weapon at the disposal of the London government. It also deliberately exploited the religious division within the Irish population. Its representatives took advantage of the hatred between Protestants and Catholics in parts of rural Ulster to build up a Protestant sectarian organisation, the Orange Order, members of which were allowed a complete free hand in attacking Catholics, driving them from their lands, looting and murdering.

'The Orange Order became an organised conspiracy of all the most degenerate social strata-an instrument whereby the lumpen strata were used as tools to break up the solidarity engendered by the United Irishmen, and to replace the struggle for democratic advance by disintegrating it into an embittered war of sect against sect.' (**Ireland Her Own**, page 156).

In the next hundred years there were several attempts by Republicans to take up the example of 1798. There were unsuccessful risings against British rule in 1803, 1848 and 1867. The defeat of these risings led the independence movement to take a rather different path, much more in accord with the feelings of the middle class. A movement grew up which aimed to secure partial independence for Ireland – 'Home Rule' – by constitutional means. It won them a majority of the Irish seats in the British parliament and seemed to be heading for success: in the 1880s and then in 1912

the British House of Commons passed Home Rule Bills. But hopes of Home Rule were dashed in the 1880s by the action of the British House of Lords, and in 1912 when the officers in the British army made it clear that they would do nothing to put down armed resistance to Home Rule from Orangemen in Ulster.

With the failure of the Home Rule movement a section of the Irish middle class turned again from the 'constitutional' approach to the more militant approach pioneered by the United Irishmen.

In 1905 the middle-class politician Arthur Griffith [1] had formed Sinn Féin, an organisation committed to full independence for an Irish parliament. His ambition was to use political independence to secure economic independence for Irish capitalism. 'Protection means rendering the native manufacture equal to meeting foreign competition. It is the first duty of the Irish nation to afford protection for that manufacturer.' The aim was to create an Ireland whose independence was based on modern industry like any other nation, 'a Gaelic Manchester', ideally with an empire of its own overseas.

Griffith aimed to achieve independence for Ireland by getting a majority of Sinn Féin MPs elected in a British parliamentary election, who would then meet separately and declare Ireland free. But there were Republicans who shared Griffith's aim of an Ireland independent 'like any other nation' but were more radical about how this was to be achieved.

At midday on Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, a small force of armed men, not more than a few hundred strong, took over many of the main buildings in Dublin. Armed struggle by the Irish population against British domination had begun once more.

For six days the rebels fought desperately against British attempts to remove them from their positions. Artillery was used to shell the rebel strongpoints and much of central Dublin was destroyed, 1,351 people died in the fighting and a third of the population was forced on to public relief as a result of the devastation. Finally, the rebel leader, Padraig Pearse, ordered his followers to surrender so as to prevent the further slaughter of Dublin citizens. In the days that followed the surviving leaders of the insurrection were taken from their prison cells and shot.

The rising was hardly successful in terms of its immediate effects. Much of the population of Dublin seemed indifferent to its outcome. The numbers taking part in the rising were much smaller than its leaders had hoped. Their defeat seemed to leave the British government as firmly in control as before. But the government could not take the matter lightly. It had an empire which ruled a third of the world. The news from Dublin might inspire rebellion elsewhere, Britain's 'Liberal' rulers turned viciously on the rebels, determined to create a bloodbath that would be a lesson to all.

The Republican leaders who led the volunteers into battle were in the main teachers and lecturers. Their vision of an independent Ireland was essentially a capitalist one. The faults in Irish society they identified with British rule and believed that they would be overcome in an independent capitalist Ireland.

But these had been joined in the rising by a different sort of force – the Citizen Army formed by the socialist James Connolly during a long strike in Dublin in 1913. Connolly believed that the rising could open the way for a much more radical outcome than that envisaged by the Republicans – for an Irish Workers' Republic.

But in the aftermath of the rising, it was the middle-class Republicans who came to dominate the popular movement.

The scale of repression let loose by the British government turned Irish opinion against the parliamentary Home Rule party which still supported the British government and its war. At parliamentary by-elections the Home Rule candidates began to be defeated by Sinn Féin members, who refused to recognise the British parliament.

Worsening living standards, particularly for small farmers, and an attempt by the government to introduce conscription in Ireland strengthened hostility to British rule. In the general election of December 1918 Sinn Féin won the overwhelming majority of seats everywhere but in Ulster. The successful candidates refused to go to Westminster and instead met together in Dublin to proclaim themselves the independent parliament of the Irish Republic, Dáil Éireann, with Eamonn De Valera, a survivor of the 1916 Rising, as president.

A fight back against the British occupying army had already started in some country areas. Now those fighting swore allegiance to the Dáil and became the army of the Irish Republic, or the IRA.

A struggle developed against the British that involved both civil non-cooperation with the British rulers and military resistance. Elected councils worked with the Dáil, not with the British. Republican law courts exercised jurisdiction in much of the country. Railway workers struck to prevent the moving of British arms. Meanwhile, a guerrilla war began to wipe out British outposts in the rural south west, and in the cities the British political police were annihilated by Republican assassins.

The British government was finding Ireland ungovernable. Its empire was threatened from its oldest colony. Greater repression was the only way it saw of

holding on. A special force of mercenaries prepared to fight for 10 shillings a day, then quite a large sum, was recruited from the most degenerate sections of the population of English towns. The 'Black and Tans', named after the colour of their uniforms, were let loose on the Irish population. A reign of terror followed in which tens of thousands of people had their homes raided, with 800 houses and 900 shops deliberately burnt down, dozens of people murdered in cold blood and many more imprisoned and tortured.

But repression alone could not contain the growing movement for national freedom. The British began to look for other methods to achieve the same goal. In July 1921 they arranged an armistice with the Sinn Féin government and negotiations for a treaty began.

The leaders of the Republican government, although prepared to use force, were by no means extremists. As the popular movement had gathered strength many of the wealthier sections of the middle class, previously in favour of some sort of link with Britain, now began to climb on the band wagon. In the Dáil a quarter of the members were capitalists and two-thirds belonged to the professional and white collar groups. The Republican leaders welcomed such supporters, seeing the main aim to be 'Irish unity' against the British. And in order to keep the wealthy happy, they resisted any moves that might threaten the 'rights of property'.

In parts of rural Ireland, landless labourers and small farmers began an agitation to divide the land of the big ranchers – most of whom supported the British connection. The Sinn Féin government saw this as a 'grave menace to the Republic. The mind of the people was being diverted from the struggle for freedom by class war. There was a moment when it seemed that nothing could prevent wholesale expropriation.'



It went on to boast that ‘this crisis was surmounted thanks to ... the civic sense of justice expressed through the Arbitration courts and enforced by the Republican Police.’ In other words, the police were used to restore to the rich their lands.

Many of the middle-class Sinn Féin leaders looked for any opportunity for a compromise that would restore peace, and with it ‘law and order’. When the British offered them a treaty that seemed to satisfy some of their demands, they jumped at the offer.

The treaty gave the Irish middle class their own parliament. But it stopped far short of the ‘republic’ that the fight had been for. Instead what was agreed to was a ‘free state’, which would still owe allegiance to the British crown, which would leave the British navy in control of certain Irish ports, and above all, left six counties in the north east of Ireland under the control of Unionist politicians who were identified with British interests. Justifying the treaty to British Tories, Lord Birkenhead, who had helped to organise the Ulster resistance to home rule before the war, explained that: ‘The people who criticise the agreement would do well to remember that we are defending the Empire with the minimum of English lives.’

The treaty threw the whole Republican movement into a crisis. Most of its political leaders were in support of the agreement. They took over the official government, working hand in glove with those who only months before had been their bitter enemies.

The rank and file of the Republican army did not greet the agreement in the same spirit. They were small farmers, landless labourers or workers, who had seen the fight for the Republic as a fight for an alternative to miserable living standards and enforced emigration. Now their leaders had

abandoned the struggle and accepted the English crown and a divided Ireland.

The IRA overwhelmingly rejected the agreement, broke with the government and prepared to fight on. There was a degree of support for their attitude from some of the political leaders of Sinn Féin, including De Valera.

But the betrayal by one set of middle-class leaders did not mean that those who remained with the Republican movement changed their ideas. They still saw the struggle as one 'of all Irishmen', and rejected any notion that the republic for which they were fighting should be a socialist one.

In a bitter civil war the army of the Free State hunted down the members of the Republican army. Using arms left behind by the British, it took over those parts of the country still under Republican control. Republican prisoners were interned in prison camps, and some were murdered in reprisal for army actions. By May 1923 the Republicans had been defeated militarily. De Valera ordered them to bury their guns while he himself began to agitate politically for Republican policies.

The Sinn Féin leaders had looked to Irish independence as a means of developing an independent Irish capitalism, which would guarantee to the Irish middle class the same sort of possibilities as those open to the English middle class. But the middle class was not prepared to go on struggling for independence if this led to social agitation that might threaten its position.

The working class, on the other hand, would only really fight if social agitation was part of the struggle. Middle-class Republicanism fell between the two stools. When the guns were buried in 1923, so too were the hopes of 1916.

De Valera was eventually elected prime minister of the Free State in the early 1930s, but that did not make that state any more independent in real, economic terms than before. After a short 'economic war' with Britain, De Valera acquiesced in British economic domination as much as his predecessors in the Free State government had. For a while tariff barriers were used to build up some Irish industry in separation from Britain: But this did nothing to solve Ireland's general poverty and high levels of unemployment and emigration, and the policy was finally scrapped for free trade with Britain again in the 1960s.

Meanwhile De Valera had long since turned against his former allies in the Republican movement, imprisoning them and even, during the Second World War, sending them to the execution chamber.

In the early 1930s Republicanism had still been a mass movement in the south of Ireland, with hundreds of thousands of supporters. But its leaders stuck to the idea that middle-class methods could solve Ireland's problems and end the British connection, even though the middle class had long since abandoned the republic for the free state.

## **Orangism and the Northern state**

RELIGIOUS sectarianism had, as we have seen, always been a crucial weapon in securing British control of Ireland. The Orange Order was formed in 1795 to fight against a Republican movement led by the Protestant middle class, and whenever threats to the British hold on Northern Ireland developed in later years it was revived.

The Order began and grew as a mass organisation of counter-revolution. For years it would be dormant, but whenever there was pressure for substantial reforms of the growth of a revolutionary movement, it would burst into new life. It opposed the Catholic Emancipation movement of the 1820s, the parliamentary reform of the early 1830s, the moves to Home Rule in the 1880s and 1912, and the struggle for Irish independence in 1920.

As the official historian of the Order has admitted:

‘Most Irish Protestants ... tended to consider Roman Catholicism and possible rebellion as almost identical terms. To keep things as they were in church and state seemed the guarantee of safety.’

The aim was, as one Orange song puts it, to keep the ‘croppies’ (rebels) down. If the ‘croppies’ refused to accept their subordinate role, then another song showed what to do:

‘And when we came to Dolly’s Brae [a Catholic area] they were in line on every side ... We loosed our guns upon them and gave them no time to pray.’

A songbook produced only three years ago by the Loyalist leader John McKeague shows things have not changed:

‘If guns were made for shooting, then skulls were made to crack. You’ve never seen a better Taig [Catholic] than with a bullet in his back.’

The Orange Order was particularly important to the British ruling class in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For the only industry that had developed in Ireland was in the north east, around Belfast, where the greatest proportion of the population was

Protestant. As industry grew up, the religious hatred of the Ulster countryside was transplanted to the towns, providing the means by which big business could divide and rule the working class.

Employers would use the Orange Order to grant privileges to its members. When it was a matter of getting a job, particularly a skilled job, being a member of the Orange Order or at least being friends with a member was a great help. In return, all that was necessary was to be a Protestant and to back British domination of Ireland when it came to elections or street demonstrations.

How this made the Protestant workers relatively privileged is shown by figures for the year 1901: Catholics formed nearly a quarter of Belfast's population, but they held only a tenth of the jobs in engineering, 15 per cent in carpentry, 11 per cent in plumbing, 6 per cent in the shipyards. (Quoted by Eamonn McCann, **War and an Irish Town**, page 139.)

The privileged position of the Protestant workers made it easy for the employers to use them against any movement threatening to bring about social reform or to secure Irish independence from Britain. For the employers could always point out that a movement involving the mass of Catholics could be a threat to these privileges. They spoke about the dangers to 'the Constitution' and the Protestant workers understood by this a threat to the Protestant ascendancy that gave them a position of supremacy over Catholic workers.

If they saw the threat as really serious, they could be relied to go out on the streets in riots aimed at 'putting the Catholics in their place'. There were serious riots caused by attacks on Catholic areas by Orange mobs in 1835, 1843, 1857, 1864, 1872, 1880, 1884, 1886 and 1889. Short of riots,

there were always annual Orange Parades, when the Protestant sectarians would flaunt their strength in front of the Catholic population.

The support which Orangism provided for British rule in Ireland meant that when the Home Rule Bill was passed by the parliament in London in 1912, the British Tory Party and the Northern Ireland Unionists were able to organise massive resistance to it in Belfast. In the same way, when the rest of Ireland was seizing its independence forcibly in 1920 and 1921 sectarianism was used to keep the geographical area around Belfast under British control.

The Unionists did not always get things their own way. In 1907 Jim Larkin led a massive strike of both Protestant and Catholic workers. The Orange Order was split down the middle and Green and Orange banners were carried together on demonstrations through the streets of Belfast. Again, in 1919, both sections of workers united in a near general strike that paralysed Belfast for four weeks. But the Orange Order succeeded in re-establishing its dominance on both occasions. A mere 18 months after the 1919 strike it was able to provoke massive sectarian riots throughout Belfast.

At the shipyards – where the sectarian policy of the employers meant that Protestants outnumbered Catholics by six to one – meetings were organised at which prominent Unionist politicians spoke. They ‘called for a show of revolvers, called upon the Protestants to drive the “Fenians” out, and turned a thousand hate-intoxicated men loose on their Catholic fellow workers, to fling them into the channel or to beat them with ruthless savagery out of the yards ...’

During the nights and days which followed, armed Orangemen carried the attacks into the Catholic quarters of the city. Bombs and petrol, rifles and revolvers were used. Catholics were driven out of their shops and houses.

Not only Catholics suffered. Carson, the Unionist leader, made it clear that the labour movement was also the enemy. 'The Sinn Féin,' he said, 'have all sorts of insidious methods and organisations at work ... tacking on the Sinn Féin and the Irish Republican question to the labour question ...' About 12,000 men were driven out of their jobs altogether. Among them were 3,000 Protestants-socialists, labour men and militant trade unionists, the leaders of the previous year's strike.

Between June 1920 and June 1922 more than 400 people were killed and 200 were wounded, and an estimated 2–3,000 were made homeless.

While the sectarian riots were raging, the Unionists were able to build a state structure in Northern Ireland that guaranteed their untrammelled rule. The armed wing of the Orange Order, the Ulster Volunteer Force, was turned into a special police force, the Special Constabulary, by the British government.

The boundaries of the new Northern Ireland state were deliberately designed to ensure a built-in majority for supporters of British rule. The old province of Ulster had been made up of nine counties. There was a Protestant and pro-British majority in only four of them – too small an area to make up a workable state.

But the full nine counties would not have guaranteed a Unionist majority. So a six-county state was set up with a Protestant majority but with sufficient Catholics to make a workable labour force that was kept divided by religious sectarianism.

Electoral districts were carefully drawn so that in a town such as Derry, with an overwhelming Catholic majority, the Protestants won most of the council seats. The council then gave out jobs and houses through the Orange Order to Protestant families who were prepared to give full support to

the government. And the central government at Stormont encouraged employers to give jobs to Protestants and not Catholics. Areas with Catholic majorities were starved of industrial investment.

The result was that in Catholic towns unemployment was about twice as high as in Protestant ones. In Harland and Wolffs shipyard in Belfast, 90 per cent of the workforce is Protestant although Catholics make up a third of the city's population.

A battery of measures were used to discourage Catholics from protesting against their inferior position. The Ulster Volunteers were officially recognised as an armed and exclusively Protestant special police force, the B-Specials, who could intimidate Catholics. The Special Powers Act was passed, giving the Unionist government the right to imprison without trial, to ban meetings, demonstrations or publications as it wanted. It even had the right to refuse an inquest into people who died while held by the police.

These measures were used ruthlessly any time a movement developed that threatened the Six Counties system. The laws were often backed, as in the 1920s, by giving free rein to mobs of Orangemen in the Catholic areas.

Occasionally working-class unity did emerge in Belfast but sectarianism was quickly used to destroy it. In October 1932 Catholic workers in the Falls Road and Protestant workers in the Shankill fought side by side against the British army in protest at unemployment.

But the ruling class did not lie low. The government encouraged employers to sack Catholic workers to give jobs to Protestants, with one of its members, Sir Basil Brooke – later prime minister of Northern Ireland for 20 years – boasting: ‘I am proud to say that I have never employed a Roman Catholic in any position on my estates.’



Within a couple of years the city was again ravaged by sectarian riots and pogroms in which dozens of Catholics were murdered by Orange mobs backed by British troops. The road was clear for another 30 years of untrammelled rule by the landowners and big businessmen of Northern Ireland, backed by British governments – Tory or Labour – and the Orange Order.

Working-class unity in the North was not helped by the sort of regime that developed in the south out of the compromise between the Irish middle class and British interests.

Without the wealth of the Belfast area, it was inconceivable that the southern state could carry through any sort of national development in the interests of the mass of the population. The leaders of the Free State aligned themselves with the most conservative groups that had existed under British rule – the southern Unionist landowners and civil servants, the few large capitalists and the church hierarchy. A stagnating, exploited, priest-ridden regime resulted.

Workers and farmers found that the pretence of independence had not improved their conditions. 350,000 of them were forced to emigrate in search of a livelihood between 1922 and 1930. Unemployment stood at 90,000 in 1931 and hunger remained a permanent threat for much of the rural population. Even in what were the 'prosperous' 1950s for the rest of Europe, unemployment remained high and 40,000 people a year were forced to emigrate.

Such a state had nothing to offer the Protestant workers of the North. To most of them a 'United Ireland' seemed to mean only that their existing privileges would be destroyed and that the power of the Catholic Church would increase. There were few Protestants who could see beyond that to the

idea of a united workers' republic in which the wealth of the whole island would be used for the benefit of all its working people, instead of being sucked out by British profiteers and their Irish collaborators.

The southern government, by putting out the story that a united Ireland would mean an extension to 32 counties of their own sort of rule, only served to strengthen opposition to unity in the North.

Yet conditions in the North were hardly a great deal better. Unemployment was considerably higher than in Britain, wages rather lower. In the late 1960s the unemployment rate in Northern Ireland was about twice that in Britain. Thousands were forced to emigrate to look for work, and wages, even in the overwhelmingly Protestant skilled industries such as shipbuilding, were about 25 per cent lower than in Britain.

Protestant workers supported British rule because it gave them slightly better conditions than Catholic workers – but British rule meant joblessness and low wages for them too.

For the Catholic workers it was worse. They had even greater unemployment rates – approaching 30 per cent in places, such as the Catholic areas of Derry City, even lower wages, and on top of that vicious police repression.

## **The breakup of Stormont**

SECTARIANISM in Northern Ireland served the interests of British big business perfectly for 50 years. It ensured a stable, Tory, pro-British regime in the North, and it ensured a nominally independent regime in the south that could never achieve real

economic independence. Orangeism effectively shackled the whole of Ireland to Britain, and reduced the republican, anti-British tradition to impotence.

British governments, Tory and Labour, were quite happy with the arrangement and turned a blind eye to the sectarianism, the gerrymandering and the police repression in the Six Counties. But the very success of this arrangement began to produce forces that undermined it.

British, European and American businessmen began, in the early 1960s, to see southern Ireland as a stable country, with a conservative government and low wages.

‘Investment came in attracted by tax concessions, low wages and unrestricted freedom to take profits out of the country. By March 1965, 234 new foreign projects had commenced operation in the state. Almost half of them were British ... Employment in manufacturing industries other than textiles, clothing and footwear went up from 143,000 to 163,000.’ (McCann, page 261).

The new expansion of industry in southern Ireland took place while the traditional industries of Northern Ireland, such as shipbuilding, were undergoing a decline. By the later 1960s, it was no longer true that British big business thought of the North alone when it thought of its wealth in Ireland: the southern state was now just as important.

Businessmen began to plan their operations on an all-Ireland basis. From a purely economic point of view, the border between North and south began to be regarded as a nuisance, and pressure was put on the two governments to collaborate in one way or another. In 1965 the first-ever meeting took place between prime ministers north and south of the border.

One thing, however, was ignored in all these calculations. The regime in Northern Ireland was based on deliberate sectarian repression of the Catholic population – including the representatives of the same Catholic middle class that ruled southern Ireland. Only physical force prevented the Catholic population of the North from fighting back.

The talk of a ‘new relationship’ between the Northern and southern governments gave the Northern Catholics new hope. They began to mobilise to demand a change within the North itself, to bring an end to the old sectarian structure and to gain ‘civil rights’. At first their demands were moderate and their method of struggle far from violent. They did not ask for the end of the Northern state or the border – only for an end to discrimination. And they did not use guns or petrol bombs, but peaceful marches. The British press has since attempted to give the impression that the IRA has always been behind the violence in Ireland. But in 1968, the IRA hardly existed. Hard-line Republicans were few, and the IRA had sold many of its guns.

What started the violence was that the demands of the Catholics, however meagre and however peacefully expressed, were in complete contradiction to the whole structure of the Six County state. That state was based on sectarianism. Its ruling party was sectarian, its judges were sectarian, its police force was sectarian, and the ties which bound Protestant workers to it were sectarian. An attack on sectarianism, however ‘moderate’, was an attack on the state itself and that was how the forces of the state saw it

When Catholics marched through the streets of Derry in October 1968 they were met with all the violence and hatred the state could muster. Police charged men, women and children with batons and beat them to the ground.

In the months that followed there were repeated confrontations, especially in Derry as police tried to break

into Catholic ghettos to attack those threatening the system. A peaceful march from Belfast to Derry in January 1969 was set on by Orangemen and B-Specials, with the police looking on. Dozens of marchers were bludgeoned to the ground and beaten up. In the aftermath the police went on to the streets of the Catholic area of Derry breaking windows with their batons, kicking doors and beating people up.

The next time the police broke into the Bogside in April, one of the men they beat up, Samuel Devenny, died as a result.

In August 1969 came the explosion ... A three-day battle kept the police out of the Derry Bogside. Orangemen, police and B-Specials decided to take their revenge. They burst into the Catholic areas of Belfast, machine guns blazing. Eight Catholics were killed, hundreds more were driven from their homes.

In the past, the Orangemen's bloody assaults had been backed by the British government. But things had changed. British big business was doing well in the south. It did not want its profits there ruined by any reaction to its treatment of the Northern Catholics.

But that reaction was growing – even the British government was forced to make warlike noises. Reluctantly, the government ordered its troops to intervene to try to defuse the situation. It promised to improve conditions for the Catholics, it disbanded the B-Specials and said it was going to disarm the rest of the police.

But one thing it was not yet prepared to do. That was to dismantle the state machine which, regardless of its faults, safeguarded big business control and divided the working class. The British Labour government of the time spoke of 'reform' in Northern Ireland, but they left the sectarian Unionist Party and its Orange Order backers in control of

the Northern Ireland government. The Orange Order was in turn able to ensure that politicians who reluctantly backed the ‘reforms’, such as O’Neil and Chichester Clark, were forced from office.

The Catholic masses on the other hand were not prepared to trust any promises from Unionist governments. For a year their peaceful marches had been attacked with batons, with water cannon, with CS gas. Their homes had been burnt out, their families shot at. The same police force was ‘keeping order’ that for 50 years had acted to prevent Catholics expressing themselves politically – even the British judge Lord Cameron admitted that ‘there appears to us to be force in the criticism ... that the police are biased in their conduct against Catholic areas and demonstrations’. (**Report of Royal Commission**, paragraph 151).

While such a government and such a police force existed, the mass of Catholics knew that their only protection lay in defending themselves. In the ghettos they began to get arms to fight off future attacks. The IRA, previously a small, isolated body, started to grow rapidly as people turned to it for help.

At first the British government and its troops wavered between trying to push for reforms and trying to prop up the Stormont regime. It introduced a few reforms and tolerated the self-defence groups which had emerged in the Catholic ghettos. The result, however, was a growing opposition to the government among those who had enabled British big business to run Northern Ireland in the past – the Protestant sectarians. The British government had disbanded the B-Specials to keep the Catholics happy. Now it tried to calm down the Protestant rage by showing that the British army was just as good as the B-Specials had been at dealing with Republicanism. It established a new military force, the Ulster Defence Regiment, which B-Specials joined

wholesale. The army began to put on a 'tougher' stance than in the past, working jointly with the hated RUC, the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

'They also intensified their searches for arms in the Roman Catholic community, without undertaking similar operations in Protestant areas. This inevitably led to greater antagonisms between individual units and the large numbers of innocent people whose homes were ransacked or who were subject to inconvenience and harassment.' (**Justice in Northern Ireland**, Cobden Trust, page 25).

In June and July 1970 the army finally showed that, faced with a choice between the avowed commitment to 'reform' and the defence of the institutions of the Orange state, they sided with the Orange state. Bernadette Devlin was imprisoned by the RUC for her part in the defence of the Bogside against the B-Specials the year before. There was a full-blooded riot in Derry.

'Gas containers crashed and petrol bombs flared through the swirling CS haze. All day Saturday and through Sunday afternoon the 1969 scenario was acted out with the army in the RUC role ...' (McCann, page 76).

In the week that followed the British and Stormont authorities permitted Orange parades through Belfast which ended with riots in the Ardoyne, Ballymurphy and East Belfast. Protestant attacks on a small Catholic area in East Belfast were repelled by armed resistance which led to three Protestants and one Catholic being killed.

'What was of importance was that the Orange parades, these noisy, never-ending celebrations of institutionalised Catholic inferiority were, apparently, being shepherded round Belfast,

past hemmed-in Catholic ghettos, by British soldiers.’ (McCann, page 77).

The final straw was the imposition by the army of a curfew in the Catholic Lower Falls area. Troops went from house to house, ransacking rooms, tearing apart furniture and floorboards in a search for the arms with which the Catholics had been defending themselves. During this operation, four innocent civilians were shot and killed by the British army. As the National Council for Civil Liberties has observed: ‘No proof has ever been offered that those killed were engaged in illegal activities of any kind. Their only "crime" was to come within the sights of a British soldier who shot to kill without any attempt to ascertain the identity of his target... No criminal proceeding or disciplinary action of any kind was taken against the soldiers involved.’

Typical of the behaviour of the army was the arrest of 39 people in a first aid station when it was claimed there were explosives hidden in the building. After they had been held in prison without bail for a fortnight, it was revealed that there was no evidence against any of them.

It was hardly surprising that the local people began to resist such ‘searches’ and such arrests. They took up the struggle of the year before – only this time it was against the British troops as well as the RUC.

Up to this point, no British troops had been killed by Catholics or the IRA. Those who blame the IRA for the violence in Ireland should ask themselves what would their own reaction be if troops, searching for their only means of defence against armed mobs, tore their houses apart, shot



up their neighbours and flooded a tightly packed working-class area with tear gas.

The British troops were not 'restoring peace'. What was being acted out was merely the latest in a long series of attempts by the rulers of Britain to impose their form of 'law and order' on Northern Ireland and, as usual, the Catholic population was on the receiving end of the punishment doled out.

The younger, more active sections of the ghetto population flooded into the IRA, particularly the more military-minded Provisional wing – as the one force which could provide them with the means to protect the community against attacks from either Orangemen or the British army and which spoke seriously about ending British rule once and for all.

The twelve months after the Falls Curfew were marked by ever-increasing hostility between the Catholic population and the British army, with the first shootings of British soldiers by the IRA early in 1971 and an increasing number of shootings of unarmed Catholic civilians by the troops. The climax came that August when hundreds of people were seized from their beds by armed troops who dragged them off to 'internment' – imprisonment without trial. Those arrested were not just supporters of the IRA, but anyone who had put up militant opposition to the Stormont regime in the previous three years – including even an avowed pacifist. The internees were subjected to intolerable hardship, including physical torture designed to make them give information to the troops and police.

For a long time the British authorities denied allegations of torture. But in May 1972 the British Lord Chief Justice was forced to refuse to admit a confession in a court case on the grounds that 'the interrogation set-up was officially organised and operated in order to obtain information from

persons who would otherwise have been less willing to give it.' (Quoted in **Justice in Northern Ireland**, page 32).

In April 1973 the British Attorney General admitted that 'there have been 55 abandoned cases in Belfast since the beginning of 1972 mainly because of the inadmissibility of confession statements' (**Justice in Northern Ireland**, page 33). In other words, torture did take place. It still does.

The Catholic communities naturally protested as the troops tried to seize people. Crowds gathered on the streets, throwing stones and petrol bombs in an effort to keep the troops at bay. The troops replied, as they were accustomed, with guns. On internment day, 9 August 1971, at least 10 civilians were killed, nine of them the result of casual violence by the army. The dead included a priest, Father Hugh Mullan, and many others were seriously injured. Typical was the case of Frank McGuinness who was shot and killed by the army during a 'riot' where stones and bottles were thrown at the troops. No warning of any kind was given, and the witnesses stated that McGuinness had nothing in his hands when hit. Seventeen more people were killed before the end of the year in basically similar circumstances.

But internment did not quell the movement among the Catholic population, despite the brutality. Instead, the reaction was massive rejection of the pretensions of the Northern Ireland government. Tens of thousands of people began a rent and rates strike, there were massive demonstrations on the streets and even the most middle-class of the Catholic politicians were forced to withdraw from positions of authority within the state. A solid wall of hostility to the government and the troops resulted. Even the Catholic middle-class was willing to give the IRA a tacit blessing. For the Catholic workers the IRA's snipers and

bombings of government buildings, shops and factories seemed the way to bring down the regime.

The British government had introduced internment to smash resistance to the Northern Ireland regime. But the resistance grew, until the state was almost ungovernable. In desperation, the British authorities resorted to the crude barbarism that had always succeeded in protecting their rule in Ireland in the past. On 30 January 1972 British paratroops opened fire on a civil rights demonstration in Derry, killing 13 unarmed people.

But the bloodshed had the opposite effect to that intended. Instead of intimidating the population, it gave new impetus to the popular movement. Catholics throughout Northern Ireland took part in protest strikes and more mass demonstrations followed. More ominous still, from the British government's point of view, were massive protest strikes in southern Ireland and the burning down of the British Embassy in Dublin by a huge demonstration.

It was clear that if the campaign of repression in Northern Ireland continued, the conflict might spread to the south, putting in danger the massive investments of British capitalism there. The British government carried through a sudden reversal of policy. In March the Unionist regime at Stormont was replaced by direct rule from London.

The British government even went so far, in the summer of 1972, as to enter into direct negotiation with the Provisional IRA.

The ending of the old Stormont regime and one-party Unionist governments did not, however, mean an end either to British rule in Northern Ireland or to the deliberate use of sectarianism to back this.

The British Tory government produced a White Paper in March 1973 outlining its aims for Northern Ireland. The

Labour Party supported, and still supports, the content of the document. But beneath the verbiage was a determination to preserve British rule in Northern Ireland at all costs. 'Due provision,' the White Paper says, 'has to be made for the United Kingdom to have a continuing and effective voice in Northern Ireland's affairs.'

However, the means of guaranteeing British rule were meant to be different to those used in the past. Instead of relying on the sectarian representatives of the Orange Order to carry through the demands of British rule, the aim became to use representatives of both the Protestant and the Catholic middle-class. After all, if the Catholic middle-class could run southern Ireland effectively for British big business, why could they not co-operate in doing the same in the North? So the talk now was of aiming 'to seek a much wider consensus than has hitherto existed' and 'to involve majority and minority interests alike in the work of the new government.'

The idea was that a representative of the British government would aid Protestant politicians run certain ministries, Catholic politicians others.

Such an approach did not mean an end to sectarianism however. The main political parties would continue to be sectarian parties. The Protestant members of the government and of local authorities would continue to distribute profitable contracts to Protestant small businessmen, would continue to try to ensure that jobs and council houses would go to Protestant workers in preference to Catholics.

But in some government departments and in some local authorities, the Catholic representatives would have the ability to alter the balance slightly to the advantage of those who had elected them.

The working class would remain divided between Protestants and Catholics. They would continue to squabble over the small privileges allowed to the Protestants. And the British government, by playing one off against the other, would continue to rule.

The White Paper itself admitted that such an arrangement could not solve the fundamental problems of workers of either religion: 'Northern Ireland has had to make immense efforts to maintain its employment position, let alone improve it.' Despite a 'skilfully and vigorously conducted programme of industrial development ... Northern Ireland has remained the poorest region of the United Kingdom.'

In other words, although the White Paper would not admit as much, under existing property relations there is little hope that the conditions of the workers in Northern Ireland will improve. A new government for Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Executive, was formed on the basis of the recommendations in the White Paper towards the end of 1973. But it did not in any way end sectarianism. The population was as divided along sectarian lines as ever before. Nor did it end the repression against the Catholic section of the working class by the British army.

What did happen was that Protestant workers, for the first time in many years, now felt that the Northern Ireland government did not belong to them. But instead of seeing their interests at one with those of Catholic workers, they continued to follow sectarian, middle-class politicians such as William Craig and Ian Paisley who spoke of a return to the past, with Orangemen in complete control of the state.

Meanwhile the Catholic workers continued to be discriminated against in terms of jobs and continued to be on the receiving end of brutality from the British army and the RUC. Troops continued to occupy the Catholic areas of Belfast. 'Arms searches', which meant the ransacking of

houses and the shooting of civilians, went on. And several hundred people remained in prison without trial.

## **The role of the British Army**

ONE of the greatest propaganda myths of our time is that the British army went into Northern Ireland originally to protect the Catholics and stayed on to prevent a 'civil war' between Catholics and Protestants.

As we have seen, the original conquest of Ireland by British armies 300 years ago had a simple purpose: to ensure that the wealth of Ireland was controlled by the British ruling class. The same considerations underlie the role the British army plays today. The basic fact ignored in all the propaganda of the British press is that the wealth of Northern Ireland is concentrated in the hands of a small number of large British firms.

A COMPLETE LIST of British firms in Northern Ireland would be long enough to fill pages of this pamphlet. In the manufacturing field they range from GEC to Rolls-Royce in engineering, through Metal Box and Oneida Steel in light engineering, and subsidiaries of British American Tobacco and Rank in cigarettes and food, to Courtaulds and ICI in textile manufacture. There are subsidiaries of British subsidiaries operating – the engineering firm of A Kirkland is part of the Courtaulds group, as is Bairnswear.

In the distribution industry the picture is very similar – the shopping centre of Belfast is dominated by British Home Stores, C&A Modes, Marks and Spencer and Littlewoods. The older 'department stores' are also under the control of

British interests – the Belfast city centre store, Robinson and Cleaver, is a subsidiary of Sir Charles Clore's Sears Holdings.

With financial institutions the story is the same. After a long process of takeover and merger by the Midland and Westminster banks there has been no independent Northern Ireland bank since 1965. So although it is difficult to obtain precise figures, it is possible to state that almost all the finance capital, the bulk of distributive capital and perhaps as much as 75 per cent of manufacturing capital in Northern Ireland is directly under the control of British capitalism.

Such a stake, needless to say, gives British capitalism almost total control over the Northern Ireland economy.

British capitalism's interest in Ireland is not confined to the North. By March 1972 there were no fewer than 986 British subsidiaries in the south and 65 per cent of manufacturing industry was controlled by foreign, mostly British, capital. Of all the new industrial projects undertaken during 1960–1970, 70 per cent were accounted for by non-Irish firms. In the same period 74 per cent of the total investment in new enterprises was made by these companies.

British companies themselves accounted for 44 per cent of new projects, American for 25 per cent, German for 18 per cent and other countries, notably Japan, for 13 per cent. To get some idea of the scale involved, the total of US investment over the period – £42 million – was the same as that of all Irish-owned firms.

The most frequently given explanation for these extremely high levels of foreign investment is that the governments, north and south of the border, have offered various incentives to attract foreign capital. Grants up to 45 per cent of the cost of new plant and equipment are made.

But there is a second 'attraction' which is less frequently publicised – the low level of wages in both Northern and southern Ireland. In March 1972 the director of the Industrial Development Authority boasted that labour costs were more favourable (to the capitalist class) in southern Ireland than in the rest of Europe. Figures produced by the Department of Employment in 1970 showed that in every industrial group, wages in Northern Ireland were lower than in the rest of the UK. Taking the average across all manufacturing industry, wages in Northern Ireland (hourly rates) were only 78 per cent of those in the rest of the UK.

The combination of tax-free profits, substantial capital grants and low wage levels means, of course, that investment in any part of Ireland can be a very profitable exercise. It is practically impossible to get figures for the North, but they are not likely to be very different from those for the south which show that the rate of profit on industrial capital shows a rise from 11.5 per cent in 1959 to 15.6 per cent in 1964. It remained at that high rate until 1966 when it began to rise again. These rises took place while the rate of profit in Britain was falling.

However, British capitalism's interest in Ireland is not limited to the actual capital stake it has here. Ireland is also Britain's third largest export market – more than 55 per cent of Irish imports come from Britain, and more than 65 per cent of total Irish exports go to Britain. Almost 75 per cent of Northern Irish imports come from the rest of the UK. So the combination of a large and highly profitable capital stake and a large and subservient market makes the whole of the Irish economy an area which the British capitalist class will want to keep at almost any price.

THE BRITISH press continually tried to portray the British army in Northern Ireland as a gallant bunch of



heroes, preserving law and order at enormous danger to themselves. Many socialists and trade unionists in Britain fall for this line. After all, most of the rank and file soldiers are working-class lads who join the army because of unemployment or to get out of humdrum dead-end jobs. It seems rough on them to be shot at and attacked by rioters.

But the soldiers do not determine the job they do. They have to obey the orders of their officers. Failure to do so means serious criminal charges. And these orders are based on the continuing need of British capitalism to protect its wealth in Ireland, North and south.

The task the soldiers are made to do is not the protection of the lives of the majority. Their task is to prop up the form of government the rulers of Britain have decided to impose in Northern Ireland. Until 1972, that meant propping up the totally sectarian Orange state. Since then, it has been to prop up a form of British rule which makes a few concessions to the Catholic middle class, but which offers no solution to the problems facing workers, Protestant or Catholic. The army's orders are, quite simply, to crack down with massive force against those who oppose this form of rule, and to crack down hardest against those who oppose it most.

The army has been used in the crudest way to attack viciously those sections of the Catholic population who oppose British rule completely and who back the Republican ideal. It has also been used, but in a less consistently vicious manner, to intimidate those sections of the Protestant population who support the idea of British rule, but not in its present form with the concessions to the Catholic middle class.

A few incidents since the imposition of Direct Rule show what the British army means to people in the Catholic ghettos.

## ONE

On the weekend of 5 February 1973, a crowd of people were standing on a street corner in the New Lodge area of Belfast. They were fired on by the army and six were killed. Two were IRA members. Witnesses say they were unarmed and that no attempt was made to arrest them before shots were fired by the army. None of the other four victims were armed, nor were they members of any 'subversive' organisation.

Yet the army has continued to pretend that all six men were killed in an exchange of fire with security forces, although the Northern Ireland Office later admitted the falsity of a statement in the press by an army officer saying that tests had proved that the men carried guns.

## TWO

Three men, Patrick McCabe, Edward Sharpe and Brendan Smith, were shot dead in separate incidents in the Ardoyne district, although local residents again insisted that they were unarmed, innocent victims. Each man was labelled a 'gunman' by army statements, although no evidence was presented to justify this claim. Edward Sharpe was shot dead from an army post while standing in the doorway of his own home, but no soldiers ever investigated the scene after the shooting.

### **THREE**

On 23 February 1973, 13-year-old Kevin Keatley was shot dead in Newry within minutes of a telephone call to the **Irish News** that soldiers wearing no form of identification were running wild in the area. Residents claimed that a single shot was fired by a soldier at close range, and that he then turned and shouted 'Who's next?'

### **FOUR**

Soon afterwards, the army carried out what were clearly summary executions of two men they regarded as 'IRA members', John Hughes of Armagh and Edward O'Rawe of Belfast. In O'Rawe's case, there is photographic evidence that he was in army custody before the time when he was shot for allegedly 'resisting arrest'.

### **FIVE**

In June 1973 Anthony Mitchell had the misfortune drunkenly to 'attack' the well-fortified Springfield Road barracks with a chair leg. He was shot dead at point blank range.

## SIX

A week later, in Deny, Robert McGuinness was killed by the army, who claimed to have shot a gunman. But again no evidence was produced that he had a gun on him, and eye-witnesses say he was unarmed.

## SEVEN

One of the most revealing incidents occurred in June 1973, when four civilians were wounded by a burst of machine-gun fire from a plain-clothes army patrol driving by the Glen Road bus terminal. A sergeant accused of attempted murder eight months later was acquitted when he claimed that the shot men were armed – although none of them had been arrested afterwards, no forensic tests were made, and no evidence whatsoever was produced. It is hardly surprising, that an investigation carried out by the New York-based International League for the Rights of Man and the London-based National Council for Civil Liberties came to the conclusion at the end of 1972 that ‘certain regiments, in particular the Parachute Regiment, are guilty of continued illegalities amounting at times to a reign of terror ... the army are increasingly a law to themselves.’

A parachute lieutenant told **The Guardian** a few months later:

'You know when we were in Ballymurphy we had the people really fed up with us, terrified really. I understand what the refugees must feel like in Vietnam ... After every shooting incident we would order 1,500 house searches. 1,500!'

Another officer commented on the feelings of the soldiers:

'Skiing or mountain climbing has got nothing on a cordon and search when you get old Snodgrass out of bed at four in the morning and go through his house like a dose of salts.' (**The Guardian**, 13 July 1973).

## Sectarian assassinations

THE most horrific single feature of life in Northern Ireland since the imposition of Direct Rule has been the spread of individual sectarian assassination. People are being killed not because of their views or because of their activities, but just because they come from a certain section of the community. At the time of writing there have been 150 such murders-people shot down in the streets, on answering the front door or as they lay in bed at night.

The overwhelming majority of these assassinations have involved the murder of Catholics by Protestant sectarians. Although Catholics make up only a third of Belfast's population, two-thirds of the murders in the city have been of Catholics. And some of the Protestants murdered were killed by other Protestants for associating with Catholics.

The British and Northern Ireland governments have often made statements condemning the killings. Certainly they have been more outspoken about them than about the

killings by the British army. But the responsibility for the assassinations lies with them just as surely as do the actions of the army.

Several reasons can be given to justify this statement. Firstly, the assassinations are the logical outcome of the sectarian indoctrination of the Protestant population for 150 years and more. From 1795, through the 19th century to 1920–22 and 1935, the rulers of Northern Ireland encouraged sectarian attacks whenever it suited their interests – and they were supported in this by the British government. Protestant workers were taught that they were under continual threat from their Catholic fellow workers and that they should be prepared to use guns if necessary to eradicate that threat.

As the Belfast coroner commented during the 1935 riots:

‘The poor people who commit these riots are easily led and influenced by the public speeches of men in high and responsible positions. There would be less bigotry if there were less public speech-making of a kind by the so-called leaders of public opinion.’ (**Irish News**, July 1935 – quoted in McCann, page 199)

Many of the leaders of public opinion may have changed their ideas on sectarianism slightly of late in their desire to look after British investments south of the border. But the fruits of their efforts at encouraging sectarianism in the past persist.

The sectarian assassinations have been the responsibility of the authorities in more direct ways also.

The whole state machine of Northern Ireland is still permeated by a sectarian spirit. That there have been a few Catholics in the government does not alter the attitude ingrained in the police force and the courts for 50 years. Nor does it alter the desire by the British authorities to maintain

a measure of support for British rule among the Protestant population – and the only way to do that is to leave intact much of the sectarian structure of the police and courts and not to touch the privileges of the Protestant workers.

The result has been that although the murders have been carried out, in the main, in Protestant areas which contain small communities of Catholics, the British troops and the police have done little to impede the movement of armed men in such areas. At the height of the murder wave towards the end of 1972, there were a mere 500 troops in the Protestant areas of Belfast, compared to thousands in the Catholic areas. Repression has been directed at the Republican areas which oppose British rule, while the Loyalist areas which shelter the sectarian killers have been virtually untouched.

There have been remarkably few arrests for sectarian murder and those who are arrested almost invariably get off when they appear in court. A survey of court cases has revealed that in magistrates courts in 1972, ‘there was a substantial difference in the treatment of Protestants and Roman Catholics charged with political offences: only one in five (21 per cent) of Roman Catholics were granted bail compared with almost half (46 per cent) of Protestants.’ (**Justice in Northern Ireland**, page 48).

An analysis of cases where people were charged with carrying arms in January-June 1973 – at a time when the wave of sectarian murders was at its worst – shows that it was regarded as much more serious for a Catholic to be armed, although he might well need it to protect himself against a sectarian attack, than for a Protestant, although as we have seen the vast majority of sectarian murders were by Protestants:

‘40 and 36 per cent of the charges against Protestants were of the least serious offences of having no [firearms] certificate,

compared with 12 and 15 per cent of the charges against Roman Catholics. The authorities seem to have been rather more ready to accept the explanation that guns were for defensive rather than offensive purposes from Protestants than from Roman Catholics.’ (page 54).

What is more, ‘figures show that a rather higher proportion of charges against Protestants (31 per cent) were withdrawn by the prosecuting authorities than against Roman Catholics (24 per cent).’ (page 55).

Finally, when it came to sentences, the Protestants were treated more leniently than the Catholics. ‘The figures for average sentences show that Roman Catholics received a heavier average sentence on charges of carrying arms in public or with criminal intent and of possessing firearms or ammunition in suspicious circumstances’ (page 60).

Under a political structure designed to maintain British domination of Ireland, it is regarded as much more serious to carry arms with the possible intention of removing that domination than with the aim of killing innocent, unarmed civilians because of their religion.

But sectarian murders have not only not been opposed by the authorities in any serious way. They have also, in certain ways, served the purposes of the authorities. These face a real problem with the Catholic working class – its refusal to accept the right of the Northern Ireland state to control it and its opposition to the use of police or troops in Catholic areas. By allowing the sectarian murders to go virtually unchecked and by taking away from the pro-Republican communities the guns and the barricades with which they could defend themselves, the authorities had, no doubt, hoped to frighten and demoralise them. Their hopes had been that the Republican areas would be forced, in desperation, to turn to the British army, the RUC and the



middle-class Catholic MPs as the only way of protecting themselves, however inadequately, from the murders.

This view might seem far-fetched to many people in Britain. But it is worth remembering that last time the Irish question was at the centre of British politics, in the early 1920s, Lloyd George, from whom many of our present ministers would be proud to trace their political ancestry, boasted to his colleagues about the work of British ‘murder gangs’ in frightening the Irish into submission. Today we know that special units of the British army, such as the Special Air Services (SAS), have been deliberately trained in the techniques of so-called ‘counter-terror’ – working in plain clothes and assassinating those they deem to be their opponents. It is only a short step from this to permitting Protestant thugs to do the job instead.

Certainly, it is difficult to find any other plausible explanation for the way in which British ministers and army officers have sat back while cold-blooded sectarian murders have taken place.

## **Prospects for the future**

THE ARGUMENT throughout this pamphlet has been that British rule and British troops can in no way solve the problems facing working people in Northern Ireland. The troops are part of the problem, not part of the solution. The British ruling class introduced sectarianism into Northern Ireland and depends on sectarianism to divide and rule today.

The British press and British governments try to shift the blame for the state bloodshed on to other shoulders. They

give the impression that the fault lies with the Republican organisations, who they like to refer to as ‘terrorists’ and ‘gunmen’ (as if armed troops are not ‘gunmen’), or at least with ‘extremists on both sides’.

But the Republican organisations did not create the poverty, the unemployment, the low wages, the slum housing. Nor have they created the sectarianism. These are all the direct products of British rule and British economic domination.

Republicanism has developed, in fact, as an attempt to set Ireland on a path which would free it from all these evils. Its traditions are ones which try to break British economic and political domination and which oppose sectarianism as a product of British rule. That does not mean there are no Catholic sectarians – there are. And because most support for Republicanism today comes as a result of the need of Catholic communities to defend themselves, that sectarianism sometimes contaminates the Republican organisations. But that is by no means the same as the Republican organisations being based on sectarianism, as are the Orange Order, the Unionist Party, and the link with Britain.

The IRA is condemned in Britain because it uses guns and bombs against British troops and the Northern Ireland police. But it was not the IRA that first used violence in Ireland. British governments used armed force to conquer Ireland in the 17th century and to maintain their hold in the 18th and 19th centuries. They used armed force in 1920–22 to keep the Six Counties under British rule. They use armed force today against the Catholic pro-Republican areas. Those who want to defend those areas have to use force likewise – and if Britain’s grip on Ireland is ever to be broken, force again will be needed.

This does not mean that socialists do not criticise the Republicans. We do. But not because they oppose British rule of Ireland, rather because we believe the methods they are using in their attempt to drive the British out of Ireland cannot work.

Republicanism is the tradition pioneered by the middle-class rebels who fought in 1798 and 1916. Its basic contention is that the solution to the problems of Ireland lies in securing national independence and unity. Everything else is secondary to this: any talk of a choice between Irish capitalism and Irish socialism has to be left until after British rule has been ended.

Such an approach made sense to those in the time of Wolfe Tone, at the end of the 18th century, who wanted to establish Ireland as a nation like any other – that is, an independent capitalist nation. It does not make sense today.

In the modern world, the giant international monopolies dominate all small Western countries, even those which have nominal ‘national independence and unity’. As we have seen, that is the case with southern Ireland. It would be just as true of a united Ireland. Under capitalism big firms nearly always outsell small ones. Such is the size of the biggest firms internationally now that it is impossible for the capitalist class of a small country like Ireland to set up in competition with them. Inevitably it will end up working hand in glove with them – and in Ireland’s case the nearest giant firms are those of Britain.

But if a united capitalist Ireland would be under the thumb of the giant firms, then it could not solve the basic problems facing the Irish workers and small farmers, north or south of the border. All it could do in the Six Counties, for example, would be to redistribute jobs and bad housing, to the benefit of the Catholic workers perhaps but then also to the disadvantage of the Protestant workers.

Such a prospect has little to offer to those who suffer under the existing state of affairs nearly as much as the Catholic workers of the North – the Catholic workers and small farmers of the south and the Protestant workers of the North.

Yet the fight against British control of Ireland can only be fully effective when it gains support from the workers of the south – remember that the burning of the British Embassy in Dublin was the key warning that forced some change in British policy after Bloody Sunday – and if it begins to undermine the sectarianism of the Protestant workers in the North. The only policy which can win consistent and sustained support from workers in the south is one which fights the exploitation of the working class of the south, as well as the repression in the North.

And the only policy which can break the sectarianism of the Protestant workers is one which talks of improving the conditions of all workers, Protestant and Catholic, rather than of redistributing a few jobs and houses from Protestants to Catholics.

It is impossible to take up such questions on a consistent day-to-day basis, continually showing how they relate to the living and working conditions among workers, North and south, Protestant and Catholic, without raising the question not just of a united Ireland, but of a United Socialist Ireland.

Because the Republicans have been unable to do this, they have been unable to build up on any lasting basis a mass movement that extends beyond the beleaguered Catholic community in the North. And even there they have lost a lot of political influence in the past two years to those middle-class politicians who would collaborate with British rule.

Many of the tactics to which the Republicans resort follow from their mistaken perspective on how to free Ireland. Unable to build a mass movement outside the Catholic areas

of the North, they have tended to see individual heroism in military confrontations as an alternative. When that has failed, they have tended to move on to bombing British-owned property – or making individual bombing attacks on political or military installations in Britain.

Such methods inevitably fail. Destroying a few odd bits of British imperialism's wealth in Northern Ireland is not going to make it abandon the rest, and killing the odd soldier in Britain is not going to make the British ruling class – which in any case regards soldiers like other workers as mere pawns to be used in furtherance of exploitation-stop sending more soldiers to Ireland.

What is more, such bombing inevitably leads to accidental civilian deaths and injuries, which increase the sectarian hatred of Protestant workers and make the anti-Republican propaganda of British governments seem more plausible to British workers.

But socialists in Britain should never confuse our criticism of the methods used by Republicans, and of the ideas which produce those methods, with the sort of condemnation of Republicanism made by the British ruling class and its press.

The real responsibility for, say, the bombings in London, does not lie with the Republican organisations, but with those who have driven the Catholic population of Northern Ireland to such a state of despair that they see no alternative way of challenging their plight.

The methods employed in Northern Ireland have not been used by the army or police in Britain for many years.

But those who give the British soldiers their orders have indicated that they would be prepared to behave in the same way over here if the occasion arose. Government ministers have often indicated that the troops are 'defending civil

authority in Northern Ireland as they would in any other part of the United Kingdom.’

Brigadier Frank Kitson, who commanded British troops in Belfast four years ago, wrote shortly afterwards in a book aimed at other army officers:

‘If a genuine and serious grievance arose, such as might result from a significant drop in the standard of living, all those who now dissipate their protest over a wide variety of causes might concentrate their efforts and produce a situation which was beyond the power of the police to handle. Should this happen the army would be required to restore the position rapidly.’  
**(Low Intensity Operations, page 25).**

Kitson’s book is copyrighted by Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, and it is commended in the most glowing terms by Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Michael Carver GCB, CBE, DSO, MC, ADC. ‘This book,’ the General writes in his foreword, ‘is written for the soldier of today to help him to prepare for the operations of tomorrow. It will be of the greatest help to him, and I hope it will be read by all those concerned with training the Army’.

If troops raided the working-class areas of the big industrial cities of Britain, arresting people by the thousand for no cause, pouring tear gas into family homes, beating up those who protested, tearing up floor boards and breaking up furniture, shooting rubber bullets at point blank range into the faces of housewives, there would be deep anger among all sections of organised workers. Trade unionists and socialists would have no hesitation in giving their full support to those who fought back against the troops, even if we might criticise the methods they used.

Yet such is the situation in Northern Ireland today. It is up to socialists in Britain to cut through the barrage of propaganda created by the press, the TV and the radio, to point the finger at those really to blame for the violence and sectarianism and to show the same solidarity with the Republicans fighting repression as we would with workers fighting attacks by the army and police in England, Scotland or Wales.

We have to say quite clearly that the people of Ireland have every right to try to control their own country by driving out the British troops – and if British soldiers are killed in the process, that is the fault of British governments for sending them there. Our slogan has to be ‘British troops out of Ireland’.

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### Further reading

Eamonn McCann’s **War and an Irish Town** is probably the best book on the events in Northern Ireland since 1968. Unfortunately it is at present out of print (August 1974) but Penguin Books say they will be reprinting it. Until then, try your local library. Another book on the recent history of the North is **Divided Ulster**, by Liam de Paor.

The Socialist Workers Movement has published a pamphlet titled **The Working Class and the National Question** which discusses the situation in Ireland and proposes the socialist solution. It is available, price 10p plus 4p postage, from the Socialist Workers Movement, Top floor, 95 Capel Street, Dublin 1. They also publish the weekly paper **The Worker**.

For a history of the IRA, read J. Boyer Bell’s **The Secret Army**.

Vital reading for all socialists is James Connolly’s **Labour in Irish History**, an account of British imperialism in Ireland and the role of the working class in fighting back. Penguin Books publish **Selected Writings of James Connolly**.

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## Note by MIA

1. In the printed version of the text the name was erroneously given as “Arthur Griffiths”.

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