

Shadow of a gunman—The Irish Republican Army

Sinn Fein was formed in 1905 and its numerous political utterances between then and the establishment of Partition leave no doubt that it represented the interests of the rising capitalist class in the South of Ireland in their struggle to achieve political autonomy in order to legislate political conditions suitable to the growth of a fledgling capitalism.

The Sinn Fein Policy Statement of 1917 summarised the utterances and actions of the organisation over the previous twelve years and made nonsense of the noble-sounding sentiments expressed by Pearse on the steps of the GPO in Dublin in 1916. The capitalist class of every country when they are striving for power pay lip-service to noble sentiments in order to rally the working class in support of their struggle and the honeyed phrases of the Declaration of the Irish Republic, with its generalisations about the Irish Nation being the property of the Irish people, were a far cry from the practical economic aspirations of the native capitalists, expressed in Sinn Fein's Policy Statement:

No possibility would be left as far as Sinn Fein were concerned for a syndicate of unscrupulous English capitalists to crush out the *Home Manufacturer and the Home Trader* (Our italics).

Despite the play with words, "English capitalists" as opposed to "Home Manufacturer", there can be no doubt about Sinn Fein's meaning: they stood for protection of the native capitalists from the competition of "foreign" capitalists. Indeed the Policy statement spells it out:

Protection means rendering the native manufacturer equal to meet foreign competition. If a manufacturer cannot produce as cheaply as an English or other foreigner only because his foreign competitor has larger resources at his disposal, then it is the first duty of the Irish Nation to accord protection to that Irish manufacturer.

This is what it was all about then! This was the bitter reality of the poet's songs, the patriot's dreams, the worker's sacrifices; this was the prize for heroism, sacrifice, murder and counter-murder, bitterness and division. The promised pot of gold at the end of the patriotic rainbow was for the Irish "manufacturer" and the "home trader"; for the worker the only gold was on his new badge of slavery, the national flag that was to adorn his poverty, fly over his slum and replace the Union Jack as a symbol of his political ignorance.

And it could not have been otherwise. Despite the heady romantics of Pearse and the phrase-mongering of James Connolly the political and economic conditions that then prevailed excluded completely the possibility of an alternative to capitalism. The purpose of the struggle was, and could only have been the political stewardship of that system; the flag that symbolised the claim of the native capitalists bore as little relevance to the problems of the working class then, as it does today.

National struggles, especially when they are waged by the very weak against the very strong, are always seen in a romantic light. They are the material for songs and

romantic novels and the new masters that emerge from such struggles are not adverse to the fictions and heroics which later purport to be history—history" which becomes an important ingredient in the fog of ignorance essential in the exploitation of the "nation's" working class.

Our purpose here is not to deny the bravery and self-sacrificing of those who contributed these qualities in the so-called fight for freedom. Such qualities were not the preserve of one side in the struggle—they are to be found in the unfortunate combatants of any war; often, sadly, they are to be found in inverse ratio to the amount of reasoned political thought on the part of their contributors.

Our object is to show that whatever the ideas, or lack of ideas, of the membership of the Sinn Fein movement and its militant arm, the IRA, the only thing they could have achieved—and its achievement was consciously desired by the political leadership of the movement—was the maintenance of the same old failed system of capitalism out of which all working class problems arise. This was true of the IRA yesterday; it is equally true today.

If we leave aside the romantics and "principles" and get down to the facts of working class life, now or in the Twenties, it will be seen that the problems that affected the working class in Ireland under English rule were similar to the problems of the working class throughout the world of capitalism. The facts of working class life were (and since the Six Day War, namely the memory of those are!) poverty, insecurity, unemployment, homelessness, slums, as well as the violent contention, war and violence which form an inevitable sackcloth to such conditions and the economic circumstances in which they arise. These miseries did not originate in "foreign" rule any more than they can be assuaged or eradicated by "home" rule. The French, English, German or Russian worker under his "own" government, lived with these problems in the same way as the Irish worker or the Indian worker, living under a "foreign" government.

In a word, the problems of the working class in Ireland were, and remain, the problems of the working class of the world and originate in the class stratification of capitalist society. Given capitalism, these problems were inevitable; they could not then, no more than they can now, be "planned" out of the system. They did not arise out of the "evil" intentions, nor the blundering or stupidity of governments, "home" or "foreign", no more than they could be planned, prayed or fought away by brave, sincere or wise men. They were the facts of capitalism and would continue to exist for as long as the working class, the only class with an economic interest in bringing about a real change, accepted that system.

In Ireland at the turn of the century the leaders of Sinn Fein were, as we have seen, concerned with the sectional interests of the rising Irish capitalist class. They did not take issue with the fact that the system of capitalism promoted by the dominant British capitalist class resulted in poverty and misery for the working class and small farmers in Ireland—and England. Their concern was not at the fact of exploitation but rather at the identity of the exploiters—at the fact that "English manufacturers (were) squeezing out their less-powerful Irish rivals".

Sinn Fein's was not a cry from the heart at the plight of the people of Ireland but a protest from the pocket of the new bandit against the fact that the older, more resourceful bandit was not giving him a "fair" opportunity to carry out his plunder. But the fledgling native capitalists were not themselves capable of changing the political conditions that thwarted their exploitative function. They needed the battalions of the working class behind them to give point to their argument but to rally the working class they had to appeal to working class interests by falsely identifying the plight of the working class with the rule of the foreign capitalists.

In 1905 Sinn Fein's demands were limited to the idea of Ireland having such measure of political control as would allow for the restriction of foreign, mainly British competition in order that Irish capitalism could develop behind tariff walls and a quota system of imports. This was to be within the framework of an Ireland "hereditary to the (British) Crown . . . with King, Lords and Commons for Ireland". Such evident self-seeking on the part of native capitalism was not especially conducive to this task of rallying the workers and this, along with the declining value of the system of Empire Preference, turned the Party's propaganda increasingly towards the idea of complete separatism that it had engendered in its militant wing.

Predictably, propaganda by deed took over and the Irish Republican Army evolved into an effective weapon waging war on the forces of British capitalism in Ireland. The IRA was composed mainly of young workers and farmers largely unaware of the economic pressures that had given rise to the struggle. They were "fighting for Ireland"! Ireland was an abstraction, a vision, a "principle"; Ireland was the opposite of what they knew and lived with, but then they did not know that all that was hateful in the Ireland they knew was the product of centuries of class rule culminated now in the harsher vulgarities of capitalism and all that was possible for the Ireland of their vision was a continuation of the same old miseries. The law would remain to enshrine the right of one class to exploit another even if the immediate enforcers of that Law wore different uniforms. Only a flag would be changed.

When the needs of the native capitalists had been served in the treaty of 1921 the capitalist class were satisfied. For them it was a matter of regret that some sections of the IRA did not see in the establishment of conditions compatible with the economic needs of capitalism the fulfilment of their vision and if that vision—largely compounded of romanticism, heroics and a sense of comradeship—impelled such sections of the IRA to the continuance of the struggle, then it was to be put down with all the viciousness at the command of the new forces of "law and order".

The IRA had fulfilled its purpose; it had served the class interests of Irish capitalism and by its very nature, apart from its lofty and ill-defined notions of "freedom", it could not have done otherwise. After the Civil War and the desertion of its leadership to the more mundane and profitable offices of capitalism such fragments as continued to exist deteriorated into a political gang that canalised the genuine discontent and revolutionary fervour of some sections of the working class, North and South, into the dream of a tomorrow that was but the pale reflection of the sad ghosts of yesterday. During the decades that have passed the principal and tragic preoccupation of the IRA has been the useless sacrifice of the lives of young Irish workers on the altar of romanticism. Many of its members have been killed by the forces of "law and order" it helped to create in the South. Still more have died in futile adventurism in the North

and thousands of young workers have spent the best years of their lives in jails in both parts of Ireland.

Inevitably years of stagnation and infiltration by informers and police spies have brought their toll of viciousness, intimidation and death within the organisation. The counter-espionage activities of police agents have at different times caused havoc and leaks in the form of young men's bodies have often been plugged with lead after arbitrary conviction by drum-head court martial. In the early Forties, after a senseless bombing campaign in England, the "major leak" scare ran rife in the movement; after numerous bullets and some tar-and-feathers had failed to stop the stream of information to the authorities the IRA discovered that the movement's own chief-of-staff was an informer!

Possibly the only positive role played by the IRA since the Civil War was that ascribed to it by the Unionist Party—and that mainly falsely. No Unionist politician ever faced an election without discovering an IRA plot. At different times throughout the last four decades the IRA was largely a figment of the imagination of the Stormont Government—in the mid-Forties the organisation could not have mustered a platoon of volunteers in the City of Belfast—but it was a useful device for stampeding those workers who were tempted to stray from the paths of Unionism. It was an almost farcical reciprocity: the Unionist Party created the conditions in which the IRA continued its tenuous existence; the IRA helped to maintain a political climate in Northern Ireland conducive to the continuance of Unionist rule.

What has it all been for . . . the tragic deaths, the beatings, the imprisonments? "For Ireland", answers the mocking voice of yesterday.

But there are two Irelands: there is the Ireland of the capitalist class which is doing quite nicely for itself and has no need for, nor interest in, the IRA; and there is the Ireland of the working class. What do they, the working class, owe the IRA? North and South for nearly six decades now members of the working class have contributed their blood in the cause of "Mother Ireland"—and yet their problems remain. If it is accepted that these problems have their roots in capitalism and will disappear only when the alternative to capitalism, Socialism, becomes the system of social organisation then it must be recognised that the IRA have played their part in thwarting the essential unity of the working class, rendering division within the working class more deep and waylaying the working class into the blind alley of nationalism. The organisation has declined in strength since 1922 but since then its real menace has mainly been to its own members. But the situation following on the rioting in Northern Ireland has given the IRA a new lease of life and it is true to say that from the point of view of the working class it now constitutes a dangerous ingredient in the Irish situation.

In the years following the collapse of the IRA's last military activities in the late Fifties a growing section within the movement began to promote the ideas of constitutional political action along the now-fashionable "left-wing" lines. Inevitably the latter-day ideas of one of Republicanism's patron Saints, James Connolly, began to take greater prominence in the thinking of the leadership and, just as inevitably, the nationalistic state-capitalist implications of these ideas has led the movement in the direction of the "Communist" Party.

The events in Northern Ireland since 1968 caused a split in the ranks of the IRA but while the immediate problems posed by the troubles in the North may have triggered off this split it was the growing influence of Leninist ideas within the movement, and the effect these had on dividing the IRA's reaction to events in the North, that formed the core of the division.

The breakaway element, or "Provisionals", as they have come to be known, were led by those who resented the growing influence of "Communist" ideas in the organisation. Not only did such people feel that politics was an irrelevancy within the context of the Republican ideal of a thirty-two county Irish republic but the new political bias in the movement clashed with their Catholicism. When the Catholics of the North were under attack such elements saw the defence of their fellow-Catholics as an immediate priority and when this course was resisted by the official leadership the long-brewing dissension and division came into the open.

The result is that there are now *two* IRA's in Ireland and to confuse matters still more the "official" group, that has moved away from the uncomplicated formula of a Republic, and now pursue a contradiction-in-terms which they refer to as a "Socialist Workers' Republic", are known as the "Traditional IRA" while the breakaway group still espouse the traditional cause—even if they are, at least in the troubled areas of Belfast, a mere anti-Protestant counterpart of the Ulster Volunteer Force.

The "Provisionals", in an attempt to maintain their claim to the title IRA are beginning to refer to the other group as the National Liberation Front—a title which demonstrates not only the real differences that led up to the split but also places the "traditionals", in the view of their erstwhile ex-comrades, in the position of stooges for the "Communist" Party.

Members of the working class, whether in the IRA or lending support to that organisation should realise that Nationalism is the tool of capitalism. The working class have no country—they have the choice of enduring the miseries of capitalism within the confines of national frontiers or enjoying freedom in a Socialist World.

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