

THE IRISH UPSURGE AND THE CLIFF GROUP

"No one has ever shown in practice or tried to explain articulately on paper how the proletariat can seize power without the political leadership of a party that knows what it wants."

--L. Trotsky, Stalinism and Bolshevism

The Northern Irish Civil Rights upsurge of the past few years has been enormously, justifiably popular with the American Left. All the elements of high political drama and standard imperialist tactics are present. Civil Rights petitioners are handed the same brutal treatment as was meted out to Black protesters in the American South in the early 1960's. With acquiescence from the British government in Westminster the leader of the Orange reaction, Rev. Paisley, uses his armed goon squads to foster the classic "divide and rule" tactic of exacerbating differences among the working class within the colonial North Ireland enclave. A certifiable ultra-rightist and religious bigot with ties to American reactionaries, he manipulates the rhetoric of fundamentalism to muzzle the Protestant workers by means of anti-Catholic ideology and to foster the oppression of the largely Catholic poor through pogroms.

But a vicarious emotional identification with the oppressed Irish fighting back against their tormenters is not enough. Nor is barricade rhetoric or mere activist militancy adequate. To be sure, no one fit to bear the title revolutionary can possibly oppose the reflexive reaction of the oppressed--the streetfighting tactics, the shooting of occupying soldiers, the periodic upsurge of rebellious violence, and the rest. But no matter how justified, such episodes must not become a substitute for revolutionary political struggle. Without the knowledge of what to do next--that is, without a program, a conscious plan of action--the struggle will simply waste itself in secondary considerations.

There is a historical basis for such a judgment. The revolutionary struggles of 1916 on ultimately produced the independence of the Free State in the South. But this independence came as part of a compromise between British imperialism and the conservative Irish nationalists, frightened by the growing radical mood of the majority of the Irish people, so the settlement contained the establishment of partition. The nearly 50 years since partition until the renewed wave of radical upsurge were a wasteland of missed opportunities and faulty misdirection--from the bombings of the late 30's through the border raids of the 50's. While no one doubts the integrity and courage behind these actions, no one should have any doubts either about their futility.

A major difficulty for the Civil Rights movement is its local isolation. It can never win so long as it is limited to Ulster. Much of the hostility the Protestant workers feel toward Catholics stems from the "Green Tory" clerical state in South Ireland, and they are impelled to fight against becoming a small minority of a united censorship-dominated reactionary Ireland. The Civil Rights movement must struggle to guarantee Protestants the freedom from clerical reaction they wish. It is false to say, as some radicals have, that the troops were sent in to oppress the "Catholic Community". They were sent in to divide and smash the Irish workers. The struggle must be nation-wide in scope, seeking to link up with the radical anti-clerical struggle in the South, with

the ultimate aim a united Irish workers republic. Anything less than this will simply prove another swindle like 1921.

The similarity between the Irish and American Civil Rights movement goes deeper than the treatment handed both by the authorities. Both had their source in student and petty-bourgeois arenas; neither had much theoretical understanding of what they ultimately hoped to achieve. Neither were afforded much direction from the established ostensible revolutionary organizations, who mostly preached emulation of Martin Luther King and non-violence. In 1964 the revisionist Socialist Workers Party publicized a slogan calling for the return of American troops from Vietnam in order to "protect" civil rights demonstrators in Alabama and Mississippi! That would have been something new under the sun, all right! Coming from self-proclaimed "Marxists" this grotesquerie signaled their fundamental repudiation of Lenin's theory of the state.

Didn't the SWP understand what imperialism's role in the liberation struggle in Vietnam was? Do they maybe think in Indochina the Yankees operate as a "neutral buffer" between the Ky-Thieu government and the Viet Cong? What kind of "revolutionary" is it who thinks that federal and empire troops are neutral in the class struggle? Trotskyists have always called upon the labor movement to organize a workers defense guard in such situations--they see them as the only guarantee against the armed freebooters of the right wing!

But this revisionist nonsense is not limited to the US. One of the co-sponsors of the meeting tonight is the International Socialism group, which has fraternal ties with Tony Cliff's state capitalist group in Britain, International Socialism. Perhaps the American ISers don't know the history of their British co-thinkers on the Irish question. When 7,000 British troops were sent to Northern Ireland in 1969 to quell the disturbances and "keep order" (what else?) the Cliff group defended their presence on the grounds they would "save lives". This was not an accidental miscueing (like "accidentally" ending up on the wrong side of the barricades!) but was consistently defended in their press. In their organ Socialist Worker (11 September 1969) they viciously accused those who called for the immediate withdrawal of British troops of "inviting a pogrom which will hit first and hardest at socialists." (our emphasis) It is hard to know what to say to such an abomination except to point out that a year later those same soldiers were rounding up Cliff's supporters in the People's Democracy organization.

So far as we know, Bernadette Devlin still agrees with Cliff on this issue. At least she did 9 months ago. In an interview conducted by John Spenser of the British Socialist Labour League, she had this to say: "The saving of lives, the necessity of saving lives in that circumstance, was brought around by the whole system and therefore you cannot simply say take the troops out of Ulster. Because the people will say you cannot take the troops out because if you do the people will die." Workers Press, 18 June 1970

This is wrong and false. If you preach reliance on the troops and police to keep order then you will begin to believe they are protecting lives and keeping order. They are not; they are imposing by force a deadly social system which costs lives. There would be a lot less bloodshed and lost lives if protection of the people of Ulster were in the hands of the armed workers of Ulster. We hope Miss Devlin understands now that it is necessary to win the people of Ulster away from those false advocates like Cliff who preach reliance upon the class institutions of the bourgeois state. Of all the major political groups

in England, only one took a revolutionary position regarding Ireland. Taking time out from cheering on the Vietnamese and Chinese stalinists and Arab nationalists for a while, Healy's Socialist Labour League consistently opposed British troops in Ulster.

We would like to address ourselves to the comrades of the American IS: do you approve of the tactics preached by Cliff? Don't you see the connection between Cliff's repudiation of Trotskyism, his embracing of the pseudo-theory of state capitalism, and his disorientation--to the point of choosing the side of the Guardians of Empire--on what is for Marxists the elemental question of the class nature of the British and Irish states? Isn't it clear that Cliff is half-way down the road that Max Shachtman walked--and all flowing from a theoretical repudiation of Trotsky's defense of the Russian workers state, which then opened up a revision of the whole conception of imperialism?

You yourselves have partially overthrown the anti-communist bureaucratic collectivist myth in order to do your revolutionary duty regarding Vietnam--calling for victory for the NLF. But that is only a half-way advance toward revolutionary socialism. Similarly, your 1971 decision to support the Newark Teachers Union stands fundamentally counterposed to the strike-breaking you advocated in the New York teachers strike. But that too is only an empirical step in the right direction. Your subjective intentions to function as revolutionary militants is continually sabotaged and betrayed by a flawed understanding of the world. There are lessons to be learned from history. One does not have to make every mistake over again.

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