

# Ireland—Common Cause of British and Irish People

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The present crisis in Northern Ireland is basically not a problem *within* Northern Ireland but one which arises from Britain's relationship with Northern Ireland, and indeed with the whole of Ireland. That the Irish problem was primarily a British one was well understood by the Communist movement from its very beginnings; and this understanding, first voiced by Marx and Engels, has also animated the policy and activity of the Communist Party of Great Britain from its foundation right down to today.

## Marx and Engels on Ireland

The special attention given to this question by Marx and Engels, from the 1840's, when they first began to develop as communists, right up to the 1890's, is reflected in the scores of articles, speeches, letters, reports, notes and so on which they devoted to the Irish question. A recent collection<sup>1</sup>, prepared in the Soviet Union and containing over 400 pages of such documents, demonstrates strikingly the extent to which they not only studied Irish history, analysed her economic ruination by Britain, and were inspired by the age-long resistance of the Irish people, but also the consistent and principled fashion in which they worked, especially in Britain, to rally popular support for the Irish cause.

Over this entire period of fifty years in which Marx and Engels developed their views on Ireland they adhered firmly to what became a major strategic purpose of all their work in connection with Ireland, namely, to disclose that the Irish and British working class had a common interest in joining forces against their common enemy, the British ruling class, and to strive to achieve the unity of these forces in practice.

It was, in fact, in connection with formulating his ideas for the resolution on Ireland, which he submitted to the International Working Men's Association in 1869, that Marx first put forward the revolutionary concept: "Any nation which oppresses another forges its own chains".

<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: *On Ireland* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1971).

Marx and Engels noted that it was the onset of the bourgeois period in Britain that led to the decisive phase in the British conquest of Ireland which Engels termed "England's first colony".<sup>2</sup> With each expansion of the capitalist system in Britain and the breakdown of feudal barriers, the Irish people suffered a further blow. As Engels commented in a letter to Marx<sup>3</sup>:

"Ireland has been stunted in her development by the English invasion and thrown centuries back".

Marx and Engels showed how the Irish people were crushed in turn by Elizabeth, James 1st, Oliver Cromwell and William of Orange. With their landholdings robbed and given to English invaders, the Irish people became "outlawed in their own land and transformed into a nation of outcasts".<sup>4</sup>

The nineteenth century saw the rapid growth of British capitalism, and just as rapid a decline of Ireland. The Act of Union of 1801 abolished the Irish Parliament, swept away the protective tariffs which that Parliament had adopted to defend Ireland's growing industries, and condemned Ireland to become an agrarian appendage of Britain.

The system of exploitation introduced after the Act of Union combined the worst features of direct capitalist exploitation with a semi-feudal appropriation of the surplus product. This system reduced the Irish people to terrible poverty. There were recurrent crop failures and famines, including the appalling potato famine of 1845-7. Some starved. Others fled across the Atlantic.

## "Business-like Extinction"

Before long a new disaster overwhelmed the Irish people. Following the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 and the fall in bread prices, the British bourgeoisie sought after cheaper livestock and meat supplies. The big landlords and larger tenant farmers in Ireland found it more to their interests to turn to large-scale grazing

<sup>2</sup> May 23, 1856. See *On Ireland*, op cit p. 83.

<sup>3</sup> January 19, 1870. *ibid.* p. 286.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Engels: "Notes for the Preface to a Collection of Irish Songs", *ibid.* p. 270.

instead of renting their land in small plots for growing grain or potatoes. The result was wholesale evictions of Irish tenants, and mass emigration.

Marx described the process as a "quiet business-like extinction"<sup>5</sup>. In 1855-66, he wrote, "1,032,694 Irishmen have been displaced by about one million cattle, pigs and sheep"<sup>6</sup>. No wonder that in *Capital* (Vol. 1, Ch. XXV), he described Ireland as "only an agricultural district of England, marked off by a wide channel from the country to which it yields corn, wool, cattle, industrial and military recruits". The resultant fall in Ireland's population was catastrophic. Marx, in *Capital*, cites figures to show that the population fell from 8,222,664 in 1841 to 5½ million in 1866. Since the actual fall began with the 1846 famine, this meant that in less than twenty years Ireland lost over 5/16ths of its people.

This was the heavy price Ireland had to pay for being an agricultural colony of Britain. The whole process was summed up later by Lenin in the following terms:

"Britain owes her 'brilliant' economic development and the 'prosperity' of her industry and commerce largely to her treatment of the Irish peasantry. . . . While Britain 'flourished', Ireland moved towards extinction and remained an undeveloped, semi-barbarous, purely agrarian country, a land of poverty-stricken tenant farmers."<sup>7</sup>

### A Common Task

Thus Marx, Engels and Lenin saw clearly that the root causes of Ireland's economic backwardness, poverty and social ills lay in her age-long oppression and exploitation by the British ruling class, especially after the burgeoning of British capital. Consequently the first essential step was to end British economic, political and military domination, and defeat the forces of reaction in Ireland which acted as the internal ally of the British ruling class.

This still remains a major task of the Irish people, for the establishment of the Irish Republic over fifty years ago in no way meant the end of British imperialist exploitation and oppression, even if it marked a new phase in Ireland's struggle and a certain advance towards full liberation.

The second major contribution of Marx and Engels to the Irish question was their insistence,

throughout their political activities, that the task of ending British imperialism's domination of Ireland was a common task of the Irish and British working people. Furthermore, that it was not only a duty for the British working class to oppose their own ruling class on this question, but even more that it was in the direct interest of the British workers themselves that this domination of Ireland by British capitalism should be ended.

The interconnection between the struggle of the Irish people for national liberation and that of the British people for democratic and social liberation is traced by Marx and Engels in numerous passages in their writings, emphasising that British reaction always drew strength from the oppression of Ireland. "By engaging in the conquest of Ireland" wrote Marx, "Cromwell threw the English Republic out of the window."<sup>8</sup>

From the very commencement of their interest in Ireland, Marx and Engels urged the British workers to assist the Irish people in their struggle for liberation. Engels, for example, was advocating as early as the 1840's the closest links between the Chartists and the Irish independence movement. The British workers were not indifferent to the cause of Ireland, as indicated by the fact that three and a half million people signed the second Chartist Petition which was submitted to the British Parliament on May 2, 1842. Among the six points of the petition was the demand that Ireland be allowed to annul the enforced Union with England of 1801.

Engels was greatly stimulated by Feargus O'Connor's address to the Irish people, published in the first issue of the *Northern Star* in 1848. Stressing that O'Connor was speaking "not only as an Irishman but also, and primarily, as an English democrat"<sup>9</sup>, Engels noted O'Connor's reminder of the three and a half million signatures received to the earlier petition, and his approving remarks that "now the English Chartists again protested against the Irish Coercion Bill in numerous petitions". Engels draws attention to O'Connor's conclusion:

"He finally stressed that the oppressed classes in both England and Ireland must fight together and conquer together or continue to languish under the same burden and live in the same misery and dependence on the privileged and ruling capitalist class".

<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx: "Notes for an Undelivered Speech on Ireland", *ibid.* p. 124.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 121.

<sup>7</sup> V. I. Lenin: *Collected Works*, Vol. 20, p. 148.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx: "Outline of the Report of the Irish Question to the Communist Educational Association of German Workers in London", December 16, 1867. *On Ireland*, op cit. p. 128.

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Engels: "Feargus O'Connor and the Irish People": January 9, 1848, *ibid.* p. 49.

### Marx, Engels and the Fenians

Marx and Engels rejoiced at every sign of British working class sympathy for the Irish cause, and castigated any activities which rendered it more difficult to unite the Irish independence struggle with the British working class movement. In a letter to Engels in which he touches on the campaign in Britain in 1867 in support of the Fenian prisoners, Marx commented "Last Tuesday, too, there was a stormy demonstration for the Fenians . . . This business stirs the feelings of the intelligent part of the working class here".<sup>10</sup> On the following day Engels, too, noted the growing support for the Irish struggle: ". . . the London proletarians declare every day more openly for the Fenians".<sup>11</sup>

When a group of Fenians, however, in an unsuccessful attempt to liberate their jailed leaders, set off an explosion in Clerkenwell Prison, which resulted in the destruction of several neighbouring houses and the death of several innocent civilians, as well as wounding 120, both Marx and Engels were highly critical of this action, which they regarded as "stupid" and as a blow against the unity of the British and Irish working people. Marx, in terms which are by no means irrelevant to today's struggle, wrote:

"The last exploit of the Fenians in Clerkenwell was a very stupid thing. The London masses, who have shown great sympathy for Ireland, will be made wild by it and driven into the arms of the government party. One cannot expect the London proletarians to allow themselves to be blown up in honour of the Fenian emissaries".<sup>12</sup>

Engels was equally forthright about the whole "stupid affair", pouring scorn on "the idea of liberating Ireland by setting a London tailor's shop on fire!"<sup>13</sup>

### The First International and Ireland

What concerned Marx and Engels in particular was the necessity to forge links between the British and Irish working people and to break down the prejudice and hostility which the British ruling class had zealously fostered over so many years. Marx appraised very highly the activities of British workers in the late 1860's in support of the campaigns on behalf of the Irish political prisoners, and throughout this period he worked

<sup>10</sup> Letter of Marx to Engels, November 7, 1867: *ibid.* p. 144.

<sup>11</sup> Letter of Engels to Kugelmann, November 8, 1867: *ibid.* p. 145.

<sup>12</sup> Letter of Marx to Engels, December 14, 1867: *ibid.* p. 149.

<sup>13</sup> Letter of Engels to Marx, December 19, 1867: *ibid.* p. 149.

successfully to involve the International Working Men's Association (set up in 1864, with headquarters in London) in these activities. On October 24, 1869, a mass demonstration was held in London in support of the demand for amnesty for the Irish prisoners. The demonstration, which was organised by the Reform League with the help of the General Council of the International, was highly successful. Thousands marched to Trafalgar Square and then on to Hyde Park where a huge meeting of some 200,000 took place under the slogan "Justice for Ireland!"

Commenting on this demonstration, Marx declared that its "main feature . . . was that at least part of the English working class had lost their prejudice "against the Irish".<sup>14</sup> Engels was equally enthusiastic about this demonstration—"the most imposing demonstration London has seen for years".<sup>15</sup>

Under the guidance of Marx, the General Council of the International devoted considerable attention to the Irish question in this period, and, in the aftermath of the demonstration referred to above, it debated the attitude both of the British Government and of the British working class towards the Irish question. The debate was opened by Marx, who had been largely responsible for drafting the resolutions, which, after prolonged debate, were carried by the Council.

The resolutions were immediately sent to the hundreds of trade union branches affiliated to the International. Only one, a small branch of the furriers, opposed the resolutions, but the General Council did not rest on this 99 per cent support. It sent one of its members to discuss with this single opposing branch, and won it over, showing how the International worked to educate the British working class in an internationalist spirit and win it for positive solidarity with the Irish struggle.

The campaign for the release of the prisoners continued for several years. A new phase of this campaign was marked on November 3, 1872, when a giant demonstration for a general amnesty was organised in Hyde Park by the Irish members of the International, together with British and other members of the General Council. At least 30,000 attended, and Engels, noting that "at least half had a green ribbon or a green leaf in their

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx: "On the Refusal by the English Press to Take Notice of the Growth of Sympathy with Ireland among English Workers": Speech in the General Council, October 26, 1869: *ibid.* p. 151. (More than a hundred years later the capitalist press in Britain displays the same virtual silence over the actions of British people in support of national liberation movements—J.W.).

<sup>15</sup> Letter of Engels to Marx, November 1, 1869: *ibid.* p.274-5.

buttonhole to show they were Irish",<sup>16</sup> commented that it was "the first time the English and Irish sections of our population have united in friendship".

This tradition was apparently still making itself felt over fifteen years later, although opportunism was clearly having its influence, Engels, when asked on September 20, 1888, what was "the attitude of the English workers towards the Irish movement?", replied: "The masses are *for* the Irish. The organisations, and the labour aristocracy in general, follow Gladstone and the liberal bourgeois and do not go further than these".<sup>17</sup>

### After one Hundred Years

From the foregoing brief resume it can be seen how much of their time and attention Marx and Engels devoted to uniting the British and Irish movements, and how they encouraged every activity that contributed to that end, and equally opposed actions or concepts that threatened to weaken this move towards unity.

In a letter to Kugelmann<sup>18</sup> Marx emphasised the necessity of the British working class to separate "its policy with regard to Ireland most definitely from the ruling classes" and make "common cause with the Irish . . . And this must be done, not as a matter of sympathy with Ireland but as a demand in the interests of the English proletariat. If not, the English people will remain tied to the leading strings of the ruling-classes, because *it* will have to join with them in a common front against Ireland".

Less than two weeks later, in a letter to Engels<sup>19</sup>, Marx again emphasised:

*"It is in the direct and absolute interest of the English working-class to get rid of their present connection with Ireland. . . ."*

In another document of the same period<sup>20</sup> Marx points out that:

*"Ireland is the only pretext the English Government has for retaining a big standing army, which, if need be, as has happened before, can be used against the English workers after having done its military training in Ireland."*<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Frederick Engels: "Letters from London": November 14, 1872: *ibid*, p. 307-8.

<sup>17</sup> An Interview with Engels, published in the *New York Volkszeitung*, September 20, 1888. *ibid*, p. 343.

<sup>18</sup> November 29, 1869: *ibid*, p. 280.

<sup>19</sup> December 10, 1869: *ibid*, p. 284.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Marx: "Confidential Communication", March 28, 1870: *ibid*, p. 162-3.

<sup>21</sup> Today Ireland is not the only, or necessarily the main pretext for the British ruling class maintaining a big army. Other overseas "strategic interests" and invest-

In the hundred years since Marx and Engels campaigned for support for the Irish struggle in the First International and in the British working class movement of that time important changes have taken place. Monopoly capitalism has come into being, and has since developed into state monopoly capitalism which has assisted the emergence of giant international firms. The struggle of the Irish people led to the declaration of the Irish Republic in January 1919, and the refusal of the British Government to accept the Republic, with the consequent imperialist intervention and partition of Ireland into an "Irish Free State" of 26 counties, with six counties in the North torn away to form a Northern Ireland puppet statelet linked to Britain.

The main enemy of the Irish people is no longer the landed aristocracy of Marx's day but rather the big monopolies which exploit both the British and Irish working people. These changes, however, as important as they are, in no way change the essence of the conclusions drawn by Marx and Engels in the last century—namely that the British and Irish working people face a common enemy, that they need to wage a common struggle, and that it is in the direct interests of the British working people themselves, if they are to defend their own democratic rights and advance to the defeat of the British ruling class, that they end the British domination of Ireland.

### Attitude of the CPGB

This has been the approach which the Communist Party of Great Britain has followed consistently ever since its foundation over fifty years ago. When the British Communist Party was first established in August 1920 Ireland herself was in the midst of a grave crisis, her people having been forced to take up arms to defend their Republic which British imperialism refused to accept. The reply of the British ruling class to Ireland's rightful claim for sovereignty and independence was war and the Black and Tans.

The year 1920 had seen a number of significant declarations and actions by the British Labour Movement in support of the Irish struggle. For

ments, as well as false arguments about "Soviet military threats" are today's excuses for the huge military expenditure. But Marx's main point here, namely the use that British rulers could make of an army trained in Ireland for actions against the British working class, is all too dangerously relevant. One need only consider the views of Brigadier Kitson and other military top-brass, with their advocacy of special training for the British army, based on the experience of Northern Ireland, for possible use in Britain against "urban protest" movements and "industrial unrest", to realise the threat from this quarter.

sections of the movement the struggle of the Irish working people was linked with the movement of solidarity with the young Soviet Union, expressed particularly in the action of the London dockers, on 10th May, 1920, which prevented the loading of the *Jolly George* with arms intended for use against the Russian Soviet Republic.

In June 1920, John MacLean published his pamphlet *The Irish Tragedy—Scotland's Disgrace*, calling for industrial action by British workers in support of Ireland. South Wales miners decided to strike one day a month until British troops were withdrawn from Russia and Ireland.<sup>22</sup> The Hands Off Russia Movement was supplemented by a Hands Off Ireland Movement.

When the British Labour Party met in conference at Scarborough, June 22 to 25, 1920, it adopted, by a decisive majority, a resolution on Ireland which demanded that the principle of "free and absolute self-determination" should be applied to Ireland, the British Army of occupation withdrawn, and the Irish people enabled to elect a Constituent Assembly for all Ireland. This resolution was a victory for the left of the movement, and particularly for Ernest Cant<sup>23</sup> who had worked hard for this outcome in Scotland.

This clear voice of British Labour was carried forward into Parliament where, on 11th November, 1920, the Labour Party representatives put forward proposals based on the Scarborough resolution, and demanding the withdrawal of "the British Army of occupation", with the establishment of an Irish Constituent Assembly elected on the basis of proportional representation to determine the question of Irish government. The British Government, determined to push forward its plans for partition, rejected the Labour Party proposals. The Parliamentary leaders of the British Labour Party then visited Dublin where a thousand delegates attending a special conference of the Irish Labour Party and T.U.C. unanimously endorsed the British Labour Party proposals. Thus, in the words of the *Report of Labour Commission to Ireland*, "for the first time since 1914, the British and Irish Labour Movement were in true alignment on the great issue of Irish self-government."

But the deviousness of the British ruling class, and especially of Lloyd George, was able to sow confusion and compromise in the ranks of the Irish people and prevent a united struggle by British and Irish labour, together with the republicans.

<sup>22</sup> See *Liam Mellows and the Irish Revolution*: Desmond Greaves, 1971; pp. 189-190.

<sup>23</sup> Shortly after Ernest Cant became a foundation member of the Communist Party.

It was in the midst of these critical struggles and negotiations, covering the years 1920-1922 that the young British Communist Party had to give leadership to the British labour movement on the Irish question. From the very beginning and without any qualifications it supported the Irish Republic and opposed the British Government and its oppression. A Statement of the Executive Committee published in *The Communist* on November 25, 1920, entitled 'Communists and Ireland', starts with the words:

"The news that comes daily from Ireland is in itself a summons to the Communist Party of Great Britain. . . . A nation is being murdered under our eyes—not in Armenia, but within a hundred miles of our own shores . . . by British men, carrying out the orders of a British Government."

Replying to those who argued that the Irish struggle, being a "nationalist struggle", was not the concern of socialists whose task was the "class struggle", the Executive Committee statement pointed out:

"In such a case as Ireland's—the case of a small nation held in forcible suppression by a great Imperialist State—the national struggle and the class struggle are inseparable from one another. The struggle against imperialism for national independence is a necessary phase of the struggle against capitalism for the workers' independence".<sup>24</sup>

When, at the end of 1921, Lloyd George put forward his proposals for partition to the plenipotentiaries of the Republic who were in London at the time for negotiations with the British Government, the British Communist Party obtained advance information of the proposals and of the agreement by Griffith and Collins, the Republic's leading negotiators, to accept them. It was decided to warn the republican leaders in Dublin of the intended capitulation of their negotiators. William Gallacher was sent to Dublin by night-boat to contact the IRA leaders. Gallacher explained what happened:<sup>25</sup>

"The next day I met several of the leaders, but they were scarcely prepared to believe it. Several declared that Collins would never sign such a Treaty. But the official word came over while I was there and they then had to face a situation bristling with difficulties and peril. Cathal Brugha was easily one of the finest characters thrown up by Irish history, and declared that he would never accept the Treaty, but conscious of where that put him, he added 'But I won't be the

<sup>24</sup> See also: William Paul: *The Irish Crisis*: C.P.G.B. 1921, pp. 13-14.

<sup>25</sup> William Gallacher: *Ireland—Can it Remain Neutral?* 1941, pp. 10-11. See also: C. Desmond Greaves: *Liam Mellows and the Irish Revolution*: 1971, pp. 268-9.

first to set Irishmen shedding Irishmen's blood'. I said I could understand how he felt on that, but nevertheless, he had to take account of the fact that if the others once got established as a government, they would have no hesitation (they would have the full backing of Britain) in shedding Irishmen's blood".

"... I then went on to urge on them the necessity of a wide social programme that would gather the workers and poor farmers around them, and this would make them invincible. I raised a whole series of points that would have made such a programme. Cathal Brugha cut in on me and he said very quietly, but very emphatically, 'Gallacher, we know you and your colleagues in Glasgow have always been good friends of Ireland. As such we are glad to have you with us. But don't try to bring Communism here, we don't want it. We have our own faith and by that we'll stand or fall'. I looked at his strong clean face, with its piercing eyes and long firm lip—the face of a man who was selfless in the cause to which he was devoted, and I wished with all my heart I could get him to understand.

"It was no use. He was ready to live or die for the Republic, but a programme such as I suggested was 'not his business'."

#### Against the Betrayal

And so the betrayal took place, Ireland was partitioned and her people plunged into civil war. This was with the acquiescence of the British right-wing Labour leaders, but partition was never accepted by the British Communist Party. In the House of Commons in December 1922, when the Bill ratifying the Constitution of the 'Irish Free State' was debated, the Communist Shapurji Saklatvala, who had been elected to Parliament on the Labour Party ticket, put forward a motion to reject the Bill. The motion was seconded by J. Walton Newbold, elected to Parliament that year as a Communist. In his speech (which, he made clear, was not made on behalf of the Labour Party) Saklatvala declared that the Anglo-Irish Treaty "was based upon coercion and was signed under duress". The only solution, he asserted, would be one based on the recognition of the Irish People's "right to a genuine and *bona fide* self-determined voice of their own".

Recalling the "disgrace" of the 1801 Act of Union, Saklatvala declared that he could not be "a party to another and a greater mockery . . . even if you were all unanimous".

But the lone voice of the Communists went unheeded in the British Parliament. Ireland was betrayed in London as she had been in Dublin.

Less than ten years earlier the British working class had been still displaying the same solidarity towards the Irish struggle that had been noted previously by Marx and Engels. When the Dub-

lin workers went on strike in 1913 they received magnificent help from the British labour movement.

"Pressed for funds with which to wage the struggle, Larkin and Connolly<sup>26</sup> turned to England and Scotland from which they received a burst of enthusiastic solidarity such as had not been known since the great dockers' strike of 1888. Funds were granted by virtually every union, by the TUC, by the Labour Party, and by the Co-operative Union. . . . (The) Trade Unions and Socialist Societies combined to stock a food-ship which the CWS supplied at cost price, they chartering the ship as their share. English and Scottish Socialists volunteered by the hundred to find homes for the children of strikers 'for the duration'."<sup>27</sup>

By 1916, however, the war-time jingoism which engulfed considerable sections of the British working class, and the inability even of many left groups of the labour movement to grasp the relationship between the Easter Rising of 1916 for *national liberation* and their own struggle for *social emancipation*, made it easier for the right-wing labour leaders to persuade the majority of workers to withhold their support from the Irish people during this critical period.

As we have seen above, the movement of solidarity with the Irish struggle emerged again in the period 1920 to 1921, but by 1922, confused by the betrayal of Griffith and Collins and outwitted by the British ruling class, British Labour, in the main, had turned its back on Ireland. Only the British Communist Party remained as consistent supporters of the Irish national cause.

For over fifty years our Party has adhered to the position stated in 1922—opposition to partition, and full support for the Irish people in their struggle to reunify their country. Repeatedly we have drawn attention to the wound inflicted on the body of Ireland. Thus in 1932, at the time of the Irish struggle against the land annuities, Bill Rust wrote:<sup>28</sup>

"The Irish masses have again raised the banner of revolt against their ancient enemy. Undismayed by past defeats and the threats of renewed violence a tiny state has challenged all the might of British imperialism and awakened an echo of admiration in the masses throughout the world. . . . From the standpoint of the revolutionary working class the

<sup>26</sup> The leaders of the strike.

<sup>27</sup> T. A. Jackson: *Ireland on her Own*, 1971 edition: pp. 377-8.

<sup>28</sup> William Rust: "The War on Ireland": *Labour Monthly*, August, 1932. See also: J. Shields: "The Republican Congress and Ireland's Fight": *Labour Monthly*, November 1934.

present Irish struggle against the 'National' Government is a glorious opportunity for pressing home the fight against British capitalism by the double method of supporting Ireland and strengthening the struggle against the capitalist offensive. . . . In Britain the cry must go up from every factory, trade union and labour exchange that the workers recognise Ireland as an independent nation and acclaim its right to separate from the Empire. We must condemn the land annuities as a system of undisguised imperialist tribute and fight against all measures of reprisals that the imperialists are employing. We must call for the withdrawal of all British troops and military representatives and demand that the artificial partition of the country be ended".

At the last Congress of the British Communist Party before the Second World War a special emergency resolution was adopted on Northern Ireland condemning the Special Powers Act as "a complete denial of liberty and democracy" and placing the blame for the repression in Northern Ireland squarely on the shoulders of the British Government. Congress therefore demanded that "all steps necessary be taken in order to remove this Act which was, and is, the basis of rule by the British ruling class in Northern Ireland. The removal of this Act will give to the liberty-loving people of the North greater opportunities to develop that unity between Catholic, Protestant, Nationalist, Socialist, which is vitally necessary in order to carry on a successful struggle for the freedom of the Irish people and greater friendship with our working people in Great Britain".<sup>29</sup>

### After World War II

When the second world war was over and we drew up our new programme, *The British Road to Socialism*, we declared, in the very first edition of the programme in 1951:

"... the enforced partition of Ireland and the maintenance of British troops in Northern Ireland must be ended, to enable Irish national unity to be realised".

In the second revised edition, in 1968, the same principles were carried forward:

"The enforced partition of Ireland should be ended and British troops withdrawn from Northern Ireland, leaving the Irish people free to realise their united republic".

When the new crisis arose in Northern Ireland in 1969, our Party immediately made its position

clear and sought an early consultation with the Irish Communist Party in order to discuss how best to mobilise our peoples in support of the demands of the progressive movement in Northern Ireland.

### 1969-70 Consultations

Both our Parties faced a major problem and that was to formulate proposals which, without in any way abandoning our basic positions and principles in support of the Irish people's right to reunite their country, would meet the demands of the immediate situation, make possible an advance for the democratic movement in Northern Ireland and so open the way to new possibilities for a solution to Ireland's basic long-term problem—full unity and full independence.

In our discussions we came to the conclusion that the centre of the present struggle in Northern Ireland was that for democratic rights, and an end to repression and discrimination, and that a victory in this struggle could pave the way for uniting the working class in Northern Ireland. In this way new conditions would be created for achieving a political solution to the partition of Ireland so that British domination of Northern Ireland could be ended and the Irish people given the opportunity of reuniting their country. We also were aware of the fact that this struggle for democratic change in Northern Ireland was not the concern of the Irish people alone, but must be the concern and responsibility of the British working people, too, since it was British imperialism which was the main factor making the continuation of repression in Northern Ireland possible. The decisive role of British imperialism has since been made more clear with the introduction of direct rule from Westminster and in the new White Paper proposals which actually strengthen the grip of the British ruling class over the affairs of Northern Ireland.

Between 1969 and 1973 the British and Irish Communist Parties have met on a number of occasions, sometimes in London and sometimes in Belfast. This close consultation between our two Parties during these recent critical years has strengthened our collaboration with one another, helped us to gain a better understanding of our common tasks and assisted the British Party in particular to obtain a closer knowledge of developments in Northern Ireland.

In its statement of August 14th, 1969, issued immediately after the pogrom in Belfast when thousands were rendered homeless and hundreds suffered physical attack from which a number died, the Political Committee of the British Communist Party declared:

<sup>29</sup> Communist Party of Great Britain, 15th National Congress, Birmingham, September 16-19, 1938.

"Any basic constitutional changes are questions of a longer-term nature which can only be settled by consulting with the people of Ireland. The immediate question is that of civil rights and democratic liberties. Unless these are introduced quickly, the situation can only worsen and a solution be made more difficult".

We therefore called for the most speedy passing of a Bill of Rights by the British Parliament to end repression, introduce electoral reform on the basis of one man, one vote, and to do away with all discrimination.

The Joint Statement issued five days later by the Communist Party of Northern Ireland, the Irish Workers' Party<sup>30</sup> and the Communist Party of Great Britain expressed the same basic demands and emphasised that the responsibility for introducing the necessary democratic reforms "rests upon the British Government, which has already committed British armed forces and has the power to legislate whatever changes are required".

A year later our two Parties met again, this time in Belfast. The joint statement issued then, 30th July, 1970, placed special emphasis on working class unity in Northern Ireland and unity between Irish and British workers as the key to defeating the reactionary Unionist Government in Northern Ireland, introducing the necessary democratic reforms and waging an effective fight for jobs, homes and education.

The statement concluded :

"The Communist Parties of Ireland and Britain, meeting in Belfast, hold that the interests of our two peoples are linked together, and that our bonds of friendship and solidarity must be further strengthened in future joint actions. We call on the working people of our two countries to continue the struggle for full democratic rights in Northern Ireland, and for the Irish people's right to self-determination".

A statement issued by the Executive Committee of the British Communist Party on 14th March, 1971, after drawing attention to the steadily deteriorating situation in Northern Ireland, pointed out that "The crisis exists in Northern Ireland because for fifty years successive British Governments have pursued a course of supporting the reactionary Unionist control of the Six Counties in order to prevent the reunification of Ireland. . . What is needed to solve the crisis is not British troops but political measures". The statement therefore called for "an end to the use of British troops to carry out the reactionary policies of Whitehall and

Stormont". It reiterated the demand for a Bill of Rights and for urgent measures to tackle the mass unemployment and the housing crisis, so that a situation could be created in which political talks could take place between the Government of the Irish Republic and representatives of the people of Northern Ireland "so that outstanding constitutional problems could be tackled and the divisions overcome".

#### **Joint Statement of April 1971**

On 13th April 1971, representatives of the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Communist Party of Ireland met in London for further talks on the situation in Northern Ireland. The joint statement issued on 14th April reaffirmed our basic joint position and warned that "Any recourse to Direct Rule by Westminster would . . . be . . . a further violation of the sovereign rights of the Irish people. It would meet with widespread hostility in Northern Ireland and from the people in the Irish Republic, and would only delay the introduction of democratic changes necessary for further progress".

Twelve months of direct rule under the one-man control of Whitelaw has confirmed that analysis. Although compelled by mass pressure to make some concessions, the British Government's new measures retain the essence of the former repressive system. The Special Powers Act has gone, but the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Bill, based on the Diplock Commission proposals, retains all the worst features of the Special Powers Act, including the right of detention, and introduces a number of even more retrograde steps. The only basic difference in the new proposals is that the machinery of repression will be firmly in the hands of the British Government instead of in the hands of Stormont as it largely was previously.

The joint statement of our two Parties, issued on 14th April, 1971, also set forth a seven point programme of demands which, if implemented, could bring democracy to the people of Northern Ireland and an end to the repression, discrimination and terror. The seven points included the demand for a Bill of Rights; finance for a comprehensive programme of industrial and housing development; an end to the use of British troops as a police force, and the confinement of their duties "to those of protecting citizens from sectarian violence when no other means is available"; the immediate release of all political prisoners; and discussions with the Government of the Irish Republic on "how to bring about reunification of the country on the basis of full self-determination for the people of Ireland".

<sup>30</sup> The two parties in Ireland merged to form a single united Communist Party of Ireland in March 1970.



The seventh point urged that on the basis of this programme "the role of British troops in Northern Ireland should be progressively reduced, and finally they should be withdrawn altogether".

The joint statement concluded by declaring :

"The better Ireland which her people desire can only be won by the Irish people themselves. The task of her friends is to fight to give them the freedom to win it. The programme outlined above is designed to create the necessary conditions for this process".

The statement therefore urged "the British working class, the Irish workers in Britain, the working class in Ireland, both Catholic and Protestant, and all who wish to see a just conclusion to the conflict of centuries to support and work for the realisation of these democratic demands".

During this whole period our Party has acted to win support for the policies outlined in the above statement, especially in the British Labour movement. We have had to fight against the bi-partisan policy on Ireland followed by the right-wing Labour Party leadership, and at the same time arouse the British Labour movement to an understanding of the real nature of the problem of Northern Ireland, and the urgent need for British working class, in its own interest, to campaign for a change in British Government policy.

### **Solidarity Developed**

As it was put in the resolution adopted at our 32nd National Congress, November 1971 :

"Reaction in Northern Ireland strengthens reaction in Britain. . . . A victory for democracy in Northern Ireland would be a victory for the British working people as well as for the people of Northern Ireland".

"It is therefore in its own direct interests that the British trade union labour movement should intensify its campaign for a fundamental change in British Government policy towards Northern Ireland".

The campaign to achieve this understanding has not been easy, but some advance has been registered. This was seen, for example, in the stand taken by 68 Labour MP's in October 1971 against internment at the time of the emergency debate at Westminster. It was seen in the opposition to British Government policy expressed by the position adopted by the National Union of Students at its 1972 conference. Above all, it was expressed in the resolution for a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, which was

adopted unanimously at the September 1971 British Trades Union Congress.

The demands for which we have fought, and at the core of which lies the demand for a Bill of Rights, are still to be fulfilled. The new proposals of the British Government, outlined in its March 1973 White Paper, mark a new phase in the campaign and, to a degree, reflect the impact of the movement for change; but the basic demands for which we have campaigned still remain, both those relating to the more immediate stage of ending repression in Northern Ireland and establishing the necessary democratic liberties as well as the longer-term and fundamental question of the reunification of Ireland.

### **Aims of the Monopolies**

In their desire to use their position in the European Common Market for maximising their profits, the big British monopolies have used the crisis in Northern Ireland to strengthen their own direct grip on the territory and, at the same time, are hoping to use the new situation to strengthen their influence on the Irish Republic as well. British imperialism's policy towards Ireland is the other side of their attacks against the democratic rights and living standards of the British working people. Both aspects of policy are directed towards strengthening the positions of the British monopolies *vis à vis* the workers of our two islands, and in competition with other foreign monopolies.

A joint statement issued by the representatives of the Irish and British Communist Parties, after a meeting in Belfast on April 24th-25th, 1972, condemned "the Westminster imposition of direct rule on the Six Counties of Northern Ireland" and called urgently "for the strengthening of the unity of the working classes of our two islands in order to defeat the aims of the Tories. Both our peoples are faced with the effects of reactionary Tory policies on jobs, living standards, democratic rights and membership of the Common Market. The violent situation in Northern Ireland is a result, in part, of the whole Tory Government's repressive policies. To defeat these there must be an end to the bi-partisan support given by the British Labour leaders to the Tory Government's policy towards Ireland".

A further joint statement of the two Parties, issued in Belfast in December 1972 warned the British Labour movement that "the increasing repression in Northern Ireland is paving the way for strengthening authoritarian trends in Britain and introducing new reactionary legislation and special powers".

### **Explanation and Action**

There is still a great task to be done to ensure that the changes needed in Northern Ireland are carried out. The British TUC policy for a Bill of Rights was a correct decision—but it still remains a declaration of principle; it is not yet being fought for by the British trade unions whose representatives endorsed it so unanimously. In the four and a half years since the crisis deepened dramatically in Northern Ireland it has required a great deal of explanatory work by our Party and other progressive organisations and individuals to spread an understanding in the Labour Movement as to the nature of the problem and the policies required to find a solution. In a sense we have been in a period similar to that which confronted Lenin and the Bolsheviks in 1914, when the imperialist war broke out, temporarily blinding the working people as to where their real interests lay. Lenin said then that what the movement had to do was "Explain, explain and explain again".

This has been, and still is, a major part of the tasks confronting the British Communist Party on the Irish question. Some advance has been made. There is a better understanding now as to the real issues involved, and more acceptance of the policy for which we have been campaigning. People are finding ways to respond to the situation, as indicated by the representative delegation of British citizens who went to Derry in January, 1973, on the anniversary of the Derry massacre to express their solidarity with those campaigning for democratic rights in Northern Ireland.

Representative sponsorship was won for the Conference on Peace and Freedom on Northern Ireland, held in London in April this year, and with a preparatory Committee, including the National Council for Civil Liberties, the Political Committee of the London Co-operative Society, the Haldane Society, the National Union of Students, the Communist Party, the Connolly Association, the National Assembly of Women, Liberation (formerly the Movement for Colonial Freedom), and the British Peace Committee. The participation of these nine organisations in preparing this conference reflects the growing concern of British people over the continuation of the crisis in Northern Ireland.

### **United Action the Key**

With the holding of elections for the new assembly in Northern Ireland in June this year a further phase in the struggle for democratic liberties will have been opened. However, the main immediate demands for the introduction of

a Bill of Rights and an end to all repressive legislation and actions still remain to be fulfilled; and to secure their fulfilment the united action of the British and Irish working class still remains the key. By our united efforts to win these demands we can create a new political situation in Northern Ireland and so open up the possibilities of the Irish people, as a whole, finding a satisfactory path to reunification and full independence. Such a historic achievement will be a powerful blow against British reaction and thus help the British working people in their struggle to end capitalism and establish a socialist Britain.

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