



DEFEND ALL IRISH POLITICAL PRISONERS



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360 men are lying naked covered only by blankets. The prison cells in which they are being kept are covered in the accumulated filth of more than two months of their own body wastes. They are infested with all kinds of disease-carrying insects. The putrid smell prevents many of the men from eating. Some are down to less than six stones in weight. The prison officers enter the cells only when protected by surgical clothing. This is the barbarous treatment being meted out to Republican and Socialist prisoners in Ireland today as part of the policy of the Labour Government.

In addition to the 'men on the blanket' there are twenty-four or more women permanently locked up in their cells deprived of exercise and all normal prison 'privileges'. As with the men, these freedom-fighters are demanding Prisoner of War status.

The British State's treatment of these prisoners shows that it believes it has a divine right to fight the Irish in their own country but if they fight back they are by definition criminals. Political status was won in 1972 after a struggle launched by the hunger strike of Billy McKee and his comrades in Crumlin Road jail. On March 1, 1976 however the Labour Government declared that these persons convicted of political 'offences' after that date were to be treated as criminals. It is the refusal of the prisoners to wear criminal uniforms and their refusal to slop out the cells which has raised the level of the struggle and led to the present situation.

Defend the Irish Revolution

The threat to the lives of the 'men on the blanket' shows how determined Roy Mason (the Minister for Northern Ireland) and his Army colleagues are to deny what is obvious — that the struggle of those they have imprisoned is a **political** struggle. It is a means of preventing the British working class and its allies from understanding that the Irish Republican movement and others who oppose the British in Ireland are fighting for the basic democratic right of self-determination. The working class in this country has no interest whatsoever in denying that right. The ruling class have. It is in order to prevent workers, women, Blacks, students and young people solidarising with the Irish struggle and campaigning for the immediate withdrawal of the British Army that Mason and friends must completely distort that struggle in the eyes of the British public. As Socialists we have the opposite task. We must expose the political nature of the 'Irish question' and explain the **legitimacy** of the fight of Irish Republicans and Socialists. Our fundamental slogans therefore are **FREE ALL IRISH POLITICAL PRISONERS and TROOPS OUT NOW.**

The Basis of Our Support

We believe that the Prisoners Aid Committee's initiative in calling for today's mobilisation was excellent. We also believe that the actual contents of its slogans are broadly correct. We do so for the following reason. The political status question is not only at the centre of the Labour Government's strategy of repression; it is also the issue on

which people in the ghettos of Belfast are again taking up in street activity after some three or four years of decline of the mass movement in Ireland. **IT IS A KEY TEST OF STRENGTH IN THE PRESENT PERIOD.** Our tasks in solidarity with the Irish struggle do not only reside at the historical level. We must attempt to be an effective aid to the Irish people's struggle at **every stage.** When decisive questions are being resolved over the issue of the prisoners the anti-imperialist movement in Ireland cannot be asked to wait for our tiny forces to transform themselves into a mass movement for troop withdrawal before we can contribute anything. In the meantime even the most partial issue must be utilised to the fullest extent to limit the British State's room for immediate manoeuvre and to lever wider openings for the building of a 'Troops Out Now' current.

The International Tribunal

At present two excellent such opportunities exist. In the wake of the Amnesty International report and the refusal of Mason to hold a public inquiry there is a magnificent chance to turn the **INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNAL ON BRITAIN'S PRESENCE IN IRELAND** into an inquiry by the British labour movement and its allies into the activities of its own State in Ireland. This would allow 'troops out' activists to take debates to areas in British society where at the moment it is impossible to get a hearing. 'Build the International Tribunal' is a key task if we are not to lose this opportunity.

The other, complementary task, which we advocate is the turning of this demonstration into an on-going campaign of united action in defence of Irish political prisoners. September 7 will be the second anniversary of Kieran Neugent beginning his blanket protest. We urge that the United Troops Out Movement and the Prisoners Aid Committee, in conjunction with the organisations of the Irish Republican movement and the solidarity movement in Britain should **immediately** revive the 'Ad Hoc Committee for Irish Prisoners of War' to build not only for an initiative on that date, but also to be able to be in a position to make a united response immediately to any new provocations by the British State in the meantime.

For United Action

Today's excellent mobilisation shows that the united action which the 'Ad Hoc Committee' achieved only partially in March is entirely possible. It is also vitally **necessary** if an effective movement in solidarity with the Irish people's struggle for self-determination is to be built. We repeat, this march is an excellent step and the PAC are to be congratulated for calling it, but what is needed is an on-going campaign of united action. It is to that question that we ask everyone on this demonstration to address themselves to now.

END THE SILENCE ON IRISH PRISONERS OF WAR

FOR AN INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNAL

TROOPS OUT OF IRELAND NOW