

For a Workers Republic

Journal of the Irish Committee for a Marxist Programme
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DOWNING STREET DECLARATION

WE WANT FREEDOM, NOT CLARIFICATION



John Major waves his piece of paper in London

The Prime Minister reaffirms that they will uphold the democratic wish of a greater number of the people of Northern Ireland on the issue of whether they prefer to support the union ..

There is no need for explanation or clarification of the Downing street declaration. It is a clear attack on the democratic rights of the Irish people, denying them the right to self-determination and elevating to the status of natural law the veto of an artificial minority. The declaration marks the beginning of a new offensive by the British, and down the road lies a revamped Stormont, new powers for the sectarian Unionist politicians, a new era of discrimination and oppression.

Barricade

Pushed to the forefront by the new

accord are the politicians of Fianna Fail and the SDLP. Their policy is to protect their wallets and make sure that the Irish working class are never in a position to unite against them. They are quite happy to stitch up the nationalist working class in the North and to build a barricade set in concrete to reinforce partition, prevent Irish unity and maintain the fragmentation of the working class.

Confusion

A major element in the whole offensive has been the mistakes and confusion of the Republican leadership. The concept of the Nationalist family has isolated the movement from radical forces, especially in the South. Now they confess that a militarist strategy does not offer a way forward, but offer the false alternative of capitulation to the nationalist parties and a compromise with imperialism that

effectively rips the heart out of the republican programme.

Alternative

The majority of republican militants have quite clearly rejected this. Now they need to fight back and construct a new strategy that demolishes the fake alternatives of military adventures versus capitulation. The first task is to overcome the democratic deficit built up by the republican leadership - to reject secret diplomacy, consultation and conventions and demand an open conference of the oppressed that can definitively reject the Downing street declaration, declare that Irish self-determination is our right and turn away from the capitalist collaborators who rule in the 26 counties and towards our natural allies among working people in all 32 counties.

No to Major-Reynolds! No to Hume-Adams! Self-determination and Socialism!

On 5th October 1968 a peaceful demonstration in Derry was brutally batoned off the streets by the RUC, leaving 96 people in need of hospital treatment. Television pictures showed a bigoted and bitter police force savagely attacking a demonstration demanding no more than civil rights for British citizens. A few months later in the same city the RUC murdered two old age pensioners, Samuel Devenny and Francie McCloskey. In August 1969 the North finally exploded as loyalist mobs attacked catholic areas and the British army was sent unto the streets to take over from an exhausted and demoralised RUC. Only two years later in 1971 did the IRA kill its first British soldier. All this seems a long time ago now. The moral rightness of the civil rights campaign and the following struggle against Stormont has been buried in an avalanche of propaganda about "the men of violence" etc. and the overriding need for "peace". However the origin of the present crisis shows that the real problem today is not one of "terrorism" but the existence through partition of a state which can only survive through sectarianism and violence. If the IRA decides to end its campaign it will not be because of the overwhelming desire for "peace", nor even that it has embraced a Socialist programme which subordinates military activity to workers unity and action. It will be because British and Loyalist violence has finally defeated it.

The events of 1968 and 1969 demonstrate that the problem predates the IRA. It showed a sectarian state which divides not only workers in the North along sectarian lines but divides all Irish workers and separates British workers from a unity and sympathy with the workers of

Ireland. Catholic workers remain over twice as likely to be unemployed as Protestant ones and continue to have on average a lower standard of living. Torture, internment and murder have all been employed to destroy their resistance to British rule. Protestant workers remain privileged only by comparison with Catholics and for this marginal privilege they have sold themselves to a bitter and bigoted sectarian unity with their exploiters. The whole Irish working class is divided North and South, making it that much easier for both native and foreign capitalism to foist two sectarian and exploiting states on them. Finally British workers are condemned to an alliance with their own ruling class in its denial of self-determination for the Irish people.

STRATEGIC INTEREST

One of the biggest lies peddled today is that the British Government 'has no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland' cited as 'proof of this is the £3 billion subsidisation given every year to Northern Ireland. In fact this proves exactly the opposite. The idea that British imperialism forks out £3 billion every year out of the goodness of its heart is hilarious. While Britain certainly wants to reduce this bill, and hopes a victory against the resistance will achieve this, it is quite prepared to go on paying if it is the price for maintaining a minimum political stability.

When Britain sent its troops onto the streets in 1969, it did so not to protect Catholics (this lie has already been nailed by history) but to prop up the northern state which was falling apart. Britain stays in Ireland because Ireland is strategically important and their role in the North is crucial to the stability of the country as a whole. Partition is crucial as the political framework for safeguarding stable conditions for

capitalist exploitation in the whole country. The very idea that the island of Ireland next door to Britain and with thousands of citizens living in Britain is of no strategic importance is laughable. At the present time and the foreseeable future Britain sees no other way to preserve these strategic interests than through direct occupation of the North.

If the real issue and the real cause of violence is the sectarian state and British occupation what can we do about it? The utter failure of republicanism has left anti-imperialists paralysed over the alternatives of continuing to support a military campaign which is increasingly isolated and incapable of delivering victory, and an almost unconditional surrender to imperialism. This is the only alternative offered by republicanism. To reject the alternative is to reject republicanism and to reject republicanism itself requires an alternative. The only alternative is revolutionary socialism. What is needed is a socialist analysis of the national question and a socialist programme to reconstruct the resistance to imperialism and build the alliances and movement that will lead to victory.

It is utterly clear that British rule in Ireland is undemocratic. Despite all the hypocritical verbiage about 'consent' being the key to any settlement, partition was imposed by Britain without the consent and against the wishes of the majority of the Irish people. It only continues with the backing of thousands of armed troops and loyalists. The only democratic solution to this oppression is the right of the Irish people to self-determination.

ARTIFICIAL STATE

This simple democratic right has been obscured not only by the British and loyalists in their attempt to reinforce partition but also by the SDLP and the Southern government. Now this democratic right is to be emasculated by the loyalist veto which has been dressed

up as the consent of the people of Northern Ireland'. They deliberately forget the totally artificial and sectarian nature of the state, created to reinforce the divisions in the Irish working class. Most hypocritical of all is Hume's claim that we live in a 'postnationalist age' (e.g. it doesn't matter who rules Ireland) while he simultaneously seeks to betray the struggle to British nationalism.

Why is self-determination for the Irish people the only democratic solution? It is easy to see that Britain can have no role in determining the future of the Irish people and neither are the Protestants of Ireland part of Britain, 'as British as Finchley'. Even the British have now acknowledged that. The British people claim for themselves the unity and independence of their state but deny it to the Irish people. The unity of British and Irish workers which socialists seek can only be achieved when this privilege is rejected by British workers and they too demand that their ruling class withdraws from Ireland.

DEMOCRATIC VALIDITY

There is no democratic validity in the demand for self-determination for Northern Ireland. This is a totally artificial state created to ensure Protestant majority - in effect self-determination. This is totally sectarian, condemning Catholics in a Protestant state to continued second class citizenship. In reality it is only a demand for loyalist privilege and for Britain's continued prevention of Irish unity and independence. Only self-determination for the Irish people simultaneously rejects Britain's interference and offers the idea that both religious communities jointly determine their futures together. The prospect of such a democratic and non sectarian state has been hampered not only by Britain and loyalists but also by the Irish capitalist class which has looked to the reactionary power of the catholic church to bolster its rule.

It has also been obscured by the republican movement failure to remain true to its stated programme. While its military campaign has been directed at imperialism it has not been free of sectarianism. More importantly it has rejected any confrontation with the 26 country state and the Irish capitalist class. This has been disastrous not just for any appeal it might have had for Protestant workers but also for any alternative it might have hoped to offer to southern workers. By proclaiming

that it does not seek to undermine the southern state and actually has the same aims as the capitalist parties in the south it stands condemned for endorsing the failure that exists in the 26 country state. Extending the existing 26 country state to cover all of the island could not possibly succeed in winning southern workers to the anti-imperialist struggle. Achieving this is crucial because the last 25 years have demonstrated conclusively that a struggle against imperialism confined to the North has no possibility of succeeding. At the same time it can't extend to the southern workers if all it offers is a 32 country free state. The republican strategy of seeking to ally with Fianna Fail, the enemy of Irish workers, put them on the wrong side of the struggle.

Here we come to the limit of any purely democratic programme restricted as it is to the demand for self-determination. Even if the republican movement reject alliances with Ireland's middle and capitalist class it would be totally incapable of mobilising Ireland's workers against imperialism. To do this would require offering an alternative to the inequality and oppression that exists in the 26 counties. Nothing in the republican idea of a 'national democracy' would do this. Only a socialist programme offers such an alternative. Only a struggle that seeks to give revolutionary leadership to the struggles of Ireland's workers offers an adequate alternative for confronting and defeating not just imperialism but Irish capitalism. In other words only in the struggle for socialism can self-determination be achieved. Only by uniting all of Ireland's workers against imperialism and capitalism can partition and the sectarian state be smashed.

WORKING CLASS

The creation of an all Ireland party of the working class with this programme is absolutely necessary to achieve this. It is clear that the republican movement is as near to this as John Hume is to demanding 'Brits Out'. Guided by such a strategy socialists and everyone opposed to imperialism have basic tasks in the current situation.

- 1 Rejection of any alliances with the SDLP and Dublin government.
- 2 Rejection of any compromise with imperialism or loyalism.
- 3 Reaffirmation of the demands for British withdrawal and self-deter-

mination for the Irish people as the only road to real peace.

4 The call for unity of all Ireland's workers against British rule.

In practical terms this means rejecting not only Hume-Adams and the Downing Street declaration but also reliance on a military campaign which is going nowhere. In the North it would mean a political campaign against attacks on democratic rights by Britain which will continue as the 'stick' half of British strategy to encourage acceptance of the 'carrot'. It means a campaign in defence of workers against sectarian attacks, exposing the SDLP and the trade union leadership who call for reliance on the British state. It means opposition to all deals which will be proposed to seal the 'peace process' with new sectarian structures. Finally it means rejection of sectarianism and an appeal to Protestant workers to reject loyalism on the basis of democratic and class politics.

In the South it would mean construction of a solidarity campaign with the struggle against imperialism in the North which would also target the violation of democratic rights in the 26 country state. It would mean intervening in the struggles of Ireland's workers against the austerity offensive of the Dublin government and for the defence of democratic rights of women against the catholic state and church. Against all talk of nationalist or loyalist 'forums' we should demand a workers forum to discuss the needs of Ireland's workers to live free from oppression and exploitation. Constructing a strategy to roll back the attacks on workers living standards would be the first priority. The culmination of such a strategy would be the creation of a party which would unite the diverse struggles of Ireland's workers and oppressed giving them the revolutionary leadership required to effect the socialist transformation required to fundamentally change the society that presently exists.

The reconstruction of a mass resistance against imperialism and the building of a revolutionary socialist party in the whole of Ireland will be no easy or sudden task. We can be confident however that neither British imperialism, the Dublin government or Hume-Adams will provide the answers to the problems facing the Irish workers. However, popular a 'peace' settlement may be in the short term it will not bring peace. The British army too was 'popular' when it first arrived onto the streets. Things did not take long to change. They will change again.

The Left and the Downing street declaration

The left in Ireland today, as in the past, is dominated by separate and rival traditions of Marxist thinking. On the one side we have the reformed stalinists in the shape of the workers party and the Communist party of Ireland. Both parties have welcomed the Downing street declaration. The communist party believes that Sinn Fein has been given an historic opportunity to join hands with the SDLP and Fianna Fail:

The Downing Street declaration, for all its limitations, at least acknowledges the Irish people as one people. That must be built upon by further struggle and by winning international support, and the opportunity for the Republican movement to be involved in direct discussions with the British and in the National Forum for Peace and Reconciliation could be valuable in developing the turnback of Irish public opinion to a confident assertion of national democratic rights
[Unity 8-1-94 p7.]

The Stalinist strategy for winning national liberation struggles originates from a document The thesis on the situation in China passed by the Communist international in 1927. This legitimised workers parties joining forces with parties representing the capitalist class in the context of a struggle for national rights. Through various twists and turns they have held this policy to the present day, despite the ruinous political capitulation to pro-imperialist forces and the defeats this has inflicted.

The ghost of this capitulation hangs over stalinist support for the betrayal of the PLO leadership and the whole movement

towards compromise with imperialism affecting many national liberation movements across the world. The outcome is always the same: the bourgeois nationalists always stab working class anti-imperialists in the back at the most appropriate moment. In Ireland today the offer to make Albert Reynolds the custodian of the national struggle should be repudiated.

Stalinism in Ireland is today on the decline. Its place on the left is claimed by organisations like the Socialist Workers Movement (SWM) and Militant - both of which claim allegiance to the anti-stalinist tradition of Trotskyism, while often showing scant regard for the political programme he espoused.

The SWM show a classic opportunism in their reaction to the Downing street declaration.

It offers nothing to workers and can not bring peace. How could it when it was drawn up by two Tory Governments who have shown nothing but

contempt for working-class people?

Having stated the obvious they go on to show a happy indifference to the possibility that sections of the anti-imperialist movement might support the statement.

Instead of pinning any hopes on Major and Reynolds we need to build up working class unity from below. The first step in that will mean building a united fight back against Tory plans to impose a wage freeze, to cut student grants and to put VAT on fuel. [Socialist Worker Jan 94 p3]

The SWM hopes to avoid campaigning on the right to self-determination by displacing this fundamental democratic principle unto an abstract call for workers unity. This evasive action will win socialists few friends among politically conscious Irish workers. Over an extended period of time it would mean bowing to the weight of unionism within the Northern working class. Although in the past the SWM has severely criticised the bread and butter politics of the old Northern Ireland Labour party, it is clear that their own position is only a left-wing version of this. Their refusal to take a clear position in the major political debate involving working class militants in Ireland today is the politics of socialist evasion. It serves their movement and the struggle as a whole ill.

Irish Committee For a Marxist Programme About ourselves

The Irish Committee For a Marxist Programme was founded by former members of Peoples Democracy, Irish Section of the Fourth International. We believe the most important task facing us, a task borne out by events, is to examine and update a working class programme for the Irish revolution. We intent to publish the results of our work and to build a conference to launch a new working-class party.

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