

Back to the Armed Struggle? The Dissidents Analysed

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On a gable wall at the top of Westland Street, in the Bogside in Derry, a billboard was erected in 2009, shortly after Sinn Féin leader Martin McGuinness denounced the republicans who had just killed police officer Stephen Carroll in Craigavon as ‘traitors to the island of Ireland’. Illustrated with a photo of an armed British soldier, it reads:

Those who administer British
rule are traitors They havent
gone away you know Iraq,
Afghanistan, Ireland¹

The billboard is a stones-throw from Martin McGuinness’s house; deliberately so. Its message, its use of republican principle against the Sinn Féin leadership and the allusion to the violence of British imperialism in discredited wars abroad, and the fact that it remains there, is an indication of a renewed momentum among armed republican groups in Derry, something that is reproduced elsewhere in the North.

Yet it is also a testimony to their fatal weakness. All of the armed republican groups are splinters from the Provisional IRA and they are marked by the failure of the Provos struggle. The Continuity IRA (CIRA) broke from the Provisionals in 1986 at the beginning of Sinn Féin’s move to electoralism; the Real IRA (RIRA) was formed in 1997, as the peace negotiations reached their conclusion; and Óglaigh na hÉireann (ONH) emerged after 2005, from among former Provisionals disillusioned with the outcome of the Good Friday Agreement. The armed republican groups, since their inception, have been

locked in a political battle with Sinn Féin which prevents them from acknowledging or analysing why the Provisionals before them failed to win their military struggle against the British. The message also hints at the continued military might of British imperialism, now tied into wider US imperial ambitions internationally, which will not be shifted by an urban guerrilla force which is a pale shadow of the Provisional IRA at their height.

Beyond the membership of the armed groups and their immediate supporters, there are many in the North who are disenchanted with the outcome of the years of struggle. The economic crisis has extinguished the vague promise that life would improve for working-class communities. Even the minimal hopes placed in the Stormont Executive that local politicians would be more responsive to people’s needs than the Westminster government are daily crumbling. Sectarian division, far from withering, is in many ways more entrenched than ever. And the continual revelations and inquiries into murders and collusion, are reminders of the key role that state violence played in the conflict, despite the Good Friday Agreement’s attempt to airbrush their role out of history and present the Troubles as being between two communities.

Within this, there are many who balk at the contortions that Sinn Féin have undergone in the 19 years of the peace process, who are still opposed to internment of republican prisoners and police harassment of active republicans, but who remained unconvinced that armed struggle is the an-

¹The billboard was erected by the 32 County Sovereignty Movement, political wing of the Real IRA

swer. The moral condemnation of gun and bomb attacks by the British government rings hollow for these people, as it did during the years of the Provisional IRAs campaign, or the argument that parliamentary politics is the antidote, and only alternative, to armed struggle.

It is within this wider context that the call for a renewed armed struggle is able to get a hearing. Armed struggle is above all a political strategy, linked to hopes of a better society, which suggests that the most effective way to combat the injustice of capitalism, and the violence of the state that defends it, is to respond in kind. The appeal from armed republican groups often, though not always, includes a commitment, however vague, to a socialist Ireland. Time and again, however, such strategies have failed to make any impression on either the state or capitalism and have often resulted not just in the political destruction of the armed groups themselves but the demoralisation of the wider movements with which they were associated.

This article examines the politics and the strategies of the anti-Agreement republican groups in Ireland today, particularly those engaged in armed struggle. It will also examine how socialists should respond and assert the need for an alternative vision of liberation based on class struggle.

Modern Irish republicanism

The various anti-Agreement republican groups continue to live in Sinn Féins shadow, marked by a pre-occupation with what they see as the sell-out that the Provisionals have engaged in with the Peace Process.² The hallmark of their politics is an appeal to traditional republican princi-

ples, stretching back, in an unbroken historical thread, through the various defeats and betrayals of previous generations of Irish republicans. The appeal to abstract, almost religious, notions of the Irish nation and Irish sovereignty, goes hand in hand with a reading of Irish history that emphasises the system of government - British occupation, partition, the Free State and so on - with little reference to the class forces shaping Ireland and beyond.

Modern Irish republicanism has combined high rhetoric about the ancient struggle for Irish freedom, the generations of martyrs who fought against British rule, with a political blindness to the actual class relations of Irish society and history. But class forces cant be ignored forever, and as each wave of republican struggle runs up against its own limitations, it has adapted to these actual class relations and political divisions. A military struggle, which is incapable of changing the form of government, since it does not address itself to the source of class rule, repeatedly ends up in outright defeat or in a political cul-de-sac and successive generations of republican leaders, recognising this, have adapted to bourgeois democracy.

This is as true of the Provisionals as it was of Michael Collins or Eamon De Valera or Seán McBride. The weakness of the southern capitalist class, and its long-standing economic ties to British capitalism, meant that it was always an unreliable force in the struggle for Irish independence from Britain; last to join the campaign and first to settle for a deal. The northern capitalist class, after 1798, based on manufacturing and heavy industry and therefore economically tied to Britain, set its face against independence and used its po-

²The CIRA, Real IRA and ÓNH are all splinters of the Provisional IRA. The exception is the IRSP and INLA, which emerged from the Official IRA. The INLA declared a ceasefire after the Omagh bomb in 1998 and eventually decommissioned their weapons in 2011. The IRSP says it is now committed to radical politics outside and in opposition to the Agreement.

litical power to mobilise Northern Protestants against it. Since the partition of Ireland in 1922, the capitalist class North and South have relied on nationalist or unionist appeals to loyalty and police repression against those who would challenge their rule.

Since partition, the isolation of successive generations of republicans has forced them to rely on appeals to the founding documents of the republic, the Proclamation read by Padraig Pearse on the steps of the GPO in Dublin in 1916 or the Declaration of Independence of the Second Dáil in 1919 as their mandate for continuing the struggle for Irish freedom. The IRA Army Council considered itself the legitimate successor of the Second Dáil, and therefore the true government of Ireland. In republican terms, the IRA were not fighting to establish the republic, they were defending the actually existing republic declared in 1919.

For most of the period between 1922 and 1968, republicanism was based on a leadership of intellectuals and the support of poorer rural Irish farmers, with limited support among workers in cities like Dublin and Cork. The re-emergence of republicanism, as a response to the repression of the mass movement for civil rights in the North, relied on those older networks but for the first time won a substantial base among working-class Catholics in the northern cities.

These, in broad outline, are the parameters within which republicanism has operated in the last century. Faced with an inability to defeat the British militarily, unable to take control of the major population centres, they have adapted to the conditions they find themselves in and fallen back on conventional strategies - elections and so on - to prove their political support among the Irish people and persuade

Britain to negotiate with them, as the true representatives of the Irish nation.

But the two elements are in continual tension. The notion that republicans are the true representatives of the nation is continually undermined by the isolation that military struggle imposes. Breaking out of the isolation, in nationalist terms, means making compromises with the political set-up that they are out to overthrow. It is this contradiction at the heart of republicanism, which is at the root of the repeated crises and splits in the movement.

The failure to locate the system of government and the state, British or Irish or Northern Irish, as an expression of class rule, means that the republican struggle has never sought to challenge capitalism itself or base itself on the organised power of the working class, where it is potentially strongest, at the point of production. Instead of seeing the class struggle as the motor of history (as Marxists do) the republican movement has always seen itself and its own actions, either military or electoral, as the principal driving force. This, along with the very nature of armed conspiracy, is the root of the elitism built into republican strategy.

The re-emergence of republicanism in the maelstrom of the uprising of Catholic areas in 1968 and 1969 had exactly these same elements.

For the early leadership of the Provisionals, mainly IRA veterans from the '50s and '60s, the commitment to armed struggle against British rule was all that was needed and they were explicitly conservative and 'anti-Communist' in their politics.³ In spite of this, the Provisionals eventually won the largest support in Northern Catholic areas as they were seen as the most determined fighters against the British Army. The eruption, North and South, of mass popular anger follow-

³See Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, (New York) 2003, Ch 2

ing Bloody Sunday was the context within which the IRA took the lead in the struggle. The conclusion that it was both necessary and effective to counter the violence of the state with violence was drawn by large numbers of those involved and was supported by much wider numbers of sympathisers.⁴

It was under this pressure that the British government abolished the discredited Stormont government. But even here, at the height of mass struggle and support, the attempts to militarize the struggle - such as the 20 car bombs in Belfast in July 1972 on Bloody Friday, which killed nine civilians and wounded 130 - enabled the British government to turn the tide and mount massive military operations to retake the no-go areas in Derry and Belfast at the end of July.⁵

From 1972 onwards, the IRA was on the defensive. The enthusiasm and direction of the armed campaign was reaching an impasse. During the secret negotiations that were held with the British government during ceasefires in 1972 and again in 1974, the IRA leadership took seriously the idea that a British withdrawal was on the cards. When it became obvious that the ceasefires and offers of talks were simply a way of weakening and dividing the organisation, the IRA returned to the military struggle. This eventually led to a readjustment, to the strategy of 'The Long War' and a complete reorganisation of the IRA in the North, by a new Northern leadership based around Gerry Adams, Ivor Bell and Brendan Hughes in Belfast and Martin McGuinness in Derry to withstand the constant pressure of arrests and infiltration by the British and the RUC.

The new Northern-based leadership continually sought ways to break out of the isolation of the Northern ghettos, such as

bombing campaigns in England, often with disastrous results, such as the Birmingham pub bombings of November 1974. A few days later, the British Government rushed through the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act, which led to the arrest and imprisonment of countless Irish people in Britain, including the Birmingham Six and Guildford Four.

The mid to late '70s were years of a war of attrition, with hundreds of republicans imprisoned. The IRA was under added political pressure from the various strategies pursued by Britain: the attempts at power-sharing governments in 1974; the use of loyalist paramilitary organisations to terrorise Catholic areas; the 'Ulsterisation' strategy, in which the British Army would take a less prominent role and push the RUC to the fore; the criminalisation policy for IRA prisoners; and later the Anglo-Irish Agreement in the mid-1980s, designed to undermine support for the Provisionals by supporting the moderate nationalists of the SDLP.

The Hunger Strikes, and the mass campaign that surrounded them, went way beyond the Provisionals expectations and led to a resurgence in support and recruitment for the IRA. This meant that the struggle could be sustained in the 1980s, but all that was on offer was the same failed strategy and the danger of isolation and defeat. The chink of light was the election of hunger strikers, in particular Bobby Sands, but also two TDs in the South, and the votes for those associated with the hunger-strikers. This, it seemed to the republican leadership, offered a way out of the political impasse.

⁴See Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town*, (London) 1993

⁵Moloney, pp. 116-117

The Continuity IRA



CIRA Graffiti

These tensions, between the demands of a military campaign and adapting to electoralism, also led to splits. In 1984-85 Ivor Bell, a key figure in the Belfast leadership, privately criticised the damage that electoral work was having on the armed struggle and along with his supporters was forced out of the movement.⁶ The Continuity IRA and their political wing, Republican Sinn Féin, were born out of an open split in the Provisional IRA in 1986. In late 1986, the Provisional IRA decided to reverse their previous policy of abstention for the southern Irish state, meaning that they would take seats in the Dil.

Dropping abstention represented a major break with republican principle. The Provisionals, at the time of their split with the 'Official' IRA in 1969, were traditionalists who claimed that the IRA Army Council was the sole legitimate inheritor of the Second Dáil of 1919. They even went to the extent of seeking the endorsement of Tom Maguire, the last surviving member of the Second Dáil. Through the difficult times of the Troubles, this was an important source of legitimacy for republican activists.

The 1986 Ard Fheis decision, was the

⁶Moloney, pp. 244-245

⁷Moloney, p. 203

culmination of a long internal struggle by the new northern leadership to replace the older, mainly southern leadership of the IRA and Sinn Féin. The old leaders were criticised as being removed from the struggle in the North and responsible for the misjudged ceasefire policy of the early 1970s, which almost brought the movement to its knees.

The Adams strategy, of continuing the armed struggle while seeking to broaden the base of republicanism by 'going political' through involvement in community and social issues and in electoral work, struck a chord with those closest to the action in the North.

It was, of course, an adaptation to bourgeois legality but it carried with it the notion that popular support could counter the criminalisation of republicanism by the British government backed by the media. At the 1981 Ard Fheis, Danny Morrison had argued for standing in elections: 'Who here really believes that we can win the war through the ballot box? But will anyone object if, with a ballot paper in this hand and an Armalite in this hand, we take power in Ireland.'⁷

The decision by the 1986 Ard Fheis to drop abstention was seen by some in the IRA as a betrayal of this cornerstone of the republican tradition. If the legitimacy of the southern state was recognised then the whole notion of the 'actually existing republic' was betrayed. Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, a veteran of the IRA from the 1930s, led a walkout and founded a new IRA Army Council, known as the Continuity IRA, and a new political organisation, Republican Sinn Féin (RSF). They too sought and received the endorsement of Tom Maguire. But they took very few members with them due to the standing of the new Northern IRA command, which

had the authority of leading the armed campaign.

In a speech to the Ard Fheis, Martin McGuinness, then a key IRA leader, promised that the end of abstention would not mean the end of the IRA's campaign.

I reject any such suggestion and I reject the notion that entering Leinster House would mean an end to Sinn Féin's unapologetic support for the right of Irish people to oppose in arms the British forces of occupation... Our position is clear and it will never, never, never change. The war against British rule must continue until freedom is achieved.

But we are not at war with the government of the 26 Counties - the reality of this fact must be recognised by us all. And in accepting this reality we must also accept that after 65 years of republican struggle, republican agitation, republican sacrifice, and republican rhetoric we have failed to convince a majority in the 26 counties that the republican movement has any relevance to them. By ignoring reality we remain alone and isolated on the high altar of abstentionism, divorced from the people of the 26 counties and easily dealt with by those who wish to defeat us.⁸

The leadership of RSF and the CIRA was essentially southern-based and had little support, beyond handfuls of people in

Belfast and Derry and some pockets of support in rural and border areas such as Fermanagh and Tyrone. It contented itself with the notion that it was holding on to the holy grail of republicanism. Nevertheless, like the Provisionals before them, the CIRA and RSF are sustained by the belief that they are the legitimate custodians of the Republic. RSF's programme *Eire Nua* is deeply conservative, economically and socially, which goes some way to explain its lack of appeal in urban areas. Its main innovation, when it was first drafted, was the notion of a federation of provinces in Ireland, as a means of guaranteeing rights for the Protestant minority in a United Ireland. It outlines a detailed structure of national, local and regional government bodies, but it has been unchanged for decades and is a faded blueprint with no reference to the means of constructing it.⁹

A description by RSF of the critical importance of abstention shows the superficial analysis of the nature of modern states.

The principle of abstention is derived from a Republican view of where the State gets its authority to rule: the people. Elected representatives who participate in the institutions of the State effectively accept the authority of that State and its right to voluntarily rule the people they represent. By withdrawing popular support represented on an official level by withdrawing elected representatives from the State, it becomes impossible for the State to function. By diverting that popular support to the parallel apparatus

⁸Sinn Féin, *The Politics of Revolution: The Main Speeches and Debates from the 1986 Sinn Féin Ard Fheis* (Dublin) 1986

⁹<http://rsf.ie/eirenuu.htm>

¹⁰Republican Sinn Féin, *Elections and Abstentionism; Republican Education 3*, (Dublin) 2000

of the revolutionary State being formed, the existing State is democratically replaced.¹⁰

But what RSF don't address is how this might have been achieved, even when the republican movement was at its strongest during the last 30 years, nor the mechanism for achieving this situation of dual power. In fact, the reverse is true. The relative isolation of the republican movement in the 1980s, confined mainly to the working class Catholic areas of the North, was not seen as the crucial issue and RSF have rarely referred to any strategy for overcoming it. Instead, the guardianship of the true Republic is to be borne with stoic resolve, resisting all attempts to lure it into compromise. The CIRA and RSF represent, in their essence, the continuation of the old 'anti-political' and conservative IRA position of the Provisionals at their inception, without the context of mass upheaval and rebellion, without the armed weight of the early Provisionals and without the attempts to broaden the support base for republicanism that the Provisionals engaged in since the late 1970s.

RSF views the trajectory of the Provisionals since then as having originated in the key betrayal of 1986:

For the fifth time in 65 years an attempt was made to depart from that basic Republican and revolutionary position and to accept the British imperialist and colonialist alternative, the 26-county State, the 6-county statelet and the overlordship of Westminster itself. The years of the great

breaches of trust - 1922 and 1926, 1946 and 1969, and finally 1986 - with all the disastrous consequences for the faithful Irish republicans which flow from them, loom before us today.¹¹

The CIRA remained and remains to this day, a marginal force, easily dismissed by the leadership of mainstream republicanism as having never killed any British soldiers. They nevertheless refuse any idea of unity with other republicans, especially those who stayed with the Provisionals after the great betrayal of 1986. The CIRA has been a persistent armed presence, keeping the flame alive, without ever inflicting any serious damage. It retains some historical pockets of support in places such as Lurgan, Newry and parts of Fermanagh, especially around some key former IRA leaders, but their membership by all reliable accounts is fluid, many having defected to other armed groups. Reports suggest that recent years have been fractious for the CIRA, with a number of defections, splits and expulsions - especially in Belfast and Tyrone - and a turn towards increased militarism, under the pressure of the other republican military groups. In 2009 the CIRA claimed responsibility for the killing of PSNI officer Stephen Carroll in Craigavon. In 2012 it announced that a new leadership had replaced the old with renewed focus on armed struggle in the North.¹²

Real IRA

For the rest of the 1980s and into the 1990s, the momentum remained with the leadership of the Provisionals under Gerry

¹¹ Martyn Frampton, *Legion of the Rearguard: Dissident Irish Republicanism*, Irish Academic Press, 2011, p.54

¹²RT News, 26/7/12, 'CIRA says it has a new leadership in place'<http://www.rte.ie/news/2012/0726/330721-continuity-ira-says-it-has-new-leadership-in-place/>

Adams and Martin McGuinness. It was they who were running the armed campaign in the North, they who would strike any deal with the British. Electoral support for Sinn Féin grew to roughly 35 per cent of the Northern nationalist vote, behind the SDLP, but remained negligible in the South, where Sinn Féin was viewed mainly as an IRA support group.

By the early 1990s, the republican leadership recognised that it could not win militarily. Faced with another impasse, the leadership circulated an internal discussion document, entitled 'TUAS'¹³ which argued for the movement to look to 'other nationalist constituencies'.

...republicans at this time and on their own do not have the strength to achieve the end goal. The struggle needs strengthening most obviously from other nationalist constituencies led by SDLP, Dublin government and the emerging Irish-American lobby, with additional support from other parties in EU rowing in behind and accelerating the momentum created.¹⁴

This wasn't a new departure for the Provisionals. It echoed their strategy during the Hunger Strikes, when their newspaper, *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, declared: 'Britain can be beaten when the Free State premier, the SDLP leader and the Catholic hierarchy are forced to apply their muscle instead of, as at present, playing at it.'¹⁵ But it began the process of secret, then public, negotiations that would lead to the IRA ceasefire in 1994.

¹³The title of the document was deliberately ambiguous - the acronym standing for 'Totally UnArmed Strategy' or 'Tactical Use of Armed Struggle', depending on the audience.

¹⁴<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/organ/ira/tuas94.htm>

¹⁵Quoted in Chris Bambery, *Ireland's Permanent Revolution*, (London), 1987, p81

¹⁶Moloney, p.479

It quickly became clear that the terms of any peace deal with the British government would be based on a version of the power-sharing experiment tried in 1974, and would mean the IRA giving up its armed struggle. This caused tensions in the IRA leadership. Adams and McGuinness, fearing a damaging split, engaged in a painstaking process of convincing the republican movement, reassuring Sinn Féin activists and IRA prisoners and keeping other parties on board. Events seemed to have turned in favour of those wanting a return to the military campaign in 1996, when the IRA ceasefire was ended with a 'spectacular' bomb in London's Canary Wharf. But behind the scenes, the internal manoeuvring of the Adams and McGuinness leadership eventually won out and the ceasefire was re-established.

As the final negotiations for the Good Friday Agreement were taking place, the seven member IRA Army Council split, with IRA Quartermaster Michael McKevitt and other senior Provisionals - Seamus McGrane and Liam Campbell - breaking away to form what became known as the Real IRA in 1997.¹⁶ They also formed a political wing, the 32 County Sovereignty Movement.

What is often forgotten - particularly by the dissidents - are the deep problems with IRA actions in the years immediately preceding the peace process. These were the years of the Shankill bombing, the Loughgall disaster in which the East Tyrone brigade of the IRA was wiped out in an SAS ambush, the Patsy Gillespie bombing in Derry, in which the IRA had tied a civilian worker from a local army base into a van loaded with explosives and ordered

him to drive it to an army checkpoint. In fact IRA actions had become so unpopular and so disastrous that there have even been suggestions that they were deliberately planned that way in order to assist the leadership strategy.¹⁷

There were large mobilisations by trade unions in response to the IRA and loyalist atrocities. But the political leadership of the trade union movement made no attempt to direct this movement beyond acting as a support for the emerging peace negotiations between the British and Irish governments and the political parties in the North.

The pressure to end the armed struggle also came from the focus on elections. Sinn Féin was engaged in a sustained effort to win over middle-class Catholic voters and voters in the South. The armed struggle was an impediment to that.

The formation of the Real IRA did not make a significant impact on the Provisionals. The numbers who went with McKevitt were few. The majority of IRA and Sinn Féin activists were still prepared to wait and see. Adams repeatedly claimed that he needed to move carefully, to bring the republican base with him and McGuinness, with his background as an IRA Commander, carried considerable weight with IRA activists.

The reasons are not difficult to discern. Many activists were war-weary, and unconvinced that the war would achieve anything - and impressed by the growth in popularity in Sinn Féin. And whatever else the Sinn Féins peace strategy had delivered, it had secured the early release of hundreds of republican prisoners. The peace process also enlarged the pool of professional politicians, and their advisors. It was accompanied by various programmes

of funding for community organisations, in a deliberate strategy to give republican (and loyalist) activists work and a sense of a stake in the system. Few IRA activists were convinced, despite misgivings, that restarting the armed struggle would get anywhere. The wind was in the sails of the Sinn Féin leadership, as the Good Friday Agreement was completed in April 1998.

The Real IRA and the 32 County Sovereignty Movement represented a rejection of the whole 'political strategy' pursued by Adams and McGuinness. The 32CSM concentrated on reasserting the principle of Irish sovereignty, with a convoluted submission to the United Nations based mainly on an article on Irish history by former IRA leader-turned UN High Commissioner, Sean McBride; a reprinting of the 1916 Proclamation and the Declaration of Independence; and various appeals to international law which challenged the legitimacy of the referenda on the Good Friday Agreement.¹⁸ The submission was, of course, ignored by the UN, but it acted as a restatement of republican principle for the renewal of the armed struggle.

The disastrous Omagh bombing a few months later on 15 August 1998, which killed 33 people, shrunk further the numbers prepared to join and demoralised those who had. Omagh was the culmination of a series of car bombings carried out on small, mainly Protestant, market towns by the Real IRA in 1998, including Moira, Newtownhamilton and Banbridge. The immediate aim was to put pressure on the Ulster Unionists to pull out of the peace negotiations and so collapse the process. The effect of Omagh was the opposite. It gave added impetus to the peace negotiations, as all the polit-

¹⁷Moloney, Ch 11

¹⁸The 32CSM Submission to the United Nations cork32.blogspot.co.uk/p/32csm-submission-to-united-nations.html

ical parties united to condemn it. It also strengthened the hand of the state. Both the British and Irish governments rushed through draconian new anti-terrorist legislation in September 1998. In the South, the new Offences Against the State Act extended the time suspects could be held without charge from 48 hours to 72. It allowed courts to: 'draw inferences from a suspect's silence when questioned' and introduced a new charge of: 'directing an unlawful organisation'.¹⁹

The Real IRA announced: 'a suspension of all military operations' in the aftermath of Omagh, while it 'conducted a process of consultation on our future direction' and, in September, announced a 'complete cessation of violence'.²⁰ Reports circulated of Real IRA members being visited in their homes by Provisionals warning them to disband. The INLA - who were believed to have co-operated in the bombing operation, along with the CIRA - also announced a ceasefire, declaring: 'the conditions for armed struggle do not exist', but maintaining opposition to the Good Friday Agreement. By July 1999, McKevitt had reorganised the Real IRA at a meeting in Inishowen, County Donegal, which included members of 'RIRA, CIRA, INLA, and disaffected members of the Provisionals'.²¹ Their strategy was to wait for the imminent deal with the Unionists and the IRA decommissioning of weapons that would follow, then denounce Sinn Féin for its betrayal and launch a new bombing campaign that would 'overshadow' Omagh.²² The bombing campaign was restarted in 2000. The Real IRA pulled off a rocket attack on MI5 headquarters in London during this period, but

the campaign was sporadic and never likely to succeed in 'getting past' the legacy of Omagh. Between 2002 and 2006, the Real IRA remained on the defensive, with only fitful attempts at conducting an armed campaign. The Stormont administration also went into repeated crisis between 2000 and 2007, especially over the issue of IRA decommissioning, resulting in less of an immediate focus for their campaign.

International events also counted against the resumption of an armed campaign. The 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001 accelerated Sinn Féin's move away from armed struggle and its distancing itself from an association with liberation struggles internationally, with the US Envoy invited to that year's Ard Fheis. The potential for support from Irish-American groups dwindled.

The organisation was also heavily infiltrated and McKevitt was eventually jailed on the word of an FBI and MI5 informer. An indication of the crisis affecting the Real IRA after Omagh is that in 2002 it suffered a major split among Real IRA prisoners. A large majority of the prisoners, led by McKevitt himself, endorsed a statement calling on the leadership of the Real IRA to stand down 'with ignominy'. They were accused of neglecting the prisoners, fraternising with criminals and failing to develop a meaningful strategy.²³ This group, which would re-emerge as a discussion group called the 'New Republican Forum', called on the leadership of the Real IRA to end its armed campaign.

...There is no support for armed struggle in Ireland at this time. And without popular support any armed cam-

¹⁹Frampton. p. 105

²⁰Frampton, p.106-107

²¹Frampton, p.109

²²Frampton, p. 109 and 117

²³Frampton, p.145

paign against British rule is doomed to failure. We believe it is the moral responsibility of the republican leadership to terminate any campaign when it becomes obvious that its continuance is futile.²⁴

The crisis also led to a deep internal debate among those who remained with the 32CSM/Real IRA. In 2002, the 32 County Sovereignty Movement engaged in an extensive internal debate, around the question of their 'single issue' focus. By allowing activists to engage in wider politics, it was argued, the support base for the struggle could be widened. The result was the rewriting of the party's objectives:

The objectives of the 32 County Sovereignty Movement are:

- (a) The restoration of Irish National Sovereignty.
- (b) To seek to achieve unity among the Irish people on the issue of restoring National Sovereignty and to promote the Revolutionary ideals of Republicanism and to this end involve itself in resisting all forms of colonialism and imperialism.²⁵

The practical effect of this was that the 32CSM increasingly took up the question of 'dealing with anti-social behaviour', positioning themselves to fill the role previously carried out by the Provisionals by carrying out punishment beatings and shootings.

They also began to comment more widely on political issues in their newspaper, the *Sovereign Nation*, and encouraged members to take part in political campaigns. But for much of the period

between 2003 and 2006, the Real IRA's armed campaign hardly existed.

Defeat or betrayal - why did the Provisionals fail?

What dominated in republican circles after Omagh, was a period of open criticism, debate and reflection. The carefully managed diplomatic stagecraft of the peace process, the secret deals, the delicately timed announcements by the Sinn Féin leadership during the years of the peace negotiations were full of double-bluffs, lies, Féints, and a continual reassurance to republican activists that despite the public moves, the leadership still held true to republican ideals. This is what Adams and McGuinness are praised for in British government ministers' memoirs, but it had a different effect on existing republican activists. The disquiet was evident early in the process, with former republican prisoners like Tommy Gorman, Anthony McIntyre and Tommy McKearney producing *Fourthwrite* magazine. This discussion came into its own after Omagh, especially through an online magazine, edited by McIntyre and his partner Carrie Twomey, called *The Blanket*.

The Blanket provided a forum and an outlet for open criticism by republicans about the direction of the peace process. The intention was not to go back to war, but rather open up debate about where republicanism had ended up and why. The ethos was one of a celebration of the diversity of responses and a reluctance to insist on agreement on alternative strategies. Space was given to loyalists, dissident republicans, mainstream republicans and socialist writers. Most often there was a sense of the lifting of the weight of silence imposed on republicans by the conditions of war and by the leadership of Sinn Féin.

²⁴Interview with Republican prisoners, *Forum Magazine*, February 2003

²⁵www.derry32csm.com/p/32csm-policy-documents.html

The debate, such as it was, in *The Blanket* oscillated between condemning the Provos for settling for too little and implying that ‘the war’ had been fought merely for equality for Catholics and nationalists within the existing state. The dominant narrative was one of sell-out and betrayal by the republican leadership, and suspicions that were fuelled by revelations of British agents such as Denis Donaldson and Freddie Scapaticci operating at the most senior level in the Provisionals. Similar debates have continued to surface, including accusations first made by Richard O’Rawe that the IRA leadership deliberately prolonged the 1981 Hunger Strike in order to advance their move towards electoralism.²⁶

It is an indication of how deep the criticism of Sinn Féin reached that *The Blanket* attracted support from such senior former IRA figures as Brendan ‘the Dark’ Hughes. Hughes was an iconic figure, a hero of the gun battles to defend the Lower Falls in the early 1970s, later a key confidant of Gerry Adams and the leader of the first Hunger Strike in 1980. Hughes’ contributions to *The Blanket* reveal a deep disappointment with what happened to republicanism; a sense of defeat, of how far republicanism had moved from its roots and in particular, the lived experience of many former prisoners like himself, working on building sites for pitiful wages, employed by builders who couldn’t be criticised because they supported Sinn Féin. The most controversial part of his contribution was Hughes revealing Adams’ role in the IRA in Belfast, a fact which Adams to this day publicly denies.²⁷ Anthony McIntyre suggested that Adams’ refusal to admit to being a leader of the IRA implied a lack of legitimacy to all republican volunteers, as if it was something to be embarrassed about.

Writing in 2002 McIntyre argued that the IRA had been defeated: ‘They have been defeated on every issue from the question of a British withdrawal, the consent principle, decommissioning, the total abolition of Stormont, and policing. Republicanism has been completely hollowed out to the point where its shell has been filled with core constitutional nationalist rather than republican positions...The ‘three Ds’ of Provisional republicanism – defence, defiance and dissent – now stand for defeat, decommissioning and dissolution.’²⁸ However, what the extent of the compromises the Provisionals have made highlights is the actual balance of forces ranged against the Provisionals and the weakness of their position.

Winning political legitimacy for the state and its institutions was a key aim of the peace process, which is why the decommissioning of IRA weapons and Sinn Féin recognition of the police were such central negotiating issues during the effort to get the Stormont Executive established. They were about forcing republicans to recognise that the existing state in Northern Ireland was the only one with the right to bear arms. Delegitimising armed struggle against the state, as witnessed in the repeated denials by Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness that they were leaders of the Provisional IRA, was simply another facet of this process. It is hardly a surprise that a key motivation for the armed republicans is to challenge this right, merely by existing. The fact of the armed struggle, whether it can achieve anything or not, by itself is an affront to the idea that the state alone should have access to the means of violence. But this challenge to the state’s hegemony on violence was afflicted by a refusal to acknowledge the weakness of the

²⁶Richard O’Rawe, *Blanketmen: An Untold Story of the H-block Hunger Strike*. (Dublin) 2005

²⁷Ed Moloney (ed) *Voices from the Grave* (London) 2010

²⁸ A McIntyre, ‘Time Has Run Out for an Armed IRA’, *Observer*, 20 October 2002

IRA campaign. The trajectory of Sinn Féin's fatal compromise with the establishment is at the heart of their various political analyses and is well rehearsed in their publications. But there is a glaring absence of any assessment of why the armed struggle failed.

The main contributors to *The Blanket* continued to view the struggle through the prism of the IRA campaign and its relationship to British military and political strategy. McIntyre summed this up with his explanation of the peace process: 'The political objective of the Provisional IRA was to secure a British declaration to withdraw. It failed. The objective of the British state was to force the Provisional IRA to accept...that it would not leave Ireland until a majority in the north consented to such a move. It succeeded.'²⁹ What this reflects is the tendency to view history as if the IRA were the key component downplaying the significance of mass movements that went beyond the ranks of the Provisionals.

Leon Trotsky, writing about earlier terrorist campaigns elsewhere, highlighted this tendency:

For terrorists, in the entire field of politics there exist only two central focuses: the government and the Combat Organisation... Everything that is outside the framework of terror is only the setting for the struggle; at best, an auxiliary means. In the blinding flash of exploding bombs, the contours of political parties and the dividing lines of the class struggle disappear without a trace.³⁰

This tendency is commonly seen throughout the republican discussion that has taken place since the Good Friday Agreement. Yet the key moments when the British government was most threatened were the periods of mass struggle - the Civil Rights Movement, and especially the mass demonstrations north and south after Bloody Sunday; and again during the Hunger Strike. No other event, no bombing or assassination carried out by the IRA ever came close to threatening the British government.

The failure to develop any coherent republican alternative out of such a widespread and remarkably open period of debate is a testimony to the political confusion and fragmented nature of the republican opposition to Sinn Féin's strategy. This was to become the hallmark of *The Blanket*, and having catalogued the various betrayals and criticisms of the Provisionals, it ended publication in 2008.

In his final article, Anthony McIntyre wrote: 'The variant of republicanism focussed on in its pages was no more. With the total demise of the Provisional republican project the symbiotic relationship between it and the writing that described it had been ruptured. *The Blanket* operated within a distinctly republican milieu. We are now in a post-republican world where others, such as Éirígí, have picked up the baton and hope to reverse the order of things.'³¹

Éirígí

It was against this background, of open dissent against the Sinn Féin leadership, a reluctance to return to armed struggle (usually characterised as 'dumb mili-

²⁹ A McIntyre, 'We, the IRA, have failed', *Guardian*, 22 May, 1998

³⁰ L Trotsky, *The Bankruptcy of Individual Terrorism*, 1909

³¹ A McIntyre, *The Blanket, One Last Time*, 18 May 2008: indiamond6.ulib.iupui.edu:81/AMLB.html

tarism’) and a vague commitment to radical socialist politics as opposed to the rightward drift of Sinn Féin, that Éirígí emerged in 2006. Éirígí was initially led by critical republicans who rejected the strategy of armed struggle ‘at this time’, first in Dublin and later in Belfast. They recruited Brendan MacCionnaith. Éirígí identifies with the tradition of left republicanism:

Éirígí identifies exclusively with a revolutionary current that has distinguished itself historically from the predominant conservative nationalist tendency. This current recognises and accepts the essential and inseparable relationship that exists between the national and social struggles. From the Irish Socialist Republican Party to the Irish Citizen Army, to the Republican Congress and, today, Éirígí, there have been organised bodies of people throughout Irish history that have dedicated themselves to the radical transformation of economic, social and political relations in Ireland.³²

In the building of such a movement inspiration can be sought, and lessons learned, from our own history. In the period prior to the 1916 Rising Ireland witnessed a cultural revival encompassing the Irish language, music and sports. The same period saw the growth of both a separatist movement advocating Irish freedom and a revolution-

ary form of socialism and trade unionism. It was by drawing support from all three of these trends that the most successful Irish Rebellion to date, and the following five year revolutionary period, occurred.³³

However, in their declaration in favour of socialism Éirígí have merely bolted socialism and trade unionism onto their underlying republicanism and nationalism. They do not make the working class and its struggle the point of departure as Marxists do. Also while rejecting armed struggle ‘at the present time’ they hold open to the possibility of returning to it in the future, without any fundamental critique of the republican conception and practice of armed struggle which has always tended to substitute militarism for the struggle of the masses. Marxists also recognise the need, in certain circumstances, for ‘armed struggle’, but only on the basis of the development of the mass struggle from below to the point where it comes into physical conflict with the state in the shape of revolution, insurrection and (if necessary) civil war, not as a separate military campaign waged by an armed wing of the party, as in the Republican tradition.

The demands of the class struggle in the north require an attempt to forge working class unity and the overcoming of the sectarian divide. Éirígí show some awareness of this. They write:

We in Éirígí also wish to see an end to the false divisions that Britain has so carefully fostered in Ireland and believe that a new political and social movement may offer a mechanism to do just that. We chal-

³²Éirígí: *From Socialism Alone Can the Salvation of Ireland Come*, 2010, p 1 www.eirigi.org/pdfs/socialism.pdf

³³Éirígí, *Imperialism Ireland and Britain*, 2007 www.eirigi.org/pdfs/imperialism.pdf

lenge those who may historically have believed that their interests were best served by supporting the British presence in Ireland to re-examine their position in the context of the twenty-first century. We appeal to members of this community to join us in a political movement for the creation of a new all-Ireland Republic where all the people of Ireland will be entitled to an equal share of the nation's wealth and equal access to power regardless of class, religion, gender, ethnicity, or other false division.³⁴

But it is clear that this is a merely declaratory, rhetorical, appeal with no real strategy as to how this unity could be achieved in practice. Particularly revealing is the last sentence where 'class' is cited as a 'false division' along with 'religion, gender, ethnicity'. Despite their radical aspirations Éirígí have not overcome the fundamental weakness in the whole republican tradition: the elevation of nation over class.

Republican Network for Unity and the INLA

A network of Concerned Republicans emerged in 2006 to challenge Sinn Féin's moves to endorse policing. They held a number of well-attended meetings in Belfast, Toome and Derry, to openly debate the issue. The leading figures went on to form the Republican Network for Unity, which also disavowed a return to armed struggle, and which has a base in Belfast and small groups of supporters elsewhere. It issued a major policy paper in 2012,

³⁴Éirígí, *Imperialism Ireland and Britain*, 2007

³⁵RNU, *Standing Outside the Peace Process*, 2012

called 'Standing Outside the Peace Process', which was mainly a commentary on the failures of Stormont faced with the economic crisis. Like Éirígí they adopt radical language:

Revolutionary Republicans stand by the belief that the struggle for National Liberation and Socialism should be practiced hand in hand, that the liberators of Ireland will be the working class and that it will be within a dual struggle for control of the 'National territory' and the 'Means of production' that a worthy freedom will eventually be achieved. In conclusion therefore, RNU view the so called 'Peace Process' as in fact inherently sectarian, inherently partitionist and inherently capitalist, promoting ultimately communal division, a continuation of British rule and the dominance of a greedy capitalist class who care little for the economic well being or welfare of the Irish people north or south. We on the other hand, intend to propose a programme of Revolutionary Republicanism, the encouragement of the Irish working class to pursue a Free Socialist Republic, via all available means of struggle.³⁵

But everything said above about Éirígí applies also to the Republican Network for Unity, as it does to another republican splinter, the Irish Republican Socialist Party and its armed wing, the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA).

Paul Little, speaking on behalf of the Irish Republican Socialist Party, welcoming the INLA decision to decommission its weapons in 2010 stated:

This weeks decision by the INLA is not only historic and courageous but also a mature political decision that will allow the politics of Irish Republican Socialism to rise to the fore... We do not fear the future, we have confidence that Republican Socialism offers working-class people a viable alternative to sectarian politics and we look forward to working with other working-class representatives to ensure that our rights are not only acknowledged but also that a real alternative is available to the stale and short-sighted politics of division. Our aim is to build a truly revolutionary political party that is not beholden to any creed; our allegiance is solely with the working class. The IRSP believe that this weeks announcement by the INLA will allow that work to continue and expand, free from the spectre of weapons. It is a truly revolutionary act.³⁶

It is very much the same mixture of republican and socialist rhetoric, idealist declarations about rights and verbal commitment to the working class without any real class analysis.

³⁶RSP statement on INLA decommissioning, 10 February, 2010 www.irsp.ie/news/?p=108

³⁷The title Óglaigh na hÉireann (Volunteers of Ireland) has been widely used in the republican movement throughout its history. The Provisionals used it to describe themselves, as do the Real IRA on occasions. A number of short-lived republican splinter groups - especially one in Strabane in the late 2000s, used this name as well. ONH is here used to refer to the mainly Belfast-based organisation which emerged in 2009.

Óglaigh na hÉireann

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The second half of the decade also saw the re-emergence of other determined armed struggle groups. It was against the background of IRA decommissioning and endorsement of the Police Service of Northern Ireland by Sinn Féin, that another group of armed struggle republicans declared itself in 2009. Based mainly in Belfast, Óglaigh na hÉireann was formed by experienced Provisional activists, including some who had been former leaders of the Real IRA, but who had split as a result of disputes among RIRA prisoners. There was considerable confusion about the new group, given that the name had been used by various groups in the past, and for some time it was described as a faction of the Real IRA. However, in interviews the leadership insist that they are an independent group. An ONH spokesman described their formation out of disillusioned ex-Provisionals, who thought that the existing groups were not serious:

The organisation began with nothing more than a number of conversations between senior republicans across Ireland [in 2005]. They had watched how the anti-agreement republican military world had the perception of [being] badly organised, ineffective and perceived [as] highly infiltrated, and, in some cases, I suppose they were. They decided that after a very lengthy debate to try and salvage a group of republicans and

form them into an organisation. It would have taken a year just to agree to the formation of a group. We had agreed the title Óglaigh na hÉireann, but hadn't made it public.³⁸

ONH see the instability of the Stormont Executive:

We have no desire to replicate or be a morph of the Provisional IRA. They failed - so, why would we want to copy them? There is a fragile Assembly. There is a forging together of political opposites that is much easier to undermine and defeat than the war that the Provisionals had.³⁹

ONH do not have a political wing, but there is public evidence of close links with the Republican Network for Unity (RNU). Both groups officially deny the connection, but the RNU co-ordinate support for ONH prisoners.

Return of the Real IRA

From 2006, there was a noticeable stepping up of the Real IRA's campaign, with attacks on police officers and bombings. Sinn Féin entered government with Ian Paisley's DUP and eventually endorsed the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). After the Provisional IRA had announced it was disbanding in 2008, the hindrance that the threat from the Provisionals represented was also removed. A 32CSM conference in Derry in July 2006, for instance,

³⁸Brian Rowan 'ONH interview' *Belfast Telegraph* 3/11/10 <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/northern-ireland/diss-14993952.html>

³⁹Brian Rowan 'ONH interview' *Belfast Telegraph* 3/11/10

⁴⁰*Sovereign Nation*, October/November 2006, p.2. It was shortly after this conference in August that 32CSM members got involved in the occupation of the Raytheon offices in Derry, despite not being involved in the anti-war movement until that point.

⁴¹'Real IRA says it will target UK bankers', *Guardian*, 14 September 2010

'agreed on the need for the movement to build upon Republicanism's traditional socialist credentials and to stand up against injustice and oppression wherever it exists. This might involve community activism or support for international causes such as Palestine.'⁴⁰ 32CSM suggest that conditions will return for relaunching the armed struggle. They view themselves as occupying the position of the handfuls of uncompromising republicans who held on through the difficult times of the 1950s and 1960s and when mass struggle erupted again, were there to direct it and restart the armed campaign.

In 2010 the Real IRA planted bombs in two banks in Derry. In an interview shortly afterwards they claimed that this was in response to the role of the banks in the current economic crisis:

We have a track record of attacking high-profile economic targets and financial institutions such as the City of London. The role of bankers and the institutions they serve in financing Britain's colonial and capitalist system has not gone unnoticed..⁴¹

By 2011 the existing republican groups were highly fragmented. Richard O'Rawe wryly commented that there were seven separate republican Easter commemorations in Belfast that year.

Most, if not all, taking part in these commemorations were convinced that their particular brand of republicanism is the one, true republicanism, and

that all others are heretical. There were even some...who have convinced themselves that they are a government-in-exile, that they are the sole guarantors and protectors of the Republic which was unilaterally declared in the 1916 Proclamation, and ratified by the First Dáil in 1919. Some weeks back, the Andersonstown News informed us that the Real Continuity IRA, which recently broke away from the main Continuity IRA, has split into three different factions. That's four CIRA Army Councils. Then there are the Army Councils of the Real IRA, Oglagh na h-Eireann, the Provisional IRA, and the Official IRA. That makes eight IRA Army Councils at the last count (I've probably forgotten a couple of IRAs here and there).⁴²

In 2012, The Real IRA announced that it had linked up with a republican vigilante group in Derry called Republican Action Against Drugs (RAAD) and other independent republican groups thought to be based mainly in Tyrone and Armagh to launch a New IRA. The announcement was supposed to indicate a greater capacity to pursue the armed struggle, but it was simply a coming together of existing groups. RAAD for instance, a group led by former Provisionals in Derry, had been facing widespread public protests after they murdered Andrew Allen, a young man who had been exiled from the city. Their campaign of punishment shootings and exiling was becoming deeply unpopular.

⁴²Richard O'Rawe *How Many Do We Need?* www.fourthwrite.ie/?p=162

⁴³A McIntyre, *Brendan Hughes* <http://thepensivequill.am/2011/05/brendan-hughes-life-in-themes.html>

Another major problem facing all the various dissident groups is simply that if the Provisionals, with much greater numbers, and superior organisation and firepower, were unable to defeat the forces of British imperialism, how are the dissidents going to be able even to seriously damage them.

Socialism and Armed Struggle

All of the republican groups profess a commitment to a socialist republic. But, for republicanism, socialism is, at best, a question that is left to the period after the achievement of the republic, and at worst, a cause of division among republicans. Brendan Hughes epitomised both the feeling that original ideals and principles were being betrayed, and an inability or reluctance to define a way forward that was typical of a broad layer of republican activists who were becoming disenchanted with where Sinn Féin was taking republicanism:

While I am not pushing for any military response, our past has shown that all is never lost... I am not advocating dumb militarism or a return to war. Never in the history of republicanism was so much sacrificed and so little gained; too many left dead and too few achievements. Let us think most strongly before going down that road again.⁴³

The revolutionary socialist direction that I was fighting for has been dropped. All that Sinn Féin has done, all that the IRA has done is become

the SDLP... all the things that were important to me, that we fought and died for, mainly the betterment of the working class in Ireland, have been dropped.⁴⁴

Socialism was a personal belief, something to be added on to the republican struggle, a definition of its end point. But what was not addressed was the potential for republican struggle to run counter to the struggle for socialism.

A clear example of the divergence of these two strategies occurred during one of the fiercest class struggles of the last 30 years in Britain. Seven months into the 1984/85 British miners' strike, the IRA bombed the Grand Hotel in Brighton during the Tory Party conference, narrowly missing killing Margaret Thatcher and her cabinet. Thatcher was bitterly hated by millions of people who supported the miners' struggle to defend their jobs and communities. She epitomised the determination of the ruling class in Britain to defeat and humiliate the strongest trade union in the country. But the IRA made no connection between the bomb and the struggle of the miners. Sinn Féin chairman Danny Morrison claimed:

If that bomb had killed the whole British cabinet, imagine what would have happened. There would have been a rethink in British political circles and it would probably have led to a British withdrawal in a much shorter time,...Today we were unlucky, but remember we only have to be lucky once you have to be lucky always.

⁴⁴A McIntyre, *Brendan Hughes*

⁴⁵Pat Stack, 'One Great Act or Mass Action?' *Socialist Worker Review*, November 1984, p.19

⁴⁶Trotsky, *Terrorism* (1911)

As Pat Stack replied at the time:

If Morrison, and the IRA, are right then this has very serious implications, and not just for Ireland. Take the miners' strike, for instance. Why go through seven months of incredible self sacrifice if one or two supremely brave acts can solve the problem? If the real enemy is Thatcher and MacGregor [chair of the British Coal Board], why not just bump them off? The answer is that capitalism is not about one or two individuals, but about a class in society that will do whatever is necessary to protect its power and privilege. The ruling class is solidly behind Thatcher's attempt to smash the miners. Her death or that of MacGregor would do little to alter that confrontation

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Or as Trotsky put it:

But the smoke from the explosion clears away, the panic disappears, the successor of the murdered minister makes his appearance, life again settles into the old rut, the wheel of capitalist exploitation turns as before; only police repression grows more savage and brazen. And as a result, in place of the kindled hopes and artificially aroused excitement come disillusion and apathy.⁴⁶

Reformism is the flip-side of terrorist strategies. Both downplay the role of the masses in winning their own liberation.

Trotsky added:

By its very essence terrorist work demands such concentrated energy for 'the great moment', such an overestimation of the significance of individual heroism, and finally, such a 'hermetic' conspiracy, that - if not logically, then psychologically - it totally excludes agitational and organisational work among the masses. In our eyes, individual terror is inadmissible precisely because it belittles the role of the masses in their own consciousness, reconciles them to their powerlessness, and turns their eyes and hopes toward a great avenger and liberator who some day will come and accomplish his mission. The anarchist prophets of 'the propaganda of the deed' can argue all they want about the elevating and stimulating influence of terrorist acts on the masses. Theoretical considerations and political experience prove otherwise. The more 'effective' the terrorist acts, the greater their impact, the more they reduce the interest of the masses in self-organisation and self-education.⁴⁷

⁴⁷Trotsky, *Why Marxists Oppose Individual Terrorism* (1911) www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1911/11/tia09.htm

For independent socialist organisation

It would be wrong to overestimate the ability of the different armed dissident groups to mount a serious military campaign. Nevertheless, some support for republican armed groups is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, fuelled by the disillusion with the Stormont administration, nurtured by ongoing police harassment of republican activists and underpinned by the deepening economic crisis. The moral argument for support for the 'age old struggle' will continue to exert a pressure on all campaigns that challenge the state in the North, and be used in turn by the state to discredit radicalism. Socialists need to do two things at the same time: continue to insist that the source of violence and oppression is the capitalist state - which means being opposed to human rights abuses - and challenging the dissidents strategy for meeting the needs of working class people in the North.

The dissidents are the continuation of the political tradition of the Provisionals and they share many of the debilitating tendencies of ultra-left armed groups elsewhere. The attempt by figures such as Martin McGuinness to dismiss them simply as 'gangsters, drug dealers and conflict junkies' is inaccurate and covers a shift by Sinn Féin to endorse the structures of the state. There is a lot of evidence that these groups are involved in criminality and extortion as well as frequent splits, accusations and expulsions in their own ranks. But this questions rather than explains their political appeal.

To the extent that such groups seek to impose their own form of policing on working class communities, socialists also have a duty to resist them openly. And to

the extent that they suggest that they offer a way of resisting capitalism, through such tactics as bombing banks, we have to strongly oppose this as both completely ineffective and running counter to the building of a genuine mass movement of opposition to the crisis and attacks on the working class. In the run-up to the G8 Summit in Fermanagh this year, for instance, the police and MI5 are already planting stories in the press warning of 'an attack by dissident republicans'. This will no doubt be used as an excuse to use repressive tactics against protestors.

The relentless slide into economic crisis since 2007 has blown away the smoke and mirrors involved in the promises of the peace process. Socialists should argue that partition distorts the development of class politics in Ireland allowing both nationalist and unionist leaders to profess a common identity with 'their own' workers to cover up the exploitation that is the foundation of their rule. We need to argue for a different vision for Ireland, in which capitalist rule is overthrown and we need to do this with workers in the South as well as workers in the North. But what separates us from the republican groups is that our end goal is not defined by the illusion

of 'the nation' - our goal is the rule of the working class.

Equally, socialists have to avoid the political tendency, common in the history of the Irish left, to refuse to take part in campaigns against state repression because of fear of association with republicans. If the left were to do this, it would mean abandoning the field of opposing state repression and defending human rights to the republican groups. And it would also ignore the way in which such issues are supported by wide numbers of people who openly disagree with the strategy of armed struggle.

Above all it is essential that socialists build independent socialist, activist organisations, based on the interests of the working class not the illusion of 'the nation' which argues for a fundamentally different strategy, based on the centrality of workers struggle and a vision of a radical overthrow of capitalism.

The armed republican groups, no matter how big they grow, are incapable of inflicting serious blows on either capitalism or imperialism in Ireland. Moreover, their politics and their tactics hinder the development of radical movements and the development of class politics that are essential to undermine the grip of sectarianism.