WHERE is the Irish struggle going? Here D. R. O'CONNOR LYSAGHT argues that the Irish national struggle, far from being a dead end, is the key to radical change in Ireland. But, he says, this struggle cannot be victorious until the revolutionary nationalist Irish minority – in the six counties – seeks strategic allies.

In the short or medium term there is only one potential major ally – the working class in the 26 counties. Linking up with them, he says, means a major change of strategy and tactics by the Irish Republican movement – towards a class-based movement pursuing the national question by means of the fight for a 32-county workers’ republic.
‘military strategic considerations today include the possibility that Ireland will not just handicap British defence interests, but might yet become a major social revolutionary threat’

This position is consciously opposed by many, including former anti-implementers in the pro-British labour movement. Some of those insist that Irish nationalism was counter-revolutionary and anti-democratic from the start, objectively if not subjectively. Most would accept it as generally progressive until the 1921 Treaty. The subsequent partition of the country is interpreted by them, however, as being no more than acceptance of the Ulster Protestant democracy’s alleged right to self-determination. Its justification is ascribed by reference to the undoubted Catholic sectarianism of the present Republic of the nationalist 26 counties. That state’s constitutional bans on abortion and divorce are considered adequate explanations — and, for some, excuses — for the political and economic exclusion maintained by the Ulster regime and its proletarian supporters’ readiness to follow some of those island’s most reactionary politicians in the name of religion against class. After all, it is accurately remarked that most of the Republians, even Sinn Fein, are also tied to bourgeois parties. The weakness of their economic base compared to the Northerners is not recognized as a natural cause for this, or else it is used economistically to prove northern workers’ superiority rather than to start questioning why, with their advanced base, their consciousness is backward.

All this is held to prove the British dimension as either non-existent or, at least, irrelevant. Irish capitalism is as strong as it can be; its weaknesses are internal (and, if explicable, due mainly to 26-County Catholicism). If there is an outside imperial exploiter it is in the United States of America, which threatens all Western Europe equally. Irish-British relations are like those of Belgium and the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain, Denmark and Germany: states formerly in client-patron relationship but now equal partners in the (West) European Community. If the North of Ireland is to resolve its problems, this will be through democratic reforms enforced by Britain, from outside, backed, in the economic sphere, by NATO and the US. The 26-County Republic can contribute only by suppressing its irredentist claims for Irish unity. The fight for Irish unity will not only not lead to socialism, but is an undemocratic diversion from that end.

The social context for this viewpoint will be considered later. Here, it is enough to say that it comes out of, and is conditioned by, conditions as much as those of the Northern Irish Protestant working class. More to the point in hand, it provides a challenge to revolutionary preconceptions that has not been answered by the largest Irish revolutionary nationalist party, Sinn Fein. Sinn Fein’s failure makes it all the more necessary to answer it here.

The British connection
IRELAND’S relationship to Britain cannot be explained simply in the terms provided by Lenin in his study Imperialism — the highest stage of capitalism. Its central concept of twentieth century chauvinism through colonial investment by metropolitan capital has applied to the North of Ireland since its foundation, but has only been in the Irish state, since 1922, when its local industrial situation became more critical. The Republic has only made serious efforts to import capital since 1948. Even now, three-fifths of its debt (315 billion) is owed to Ireland’s own banks.

Yet formal metropolitan status cannot be separated from the historical context preceding the period when it became significant. Ireland was exporting capital before its economy was strong enough to benefit from such exports. Until the 1960s, it believed it had no ready worked raw materials — one of Lenin’s four main reasons to invest revolutionary threat (‘Britain’s Cuba’, as feared most publicly by British conservatism’s right-wing, and less openly by more powerful figures). This possibility was apparent at times during the 1919-21 Anglo-Irish War and the subsequent Civil War in the 26 counties, as well as during the struggle of the early years.

Both these basic reasons for occupation can be questioned and should be examined further. Certain, the economic cause has changed over the years.

The problem of investment TODAY, Irish banks are ready to advance three-fifths of the state’s debt, but not to move their investments out of foreign industry. So special incentives are given to encourage foreign firms to invest in Ireland, with diminishing success. In this process, it is certainly true that British interests are outnumbered by those of the United States: in 1986, new British investment amounted to a quantified £330m out of a total £570m of foreign investment, of which the USA had supplied £317m. The point is that Britain does have an interest, second only to that of the Americans. What is more, it is close enough to be the obvious choice as policeman for all imperialist investors. A new and more than ever before sustained and broadly-based national democratic revolution ended in a compromise by which the garrison was given its own federal relationship within the union, while the nationalist majority obtained what its leaders claimed was a ‘stepping stone’ to full independence, which it proved to be if independence excluded territorial unification.

The garrison that forms the majority in the province of ‘Northern Ireland’ has kept it in being so that the 26-County Republic can enjoy its neutrality without worrying the British government. Many would claim that Irish neutrality is not such a cause of worry in the nuclear age. In fact, countries have been destabilized for less (notably, the Micronesian island of Palau). No country with pretensions to great power status is likely to feel
happy, even now, about a neutral country the size of Ireland relative to Britain, that blocks its appropria-

tion of central itself. As it is, nuclear submarines belonging to Britain and other NATO

powers are known to patrol in the Irish Sea. A union would be in a position to
block suchcraft passing through the North Channel
etween Larnie in the North of Ireland and Portpatrick in Scotland, the narrowest and the

shallowest sea division between the two islands. To keep
the Channel open, the British government has to control both its shores; it does so under the
present status quo.

The idea of nationalism has an interest in Ireland
that involves keeping it divided. Only complete and
public acknowledgement of its authority by the rulers
of an independent Ireland, literal and open acceptance of its satellite status – including
entry to NATO – and the maintenance of this posi-
tion for at least a decade, is acceptable for
allowing Irish unity. Ideally, it would probably prefer such a solution to the present instability, or
even the lesser instability that existed before 1969.
The trouble is that, while the Republic's response to the
struggle to its north has not been very favourable to the freedom fighters, it has tended to
compensate for this over the years by taking a firmer stand on one issue to its neutrality. This is
arguably more formal than real. NATO planes fly
across Ireland and are even guided by a communi-
cation network in west County Cork.

% Nonetheless, such collaboration remains covert – more so than NATO desires. In the last 25 years, neutral premises have turned slowly but definitively

away from being a bargaining chip in negotiations for IO mem-
bership into a matter of principle. Over 80% of the people of the south now emphatically agree with this.

This makes it all the more important for Britain to maintain its aiki. It will not the desire of its
majority in the Six Counties of 'Northern Ireland' on the basic issue of the
province's surrender to the Irish majority. It might even be that the respect for such a

position is a unique bond with the nationalist, northern and Irish nationalist, and the Ulster

Unionists. They had begun their fight against Irish
nationalism in 1922, adding their support to the state creation.

They are, of course, the main groupings that had been
created against the first Irish Republic
rising, on that very basis. Their central role as
organizer of Unionism made it impossible for
the North of Ireland to be run save on a sectarian basis

that upheld and extended the discriminatory housing practices common in the area.

Today, Protestants have two-and-a-half times better housing in the six counties in all sectors. Britain allowed this to happen – it was interested in
its security, not Six-County democracy.

Building a revolutionary opposition

The Vanguard of the struggle against the occupation
is – as it has been from the beginning, save for
sympathetic upsurges on specific issues in the
Republic – a minority cross-section of the Six-County
minority. This cross-section, unemployed workers and the younger children of the petty
bourgeoisie have a disproportionate influence since they suffer most from the area's sectarian
hiring practices. At the same time, such is the institutional-
ized discrimination at all levels that the local
national bourgeoisie is also reasonably represented. The result was a strong, active revolutionary nationalist movement representing 35%-40% of the
Six Counties' national population, with a majority of
people in its support who live in towns and the border whose economies have been weakened by
partition. In all, up to now the necessary struggle for
a national liberation of the Six Counties has gained
overwhelming support for a united Ireland. But the
religious minority within Ireland's territorial minority

continues, continuing three-fold minority position of
the revolutionary nationalist movement gives

superficial justification to the arguments that the crisis in the North of Ireland can be ended in the North
Ireland itself, arguments that are not only put for-
ward by pro-imperialists. Whether this was ever
possible is doubtful; its current possibility is cer-

tainly possible to maximize its support outside of its northern stronghold. It has three groups from which it can
choose, beyond its chances of becoming a majority of the Six-County minority which cannot be an adequate substitute
for any of the others. The three are:

1. The northern Irish Protestant majority;
2. The national bourgeoisie in the Republic;
3. The working class in the Republic.

One only of these provides the correct
strategic priority. And the Ulster Protestant leads immediately to the 'internal solution'. The vast majority
of this community has no idea of an Irish unity other than as part of a
socialist workers' republic and, more to the point, how they can
make this work. If such a republic is not on the obvious agenda.
What is more, the Protestant minority is
particularly hostile to the Republic's armed struggle, whose aim they think is
associcated with them. As long as it

continues on its present offensive basis, its organizations and supporters are the
very last people among whom the political leaders of Ulster Protestantism
will seek allies.

Protestant economic base

ONE THING is needed to be added. The fact that the Ulster Protestant community, even the workers among it, are not immediate allies in struggle against imperialism does not mean that they will always oppose it. The Ulster Protest-
tant working class has had a developed economic base for holding the workers in any other part of Ireland. It has produced labour leaders who compare
favourably with most of the others. Indeed, from a political point of view, a lack of unity
is that the conditions that created this base also revived the nationalism that negated its effects. The best leaders of Ulster Protestant workers have
tended to be more politically isolated within their community than the better leaders of Britain. Their
views cannot always be faced. With a genuine secular social democratic movement that hegemonizes the masses of Irish nationalist workers and the state power actively – a movement that has not yet been

seen in Ireland, but this does not mean that it is im-
possible – then it can be expected that Ulster's workers of both traditions will unite in a higher cause than that of political rights within one union. In the six counties, conditions are ripening for the revolutionary potential of bourgeois nationalism in the south, this potential is practi-
cally extinguished outside the border counties. In the
Republic, the capitalists have built a secure base, with an economy more separate from that of the
North of Ireland than it is from that of Britain. The
base extended industrially in the 1930s under

"if the Republican ever looked like forcing its withdrawal, Britain would be
able to take the offensive, rebuild its bridges with the Unionists and abandon
civil rights to fight an immediate and terrible war."

*Policies of self-sufficiency initiated by Fianna Fail, the
constitutional heir of the militant opponents of the
1921 Treaty. By the end of the 1930s, conditions
necessary to ensure economic independence were
too radical for Irish capital. The Republic
opened to multinational firms with immediate, if
short-lived, success as far as unemployment was
concerned. From the end of the 1930s employ-
ment has tended to increase, while in this decade it
has engendered a rise in emigration for the first
time since the 1920s.

Despite this, the capitalist classes enjoy a
measure of stability that is threatened by the ac-
tivities of their fellow-nationalists in the North of Ireland. Early in this struggle, to stave off its spread, they attempted to reduce economic discontent and social unrest. But this has increased the national debt to a level where it has come to be perceived as an even greater destabilizing factor than the struggle. So, since 1982, the debt has been attacked by a series of retraction policies.

The advent of the development of 26-County capitalism could be portrayed as the history of a developed, if inefficient, metropolitan bourgeoisie. This is the interpretation made by the Socialists' Workers Movement (SWM), the Clann (State capitalists) group, which is one of the largest non-official, non-republican groups of the Irish revolutionary left. For the SWM, since 1921 the 26 counties have enjoyed as much control over their economy as is compatible with capitalism. From this, it follows that it is capitalism rather than nationalism that represents the most pressing and, objectively as well as subjectively, the primary enemy of the Irish revolution. The country is too advanced for any strategy of parochial, revolutionary socialism which is emerging out of the democratic one - in the sense that it may have succeeded elsewhere. Ireland is more enlightened, secular and democratic and secondary, if unavoidable, demands, with the struggles to achieve them simply translate into the economic class struggle to fight oppression (Socialist Worker, January 1989).

The economic facts that underpin this argument are unimpressive. A large proportion of them depend on the strength of the native banks, still clinging to the myth of the national debt. However, in the first place, national oppression is not linked directly to economic factors — for example, Catholicism and Fascism have been relatively prosperous parts of Spain. What is more, Irish banking was even stronger and more independent of London at the time of the Anglo-Irish War. Today, of all Irish banks, with one possible exception, are controlled by British interests. And the one doubtful one (but the biggest), the Bank of Ireland, has at least 40% of its stock in British hands. They were more independent in 1921. Even so, then, those who harp on the industrial revolution that lasted over the raw materials to exist, the banks were as much an instrument of national oppression as of capitalist development. They were not only instruments of the resources that could have been used to fund jobs for those who were forced to emigrate to find work, when the Anglo-Irish War ended, they could have provided only positive balance payments. The importance of these two factors in what was until the 1960s, a predominantly peasant society has made it impossible for the constitutional heirs of the anti-Treatyites to deal with them. The most definite challenge to the banks, by the constitutional Republican Clann na Poblachta in 1948, almost certainly to one extent and another.

Here again, it is clear that what Wolfe Tone, Irish Republicanism's ideological ancestor, called 'breaking the connection with Britain' meant breaking Irish financial capital. And while schematically the reverse can be said to be true, the history of the last 20 years shows that, by spreading the struggle for unity against the uneasy stability that justifies capital's resistance and the dividend of power that it extends, it might ultimately begin to overcome the opposition of the banks and their depositors. Without the national struggle as the booster — in effect, if this struggle is defeated — no anti-capitalist revolution is likely to succeed in Ireland for many years.

The Socialist Workers' Movement warns against socialist revolutionaries 'riding the nationalist tiger'. The longest, most successful of the last years of national revolutionary downturn have seen the swallowing of socialist revolutionaries — and the nationalist tiger. The point is that these have been years of downturn. Similar phenomena occurred at similar moments during and after the Anglo-Irish War. When the struggle takes off again, an inevitable condition and result of this remobilisation will be the development of the nationalist struggle towards a socialist perspective.

There is another reason given (although not used by the SWM) for denying the subjective political priority of the struggle. This is the sectarian nature of the state established and ruled by the leaders of those who fought for Irish independence and unity. The sectarianism of the Provisional IRA and the IRA have had a demoralizing effect on many democrats' aspirations for a united Ireland. In fact, the sectarianism of the Irish War did not have strong views about keeping their state free of birth control and divorce. The Catholic hierarchy did not support the freedom fighters in this struggle, lest it open its divisions (after all, most of its members were constitutional 'Home Rule' nationalists). It was necessary to support the Treaty, albeit with necessary token protests against partition. In this regard, with more than 90% of the population Catholic, I feel natural that the majority Church be in a strong position. Natural, too, that successive 26-County governments were misled by it, particularly on sexual matters. Today, Catholic dominance of the 26-County state is a necessary part of that state's stability within the partition settlement; its political base is strong, because of partition. Finally, as for the Republic's national bourgeoisie, the cultural expression of its inadequacy both as a national force and a developed imperial mobilizations of workers.

The problem is how to build on this potential. On the positive side, it must be recognized that the struggle in the 26 Counties must involve transforming it into a class one. A programme must be prepared as the centre for all future struggles around the core and present active revolutionary demand for a united Ireland. This Freedom Charter must include transitional demands. These can be developed into powerful transitional demands, however, it is clear that repudiation of the debt must be included to release the resources necessary to meet the demands, as well as the savings on the border garrisons. But the most important fact about a Freedom Charter is that it must indicate the beginning of an active strategy to build the Communist Party in the North of Ireland.

And this raises the negative point. Any front to implement a Freedom Charter has to include Sinn Fein, which is probably larger than all the other anti-imperialist bodies put together. Sinn Fein's strategy is not even centred on its own political programme but, rather, on its minimalistic duty to support the aggressive armed struggle. That ingredient is being waged by the Irish Republican Army. Time and again, this struggle — fought as if its soldiers can drive the British Army into the sea — has inevitably blundered, killing civilians pointlessly and increasing hostility to it from 26-County workers who become more open to the enemies of Irish unity arguing against any revolution developing beyond the Catholic parts of the North of Ireland.

The Communist Party's answer to this, true, to its apocalyptic vision of a grand alliance combining Loyalists and Catholic bigots, is to call for a cease-fire (This is the most friendly solution of all the groups that support an internal settlement). There are other objections to this: they are trying to force a cease-fire; there are too many armed groups already outside its control that dissident elements could join. More importantly, the Communist Party's previous cease-fires in 1972 and 1975, the British and the Loyalists will ignore such a move. For them, it will be interpreted as weakness and an intention to smash all nationalist resistance once and for all. This reaction may stimulate a revival of its resistance and even (as such a move did with Bloody Sunday and the Hunger Strikes) stimulate the reaction in the Republic that is necessary for victory. The trouble is that, as on previous occasions, the process leading to this escalation will not have been prepared and is likely to collapse. It would be a gamble that should not be taken.

Instead, the fighters should change their strategy within the armed struggle. They will have to see themselves not as the vanguard of what is still a non-existent rising in arms of the Irish people, but as an essential part of a wider project (of changing their current existing support depends) and more accurately, guarantors that the existing state revolution will not go in the way of the other. This will enable them to adapt their tactics, like their allies, to the claims of the Freedom Charter.

The Irish national question remains acute. It can only be solved by transcending its existing limitations through the process of permanent revolution. Beyond this, it is a long speculation, but it should be added that this must be a means to an end, not an end in itself. The Irish question in favour of the oppressed and exploited will be the greatest revolutionary change in world history since the 1789 French Revolution. It will not be a sign that the permanent revolution is beginning for Ireland's neighbours.