

Workers Press interviews

Bernadette Devlin

'I believe that to end internment it is necessary to bring down the Tories'

Part Two

In August 1969 the Labour government sent British troops to N Ireland. The Socialist Labour League was the only political movement in Britain to demand their immediate withdrawal. Here, in the second and final part of an interview by Sarah Hannigan, Bernadette Devlin is questioned on her own position at the time and her prospects for unity of the Protestant and Catholic working class.

SH: WAS it not the mistaken reformist policies behind the civil rights movement which led yourself and others into initially supporting the arrival of British troops in Ulster?

BD: I HAVE never supported the British troops. I almost got thrown out of the Bogside by a contingent of ladies and the parish police for what seemed to me a reasonable statement. Someone asked should we fight the soldiers—I said on the platform, not yet. I was accused of attempting to lead the people into war and being a dirty red.

It wasn't reformist politics that led the people of Derry into supporting British troops, as they certainly did. They stood cheering at the khaki uniforms. Most kids like myself were brought up to believe that khaki was Irish linen soaked in blood. I attempted to say 'look we're safe for the moment but...' and that was as far as we got.

There was no revolution those days in Derry. The whole idea was to a large extent one of the British left—hungry for some sign of political consciousness among the workers.

You had a mass of working-class people living in a ghetto. They just hated the place, hated the fact that it was coming up to August 12 and that the Apprentice Boys (Protestant Masonic organization) were going to go around the walls of the city and that the Bogside was going to be reminded once again that they were inferior, they were at the bottom and they would have to put up with it.

Then they saw all the Apprentice Boys moving, all the Orangemen moving, all the police moving and then it started. I fought in the Bogside and I kept fighting because I said: 'Christ, once we stop fighting and those boys come in here we are finished. People were not fighting for a united Ireland or a workers' republic or for civil rights. They were fighting on the corner of Rose St because if they stopped fighting the police would have come in and rounded them up and they didn't know what would happen to them. They fought for three days. The myth was that the whole of the Bogside fought, which wasn't true. The young people of the Bogside kept the fighting going with the support of the people, many of whom sat down at the back of Ned Kelly's corner cheering us on. The women were the people who made petrol bombs, the kids broke the stones and the youth did the fighting. Most of the men in the Bogside just sat and watched. As long as the bookies were running they were happy enough.

So when the army came in, they just constituted a force which in the immediate circumstances was not hostile. If any authority not under the control of the Stormont had walked in the Bogside—whether it had been the Free State army, the British army or the Red army, it would have been cheered if it looked as though it was going to stop the fighting by protecting Catholics.

But it didn't last long and certainly most groups on the left in Britain made a mistake. International Socialism made a mistake. I don't know why they just don't say 'we made a mistake, a perfectly understandable mistake'.

Many of them were in a situation they had never been in before where possibly many of them thought a revolution had come or something. So they were emotionally tied up in the situation and they made a mistake. Why don't they say it, why doesn't the Communist Party say it? Certainly not through the reason of getting emotionally involved. It just makes mistakes.

I never supported the army as Bernadette Devlin, socialist, but as Bernadette Devlin, worn-out-sick of fighting. I was glad British soldiers were standing between me and the police. But if the soldiers had come in the next day, it would have all been over.

SH: IN 1969 all those groups such as the Communist Party and the International Socialists opposed the SLL because it immediately demanded the withdrawal of troops from Ulster. Were we not right on this basic question?

BD: I THINK you were right and I don't think anyone at this stage is denying it. But I remember being annoyed with the Socialist Labour League as well because as I was standing in Derry, I thought 'It's all right for them standing at the flaming tube stations preaching their purism. If half a dozen were standing over here what would they say?' But you were right. And as I say, people ought to admit you were right. My criticism is that it was much easier to be right and not involved than to be right and still involved.

SH: IS THE withdrawal of troops something which can only be achieved in the struggle to unite the English and Ulster working class to force the Tory government to resign?

BD: YES this is the line I've always followed and argued greatly against groups like the International Marxist Group. One of the most scurrilous cries ever to come out of Ireland is the cry of 'socialist imperialism'. This is levelled at every section of the British left which attempts to say to Irish workers, your problems are our problems, we must fight them on the same basis.

This came from people like Michael Farrell and the People's Democracy. Their line is 'we're fighting the battle, you support us and never question what we are doing'.

I say if we are going to talk about the presence of British troops, we can't isolate it from the question of who the British troops are. How come they've got so many soldiers without conscription? Because as unemployment grows, adverts for the army appear appealing to every young boy who earns under £18. They join the army rather than join a trade union here or get into a socialist movement and do something about a situation where youth earn less than £18 a week.

I don't think it's 'concessionism', as the IMG calls it, to refer to the class struggle in Britain and Ireland and the fact that it's the same government that creates unemployment here which sends British troops to N Ireland. They say that I ought to go out to British workers and say 'look, sorry for your problems, but you must be against the British army solely because it's in Ireland. So wrench yourself away, it's nothing to do with your class politics'. This just isn't true.

I certainly believe in withdrawing British troops. But it's not possible to make that demand in isolation from our demands for change and outside a political programme. I put forward a political programme which I know the Tories wouldn't dream of granting, which I know the system is incapable of granting.

I disagree with the demand 'withdraw the British troops to their barracks' pending a withdrawal from the country. Troops don't just sit in the barracks, while they are there they are there for a function. What this demand really implies is that you really call the troops off the Catholics, let them fight on and if in the process Protestant workers come out with a backlash, then let the troops out again and slaughter the Protestant workers. This in itself admits that you are not going to achieve a programme which will bring the system down.

So I say this quite clearly. Take the British troops out, knowing that they can't take them out, knowing that the situation doesn't allow them to take them out. That's their problem not mine. As with the demand for a minimum wage, for full employment, they don't know how to do it and that's not my problem. My problem is not how the Tory government solves the N Ireland problem.

SH: THE Communist Party opposes this demand. The International Socialists now say they are for the withdrawal of troops, but not for pulling the government down. What is your position?

BD: THE IS are for the withdrawal of troops and they have been since shortly after 1969. It would be much easier to understand that they are now, if, as I said, they would say they were wrong in 1969. People would see what they are doing much more clearly. I think they are also agreed on the line of bringing the Tories down. Certainly on any of their platforms I have spoken they've been in favour of the need to bring down the Tory government.

I don't see anything wrong with saying—for no other reason than Ireland—'Bring the Tories down'. But knowing that there are 150 other reasons, I see the issue of bringing the Tories down connected with an understanding that the next Labour government is not going to be any better, in fact will have to be worse than the present Tory government. This, I think, IS would probably agree with as well—their line of voting Labour is one with no illusions.

SH: RECENTLY you said in Derry that the real allies of the Catholic workers were the Protestant workers. A few days later, speaking in Belfast, you did not refer to this point. Was there any reason for your inconsistency?

BD: NOT any reason. Probably I did not refer to it because of the immediate situation in Belfast. Certainly it's not something that I have abandoned. I use it most of the time when I am speaking. I try to get it across that we are not more militant than the militant nationalists because we are more anti-Protestant. Their enemy is the Protestant working class.

If I've spoken and not referred to this it's not because of principle, but because of the situation, of practicality, which is a point of my own failure. I ought to do it.

It's easy to sit over here and see flaws in what's happening in the North of Ireland, than to be in a situation where you are not only concerned of getting across to workers, of struggling for socialism, but also the day-to-day problem of getting from town to town—when someone on the way is likely to say so and so has been shot and such and such an area is under siege.

You suffer from lack of clear thought, from the ability of not being able to say 'sorry not my problem'. There ought to be a better division of labour. A meeting that is important to address is important, but in the immediate situation when someone says 'come to our area, the soldiers are raiding it' it seems less important.

You find you're about to go to a conference of the left and something of an immediate nature breaks out and you go there instead. In the long term it's not a principled thing to do, probably again in the long term, not even helpful—but in the immediate situation it's the only thing you can do.

SH: HOW IS it possible to wage a campaign against 'internment' without making the struggle



◀ If we are going to talk about the presence of British troops, we can't isolate it from the question of who the British troops are... Troops don't just sit in their barracks. ▶ While they are there they are there for a function.



to unite the working class and force the Tory government to resign the central issue of this campaign? If this is not done, is there not a danger that the fight against internment is transformed into a reformist protest like civil rights?

BD: I THINK there is a grave danger of this happening. It's best seen if you take the argument or the slogan of 'end internment' and take it further than the slogan stage.

We on the left say the ending of internment is not the releasing of the 300-odd people who are interned. That's releasing internees. To end internment means ending the machinery of legislation which allows internment. This seems to me perfectly logical. There's no point in releasing internees today and leaving the machinery by which you can pick them up again tomorrow.

Now the Social Democratic and Labour Party and the Communist Party in Ireland say ending internment is emptying Long Kesh camp. Their energies are devoted towards the release of the people immediately interned. In fact the Social Democratic and Labour Party line, as put forward by Fitt in parliament, is to charge them, take them up before the courts then put them back in Long Kesh by command of the magistrate, which makes it respectable.

Now, they say, they're no longer political prisoners because they went through the process of the courts and they're now criminals.

Charge a few Protestants, then the brutality, the torture and the very instigation of internment becomes, overnight, respectable. So if, in fact, you are to stop it becoming a reformist campaign, the call for the ending of internment has got to embody the explanation of why internment is necessary, what is the state of existence of a system which has now reached the stage that it openly admits that in order to continue that existence it is necessary to go against its own laws.

They made the laws, the courts are for them, which is a point everybody in N Ireland understands. The courts are not instigated for the fair treatment of the working class in dispute. The authorities admit that even their courts, their soldiers, their police, can no longer contain the situation or maintain their power for them, that they come to the ultimate weapon of repression which is, 'those you can't shoot, just lift and intern them.' Unless you understand it on this basis, there's no point in saying end internment because ending internment of itself necessitates ending the N Ireland administration.

The one demand cannot be removed from the other. And in this country, I believe that to end internment it is necessary to bring down the Tories. Because if you bring down the Tories on the issue of internment it will be that much harder for a Labour government to go into power and say look we've got to keep internment too.

Subscribe! workers press

The daily paper that leads the fight against the Tories.

£17.12 for 12 months (312 issues)
£8.56 for 6 months (156 issues)
£4.29 for 3 months (78 issues)

If you want to take Workers Press twice a week the rates are:
£1.32 for 3 months (24 issues)
£5.28 for 12 months (96 issues)

Fill in the form below NOW and send to:

Circulation Dept., Workers Press, 186a Clapham High St., London, SW4.

I would like to take out a subscription to Workers Press.

Days required MONDAY THURSDAY
(Please tick) TUESDAY FRIDAY
WEDNESDAY SATURDAY

Or Full subscription (six days) for months.

Name
Address

Amount enclosed £

I would like information about THE SOCIALIST LABOUR LEAGUE

Fill in the form below and send to NATIONAL SECRETARY, SOCIALIST LABOUR LEAGUE, 186A CLAPHAM HIGH ST, LONDON, SW4.

Name
Address

THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF REVISIONISM

This seven part series by MICHAEL... appeared in the Workers Press is now available as a pamphlet. Order from New Park Publications, 186a Clapham High Street, London SW4. Price... including postage.

