

# Aspects Of the History, Ideology and Politics of The Workers' Party

The creation of The Workers' Party came after many years of arduous and costly struggle. At the jubilant Ard Fheis, held in Liberty Hall, Dublin in 1982, when the decision was ratified formally, delegate after delegate spoke of the efforts and sacrifices which had gone into producing Ireland's first major revolutionary democratic, secular, socialist party.

The story of the Party's development, the various crises which were overcome, growing electoral successes, subsequent betrayals and the slow process of rebuilding is, in many ways, an account of the difficulties a socialist party faces in a society dominated by a conservative, if not grossly reactionary, value system.

It is not possible to tell that entire story in a few pages. The decades from 1962 include one of the most horrible and evil chapters in the history of modern Ireland; a chapter which unfortunately has not yet concluded. The history of the Party is woven into the fabric of those years. It played a major role in shaping the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association in the 1960s. Subsequently it opposed the growing sectarian, murderous terrorism which has polarised Northern Ireland as never before.

At the same time it set about the task of bringing alive the consciousness of the working class in the Republic through housing action committees, trade union activity, anti-ground rent campaigns, fishing rights and the private ownership of rivers, defence of public enterprises, tax marches and many other localised campaigns.

It is no exaggeration to claim that during those years the Workers' Party was the most dynamic political force in the country. That dynamism was clearly a product of both the Party's ideological understanding and its disciplined political organisation developed over the two decades from 1962 - 1982. (In 1962 the IRA had declared that the military campaign, begun in 1956, was over).

During the period 1962 - 1969, the Republican Movement as it was then known, was being altered from a militaristic organisation, solely concerned with securing "national unity", into a revolutionary political organisation with an embryonic socialist agenda. This creative development by key elements in the leadership was met by serious internal opposition from 1964 onwards, on three grounds: because of

- (i) The decision to reject the idea of a "military campaign to unite the country";
- (ii) Deep hostility to the socialist project; and
- (iii) Opposition to ending the policy of abstentionism, i.e. the decision to take seats in parliament.

It is a matter of historical record that the outcome of the vicious opposition to these changes was to culminate in the creation of the Provisionals in 1969 by an alliance of elements in Fianna Fail, right-wing Irish Americans, northern sectarian Roman Catholic nationalists, and embittered ex-members of the Republican Movement from the 1940s.

To grasp the significance of this radical transformation of the Republican Movement, undertaken after 1962, it is necessary to have some appreciation of the history of modern Ireland as understood by the Workers' Party. Specific attention must be paid to Republican ideology and the contradictions which surfaced at various times but most critically in the twentieth century.

From the French Revolution to the present is a mere two centuries. But they have contained some of the most turbulent years the world is ever liable to witness. The slaughter of millions in world wars; the threat, even if diminished, of nuclear annihilation; the incredible waste of natural and human resources on armaments; fierce global and regional ideological confrontation, particularly that of communism against various forms of fascism; the imperialistic exploitation of hundreds of different

peoples; the concentration of political and economic power in fewer and fewer hands; the (re)emergence of religious and nationalist fundamentalism; a total transformation and a massive explosion in productive and technological capacity alongside world wide unemployment, poverty and famine. Ireland was and is part of that world. Our history cannot be understood in isolation from the events and philosophies which have shaped the rest of our planet.

## **Insulated Ireland**

Unfortunately there are those who see Ireland as somehow insulated from the intellectual, political and physical turmoil which dominates world life. This is particularly true for elements who have interpreted "republicanism" as a unique and specific, Irish phenomenon, identical to nationalism and congruent with the perceived political aspirations of the country's Roman Catholic majority. While nothing could be further from the truth, this monster version of republicanism not only has had grave murderous consequences for people, but at the same time has invaded popular consciousness largely through a widespread uncritical (often willing) acceptance of the projections of its propagandists.

Republicanism, as The Workers' Party understands it, cannot be separated from the fundamental principles of the French Revolution - for Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. In one sense it would be reasonable to argue that there was a specific and important Irish dimension to the development of Republican political thought; Tone's dictum - to unify Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter. But, on examination, this is really a localised exploration and elaboration of Fraternity, i.e. to remove divisions, barriers and sectarian hatreds in Ireland. It cannot be interpreted in any sense, as making Republicanism a uniquely Irish political phenomenon.

Furthermore, Tone's assertion is in reality a demand, just as in France, to place the concept of citizen at the centre of the new republican political order; denominational identity is to be replaced by the "common name of Irishman". In one of his comments on the state of Catholics at the time (1793) it is interesting also to note that he wonders what answers could be given "if they were to rise, and, with one voice, demand their rights as citizens, and as men?". (Emphasis added)

To discharge this fully, i.e. to replace denominational identity with citizenship is also to proclaim the democratic, secular nature of Tone's republic.

Opposition to the concept of a secular society is part and parcel of both states in Ireland. Equally there is significant hostility to the idea of socialism. Much of this derives from the country's "religious value systems", a scanty knowledge of socialist philosophy and a conservative dread of the future. (Naturally events in Eastern Europe have added to the problems facing Irish socialists). A statement by the late former leader of the Irish Labour Party, Brendan Corish, is illuminating in this respect. Asked to outline his philosophy, he replied "First I am a Catholic, second an Irishman and third a trade unionist". A statement of a similar nature probably could be had from leaders in the nationalist/unionist blocks in Northern Ireland.

In the course then of the late sixties, Republican activity was directed to social problems which had the purpose of developing a new type of membership but which sought also to heighten class consciousness. At the same time internal education stressed the socialist dimension of the Republican tradition - from Tone to Frank Ryan.

## **Militaristic Nationalism**

The great tragedy of 1969/71 was the virtual displacement of the democratic, secular, socialist, Republican tradition by rampant vicious, sectarian, militaristic nationalism in the shape of the Provisional Alliance. The Civil Rights gains were set aside and even (Official) Sinn Féin / IRA, for a brief period, were sucked into the downward spiral of violence. Although determined efforts were made to continue with programmes of social action e.g. housing agitation in Belfast and Dublin and a restoration of the Civil Rights Movement, significant outbursts of violence in Northern Ireland dominated political life throughout the country.

At this time it would appear that the British Government adopted a "lance the boil" policy i.e. taking any opportunity to escalate the level of violence in order to bring about a situation in which the gross excesses of murderous sectarian terrorism would lead to an explosion of popular angry rejection, and disgust with all violence. (This expression was used by an MI5 officer during an interrogation in 1971. He added that he expected the process to take 10 years). There is significant evidence to support this understanding if one looks at the cumulative effect of key episodes in 1970, '71, and early '72 - the Lower Falls Curfew, Belfast in July 1970, the introduction of Internment without Trial throughout Northern Ireland in August 1971, and the Bloody Sunday murders of January 1972 at the Civil Rights March in Derry.

The product of the major events from August 1969 was to provide a fertile recruiting ground for the Provisionals. At the same time a variety of loyalist terrorist organisations were spawned in response to the growing violence. The outcome would be twenty five years of terrorism with the goal of a democratic, secular, socialist republic buried in the pervasive murderous sectarianism which has at this time left Northern Ireland polarised as never before and the majority of citizens in the Republic apparently alienated from any concept of "national unity".

May 1972 saw a major decision by (official) Sinn Féin and the IRA. Speaking at Carrickmore, Co. Tyrone, Tomás MacGiolla, the then Party President, declared that violence in Northern Ireland would lead to a spate of sectarian murders and would ultimately and inevitably frustrate any possible moves towards unity. This announcement was in fact the beginning of the dissolution of the IRA. And it would have significant consequences as the pressure to create a serious socialist party developed from 1973 onwards. It may be useful, at this point, to distinguish four periods in the history of The Workers' Party, without in any way implying that these are watertight - 1972-'77, 77-82, 82-92 and 92 to the present.

## **Unprincipled Minority Opposition**

Serious tensions and contradictions developed within (official) Sinn Féin as a result of both the May decision and the build up of pressure to press ahead with the development of the Party. There is much detail in this period which will require in-depth revisiting in order to formulate a more comprehensive history of The Workers' Party. But for present purposes it is sufficient to indicate that an unprincipled minority opposition, led by an opportunist named Seamus Costello over a two year period, sought to reverse the May decision and at the same time frustrate the development of a disciplined socialist party. In this he was supported by Trotskyist and other ultra-left elements on the fringes of the Party, and by sectarian adventurers, largely in Belfast.

Expelled from the Party, Costello organised the Irish Republican Socialist Party with a military wing - the Irish National Liberation Army. In 1975 they launched murderous attacks on key Party personnel, killing both rank and file members and leading figures in Belfast, and severely wounding the future General Secretary, Seán Garland. In October of that year the Provisionals launched what amounted to a virtual Pogrom against members in Belfast, killing six people including a six year old child, and wounding twenty six others. It is notable that this latter series of attacks took place during a "cease-fire" and according to well placed security commentators could not have taken place without at least the passive support of the British Army. (It is interesting to note in passing that the American Provisional newspaper, published in New York justified their murders with the headline "Provisional wedge against communism in Ireland").

Heightened determination to press forward with the development of the Party resulted from these attacks. Internal Party education begun in Mornington, Co. Louth, in 1971 was extended with regular weekend and week-long schools attended by Party members and branches from all over the country. Advances were made in party publications. Major discussions took place around the appropriateness of the current Party name; not only at the level of ongoing confusion with the Provisionals but more significantly as to what extent it conveyed the radical development of Party policy. At the time there were those who thought that the renaming of the Party should be total i.e. replacing Sinn Féin with The Workers' Party. The Ard Fheis of 1977, however, decided overwhelmingly that Sinn Féin would be retained and The Workers' Party attached as a suffix. A new era had begun.

## Parliamentary Breakthrough

The next five years saw, what at the time looked like, the completion of the pre-stage of Party building. Although the Party had won seats in Local Government elections North and South during the previous decade, the major breakthrough into parliamentary politics had still to happen. Significantly this took place in June 1981 at the time of the Provisional hunger strikes in Northern Ireland. Joe Sherlock, Cork North East, was returned as the first SFWP Dáil member.

There can be no doubt that 1981 was a significant date in recent Irish history. The Provisionals won a number of seats, one in Westminster and two in Dáil elections in the emotionally charged atmosphere surrounding the hunger strikers. (This might be seen as the beginning of their transition to "parliamentary politics"). At the same time SFWP became The Workers' Party, in 1982, after winning three Dáil seats with Proinsias De Rossa, in Dublin North West, Sherlock in Cork and Paddy Gallagher in Waterford. Paradoxically, as the Party progressed in the Republic, in Northern Ireland it suffered both by its refusal to support the Provisional hunger strike and by its endorsement of the Chilver's Report on Education proposing the creation of a single teacher training college in place of the existing denominational structures.

The Roman Catholic Church while accepting an integrated third level system in all other respects vehemently rejected the Chilver's proposal and consequently, overtly and covertly, attacked The Workers' Party. Local government seats were lost - some never to be regained. The third period identified stretches then from the Ard Fheis of 1982 until the betrayal of the Party and its programme in 1992 by the group subsequently to become the Democratic Left, now absorbed into the Irish Labour Party.

The events surrounding the efforts to liquidate The Workers' Party have been well documented in the publication *"Patterns of Betrayal - The Flight from Socialism"*, available from Party offices, and require no further elaboration here. It is important though to state that the damage done to the Party far surpassed any of the murderous assaults of the mid-seventies. This was true not only for Party structures and morale but also in terms of the many thousands of voters who had placed their hopes in an honest, serious, democratic, secular, socialist party and saw those hopes dashed by the gross opportunism and individualism of those who betrayed the Party.

From 1982 the Party, now unequivocally declared as a party of and for working people, began to assume a more significant role in the political life of both states. Its clear national and international policies - peace, work, democracy and class politics - its active participation in the major issues of the time led to an increase in membership and in some senses a more than disproportionate growth in its influence.

From the early seventies the Party had campaigned strongly in support of a wide range of international struggles- Vietnam, Angola, Nigaragua, South Africa, Palestine and others. Fraternal linkages were established with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in December 1983 when a party delegation visited Moscow at the invitation of the C.P.S.U. Central Committee. In the following years fraternal relations were established with a wide number of Communist and Workers parties in Europe, Asia & Latin America.

At the same time the party was prominent in opposing terrorism and sectarianism in Northern Ireland, in defence of natural resources and the state sector in the Republic, in trade union activity, in the development of nationwide tax protests. In fact it had become the cutting edge of radical thinking and activity, particularly in the Republic. The Party also sought to improve Irish understanding of the critical importance of peace and demilitarisation in Europe through its promotion of, and active involvement in, the non-governmental body the European Committee for Security and Cooperation.

As a result there was a steady rise in electoral support for the Party, with new seats won in the 1985 Dublin local government elections, culminating in the elections of 1989 which saw seven members in the Dáil and a first ever European Parliament seat in Dublin. As stated earlier The Workers' Party was seen, even by its enemies, as the most dynamic political force of the decade. This increase was also

reflected in Northern Ireland where the Party polled just short of 6% of the vote in the Belfast Local Government elections of the same year.

## **Party Reconstruction**

The primary task facing the Party, like many other workers' parties, since 1992 has been one of slowly and painfully reconstructing itself, while at the same time facing as many as possible of the various challenges which any political party confronts e.g. elections. These tasks were made more difficult by the legacy of heavy debt incurred over the years but now borne by a party with a much reduced income.

At the same time while some serious progress has been made from the low point of 1992 it must be recognised that the present political condition is hostile to the democratic politics of a socialist party. This is compounded by the fairly widely held view that politics is not seen by a growing number of people as a vital, central, and critical component of everyday life. In addition many citizens are cynical as to the motives of individual politicians and the sincerity of their parties. Thus the challenges faced by the Party now would seem to be of a different order than those of the seventies and eighties.

In particular there is the clear shift to the centre-left / right which has had the consequence of both seeking to remove ideology from politics and at the same time blurring any difference between parties in the eyes of the electorate. Where, from the mid 1960s onwards there were obvious major ideological battles to be fought around readily identifiable and burning 'left' issues e.g. Vietnam, South Africa, Nicaragua, Angola and others, which mobilised the idealism of the young, and spilled over at the same time into local politics, capitalism had, by the early 1990s, persuaded social democracy of its unassailable world political and economic dominance. The recent anti-war, anti-World Bank, and anti-globalisation mobilisations may herald the beginning of a new resistance to capitalism's ideological and political hegemony.

With capitalism having recruited social democracy as a more than willing ally to its cause, socialists and their parties will find themselves increasingly being disparaged and dismissed as "old hat" - "not in touch with the times" - "clinging to outworn dogmas". In fact every possible verbal trick in the book will be played in order to persuade socialists that there is nothing to do but go along with the prevailing tide. There could be virtues in this situation. Clearer water should become visible between socialist and other parties as it becomes more evident that the "managerial" approach of the various governments, and their occasional identical replacements, cannot resolve the deep-rooted problems at the heart of the economic and political systems.

The problem for the Party is to gear and develop ourselves to take advantage of this situation in a period of ongoing vicious sectarianism and fundamentalism in Northern Ireland and the media-led, ideologically denuded politics of the Republic.

There are no easy answers. No instant solutions. Indeed we will need to shun any such suggestions; at the same time we cannot rely solely on our correct theoretical perspectives. The challenge is to reconstruct, recognising that it will take time, foresight, planning and meaningful political activity.