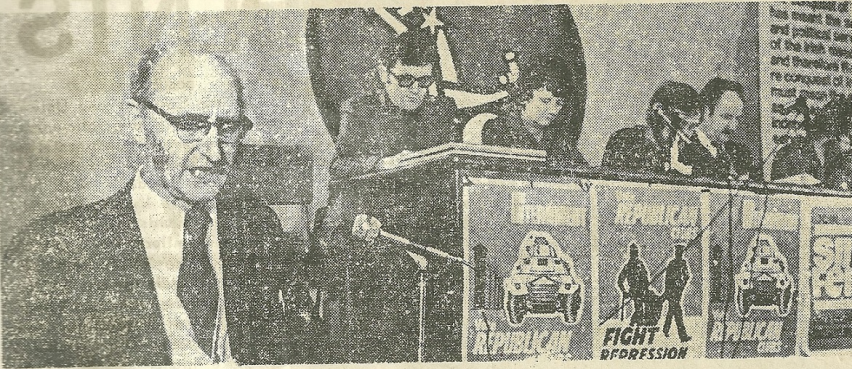


# OFFICIALS

BY  
FINN GEANEY

# MILITANT

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## WILL NOT REPLACE THE LABOUR PARTY

Up to 500 delegates and observers turned up to the Sinn Fein (Official) Ard Fheis on November 30th in Dublin. The 'Officials' annual conference came at the end of intense electoral activity by the organisation over the past 18 months. In the by-election in North East Cork, a constituency with a mixture of workers and farmers, the Official candidate got over 13.3% of the votes, beating the Labour party candidate. On October 10th in the Westminster election in the North they contested 5 seats, and 14 of their candidates gained local government seats in the 26 county local elections last June.

One of the main issues of contention at the Ard Fheis was whether or not the 9 Republican Club councillors returned in the Northern Ireland local elections of 1973 should take their seats on the councils, or continue with the policy of abstention until internment would be ended. A two to one majority against abstention was recorded.

### PROVISIONALS

This issue, which should have been one of tactics, has again been debated, as in the 1970 conference, as if it was a matter of fundamental principle. At the 1973 conference the SDLP was castigated for not 'refusing to negotiate until harassment

and repression ceased'. The Derry Republican Club candidates proclaimed in their local election manifesto in 1973 that they would 'take their seats when internment has ended and the Special Powers Act has been abolished'. This contradiction should never have arisen. In an area where the overwhelming majority of the people turn out to vote it is futile to abstain from elections. Electoral platforms constitute one of the areas through which socialist ideas can be got across to the working class. But if abstaining from elections is futile it is even more so, in today's conditions to stand for election and then refuse to take the seat. Such tactics have helped parties like the SDLP to spread their influence amongst the Catholic population.

It was inevitable and correct that a retreat be made on this point. The appearance of Republican Club members on the local councils could in some cases be like a breath of fresh air for these moribund bodies, but will do little to affect the balance of power.

However the thinking behind the manoeuvring by the leadership is not always as honest as those who at the Ard Fheis accept the need to change course. In 1972 the Official IRA claimed responsibility for the explosion at Aldershot and the killing of Barnhill in Strabane. At the re-

cent Ard Fheis McGiolla proclaimed, 'the Provisionals continue to do the dirty work by keeping up the terror tactics'. He is correct to criticise the terror campaign. The Provisionals bombing and shooting campaign amplifies the divisions between the Catholic and Protestant workers. But the leaders of the Officials need to explain why something can be correct for them in 1972 and incorrect for the Provisionals in 1974. It is mostly their failure to have a thorough and honest reappraisal of their past tactics and policies that is now leading Sinn Fein towards further splits. Already ex-officials from Wexford, Dublin, Limerick, Wicklow, Tipperary and parts of the West have come together to form a new organisation. Harassment by the British army in the North continues. The temptation to be lured into reprisals can only be combatted on the basis of a worked out understanding of the tasks facing the Irish working class as a whole in the coming period.

### NEW PARTY

It is significant that the majority of Official Sinn Fein today has broken with the militaristic traditions of the past. But this reorientation is a repeat of the late 60's. The reason for which Seamus Costello's group has set up a new 'Irish

Socialist Republican Party' are not the same as those which led to the formation of the Provos five years ago but the same basic issue is involved. Is the electoral and military strategy of the Officials derived from the programme and perspectives of the movement and drawn up after democratic discussion in all the branches and committees of the organisation, or is it based on the seasonal whims of the majority of the Ard Comhairle?

Seamus Costello, with whose policies the Militant does not agree, was dismissed from the Officials for advocating a tougher line on the North. Around this issue many previously active members are being expelled or are dropping out up and down the country. Other expulsions and resignations have resulted from the domination of the movement by reformist policies which have their roots in the intervention by the Communist Party in the past period. Costello's new organisation will be unable to unite these people whose only common bond is hostility to the present leadership of the Officials.

The Officials have set themselves the task of replacing the Irish Labour Party as the mass party of the Irish working class. Interpreting the 5,000 votes for Joe Sherlock in N.E. Cork, won mainly from the Labour Party's previous totals, as a big breakthrough, misses the main point. Over 30,000 votes went to the conservative parties, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael. Only Labour with its firm base in organised trade union movement can break the hold of the capitalist parties.

The Officials got 15,000 votes in the 1973 general election in the 26 counties. The Labour Party got 186,405. It is alone a daunting task to catch up as far as electoral support is concerned. But to oppose the political party of the organised working class with a political programme which is not to the left of the Labour 1969 policy

documents and hope to win would be an even more daunting task.

The Labour Party's temporary position in Coalition has resulted in individual Labour voters, equally temporarily turning in disillusionment to the Officials. But when the mass of the working class begins, under the impact of the growing economic decline in the country, to look for a political lead arising out of their trade union struggle, they will turn more and more towards the Labour Party - the party to which their class organisations are affiliated.

Sinn Fein's role in this process has yet to be discussed at an Ard Fheis. Unity of the left is a phrase that the Officials leadership have been airing a lot recently. Such unity is only possible on the basis of free and open discussion. 'Militant' has twice in recent months been put off when debates between both tendencies had been attempted.

For the second year running there was a call from McGiolla to the ICTU and the British TUC to cooperate in the bringing to an end of the sectarian killings but this idea as before looks like being shelved until next year's conference in the interest of maintaining NICRA and the Catholic vote in the North. In the meantime Militant's campaign for an armed Trade Union Defence Force gets no support from the Officials leaders.

If Sinn Fein is to grow to a mature political voice within the Irish working class movement it must first transform itself into a democratic organisation. It must then begin a process of looking at the long term perspective for the growth and development of the Irish working class and not just emesh itself in short term electoral and military manoeuvring. Socialists in the Officials must fight not only for democracy but for a turning towards the traditional organisations of the working class. Not for the dream of their replacement.