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Derry 1968: how the left failed

Last October marked the tenth anniversary of the first Civil Rights march in the city of Derry, Northern Ireland. In the following article Paul Lannigan, who participated in the 1968 struggles as a member of the Healyite Socialist Labour League in Derry and is today a member of the Spartacist League Central Committee, discusses the events and analyses the failure of the left to put forward a programme of proletarian class struggle. The article is based on a presentation given by Comrade Lannigan to a Spartacist League public meeting in London on October 27.

Anyone familiar with the left-wing press in Britain and Ireland can hardly have missed the dutiful marking of the end of a decade of upheaval in the Six Counties by almost all of the ostensibly revolutionary groups. Articles entitled "10 Years in the North of Ireland" or "Derry: Ten Years After" have proliferated. Some of the authors have tried to rewrite history; others, notably prominent participants in the Derry events like Eamonn McCann, have sought to apologise for not doing what they know should have been done; while still others have merely gone through the motions, giving perfunctory nods to acknowledge the existence of this troublesome island off the west coast of the Isle of Man.

The Spartacist League has a different reason for addressing the events of 1968 in Ireland and their aftermath. We believe that our tendency has a programme which can be applied to unravel the tangled knot of national/communal, social and religious conflict that is the stuff of Irish politics. Our programme, summed up in the slogan "Troops out now—not Orange against Green, but class against class", points to the crucial need for a proletarian struggle against both imperialism and all forms of nationalism as the key to the resolution of the democratic and socialist tasks in Ireland.

Working-class unity in Ireland, considered a grotesque and utopian pipe-dream by the "socialists" of the British left, cannot be regarded as merely desirable for an effective fight to defeat imperialism and establish a workers state in Ireland. Particularly in the twentieth century, the attempt to create any kind of governmental regime in Ireland has necessitated the consent of the Protestant community. The attempt by the British Liberals to impose a neo-colonial "Home Rule" solution on Ireland in 1912 foundered on the rocks of northern Unionist opposition. As recently as 1974, the social power of the subjectively pro-imperialist Loyalist bloc was again demonstrated in the Ulster Workers Council strike, which defeated the Sunningdale proposals for a "power-sharing" executive and a federal Council of Ireland.

Our considerations are thus fundamentally practical. Without the splitting of the Protestant community along class lines, the possibilities for a successful indigenous proletarian revolution in Ireland are virtually nil.

We are not blind to the difficulties of achieving this goal of working-class unity. However we are not of that school

of petty-bourgeois pessimists who see only the problems. The history of the working class in Ireland is not merely one of sectarian divisions. There is also a fine tradition of united working-class struggle established by the 1907 Belfast shipyard strike wave, or the 1919 engineering strike. Even since partition, which significantly hardened the communal divisions, there have been important instances of united working-class action; the most important was the Belfast Outdoor Relief Workers strike in 1932. In this major struggle, Protestant and Catholic workers not only struck together but fought together in riots against the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). It took an eight-day curfew to quell these street battles.

Derry 1968 was not another Belfast 1932. The Protestant and Catholic workers were not engaging in joint mass struggles. However it is clear that in 1968 it was possible for revolutionaries to penetrate both sections of the working class and, by drawing on and transcending the different traditions of struggle, to create the basis for a party which could provide a way out of the impasse in Ireland.

Origins of the Civil Rights movement

Firstly it is important to examine the origins of the Civil Rights movement. The sharpness of the upheaval in Derry came out of the deep sense of grievance felt by its majority Catholic population over various acts by the Unionist government during the 1960s. The permanent economic depression which hung over Derry (unemployment was 16 per cent, and for males 25 per cent) was exacerbated by the consciously discriminatory policy of the Unionist government in favour of the predominantly Protestant areas of the Six Counties. An example was the siting of Northern Ireland's second university in the small Protestant town of Coleraine, although Derry was a natural choice because of its size and because there had been a University College in the city since 1865.

Measures like this served to increase the resentment of the Catholics in Derry. The nature of the political structure added to this resentment: a majority of the electorate voted anti-Unionist and yet a Unionist Corporation was consistently elected. This was accomplished by the gerrymander: an electoral ward of 14,000 voters elected 8 councillors, while two wards containing a total of 8000 voters elected 12 councillors. This effective disenfranchisement of the 70 per cent Catholic population was maintained by the refusal of the Corporation to house Catholics, particularly outside their own ward. Housing was politically very important since non-householders were not allowed to vote in local elections. This housing policy reached a low in 1967, when no houses at all were built in the city.

Housing was in fact the spark which set light to the situation. The first Civil Rights demonstration, in Dunganon in August 1968, came after the allocation to a 19-year-old Protestant girl of a house in which a Catholic family

had been squatting. This was quickly followed in October by a demonstration in Derry, organised by left-wing activists in the Derry Housing Action Committee.

Everyone expected that the march would pass off peacefully, like the Dungannon one. But October 5, 1968 was to be the occasion of the most violent shake-up in Ireland since partition and the civil war. The Minister of Home Affairs banned the demonstration. People were thus quite tense; but the atmosphere was more festive than martial as we marched along Duke Street. Even when we came to the RUC tenders which blocked our path to the Craigavon Bridge, most people sat down in the road and sang civil rights songs. Then the sky fell in.

The police baton-charged. A cordon of police along the back of the demonstration blocked the path of fleeing demonstrators. This experience changed people's world-view more than 10,000 lectures on the state ever could. From then on street corners, fish shops and bookies' shops were all arenas of the hottest political debate. It was an incredibly fertile period for the development of a socialist organisation.

However as soon as the "lefts" like Eamonn McCann, who had played a key part in organising the October 5 demonstration, realised the extent of the explosive discontent they had inadvertently tapped, they immediately abdicated their position of leadership in favour of a group of "responsible" Catholic businessmen. The latter intervened virtually unopposed to form the Citizens Action Committee (CAC) at a meeting in the City Hall on October 9. These gentlemen immediately proceeded to remove all the latent class content of the movement. The CAC leaders pushed a line of pacifism and respectable anti-Unionist unity, calling off a planned march and substituting a mass sit-down protest in Guildhall Square.

"One man, one job"

The original demands of the Civil Rights protests were "One man, one job", "One man, one vote" and "One man, one house". These demands clearly had a democratic edge against the anti-Catholic discrimination of the Northern Ireland state. Moreover, in the early stage of the struggle the "jobs" demand was generally understood to mean the need for *more* jobs, not for throwing Protestants out of work and giving their jobs to Catholics. Similarly with housing. The demands, while vague, were thus potential focuses for a class-wide fight for social equality against the capitalists.

There was a widespread recognition among the protesters that many Protestants lived in even worse conditions than some working-class Catholics. For instance, on the Protestant Shankill Road in Belfast in 1969, 97 per cent of houses had no indoor toilets and almost as many had no hot water.

For those sages who regard the Protestants as a labour aristocracy or as a "white settler caste" it appears that the difference between outside toilets and swimming pools is academic. Their hygiene must be on a par with their political insight. What these people do not understand is that the system of discrimination also involves political patronage.

Thus in order to get good jobs and houses, Protestant workers had to vote Unionist, restrain any militancy over wages, job conditions etc. The disparity in wage levels between Northern Ireland and Britain for the same job in

the same firm shows the effect that this system has had on the possibilities for working-class action of any kind. And this has not been completely lost on Protestant trade unionists. A meeting of predominantly Protestant shop stewards in Belfast in 1965 called for an end to discrimination on religious grounds. The various splits in the Unionist monolith over the last few years reflect in a distorted way these class tensions.

However, in 1968 any possibility of intersecting this feeling and organising a united working-class struggle was wasted by the "lefts" in Derry. The formation of the CAC gave the mass movement a liberal democratic pan-Catholic colouration, with demands like "One man, one job" fading rapidly into the background or taking on an anti-Protestant connotation. When one of the two Protestants on the CAC, Claude Wilton, stood for election in 1969, the popular slogan was "vote for Claude, the Catholic Prod", identifying him with the Catholic side *against* the Protestants.

Class struggle or pan-Catholicism?

I was then a member of the Socialist Labour League (SLL—later League for a Workers Vanguard) in Derry, and this group, while small, had some possibility of fighting for class unity in this period. The SLL's social base in Derry was mainly Catholic, while in Belfast it consisted mainly of Protestant trade unionists. Our attack on the Civil Rights movement was not, however, centred on its supra-class, anti-Protestant character but on its limitations as a protest movement.

There was one concrete case which opened up particularly good possibilities for raising the class question: a busmen's strike in Derry in 1969, in which we were strategic in leading a largely Protestant workforce out on strike against the introduction of one-man buses. Here was a perfect issue for raising the call to defend and win jobs for *all* workers through an end to discrimination and work-sharing at full pay. Moreover, this was an issue which the CAC would never have touched. However our calls for class unity were so formal and abstract that we did not see the CAC as the key obstacle to it. Thus we did not use this strike action as a way of splitting the pan-Catholic alliance.

The SLL, except in one case when it led a strike of dockers and shirt factory workers against RUC repression in Derry, was generally peripheral and too small to make a strong impact, particularly given its flawed and abstract programme. However, Eamonn McCann and his co-thinkers in People's Democracy (PD—originally a loose student organisation in Queen's University, Belfast) have a much greater responsibility for what happened to the civil rights struggle. In his well-known book about the Derry events, *War and an Irish Town*, McCann himself expresses rather well what he did wrong, albeit with a reformist perspective:

"If any group had fought consistently—from within or without the civil rights movement—or both—for such a programme, the all-class Catholic alliance, which is what the civil rights movement became, could not have held together. And such a programme, hardly the normal stuff of Northern Irish politics, would not have attracted immediate mass support; but it might have enabled those of us in Derry at least to go on *talking* to Protestants in the Fountain in 1969. At any rate the matter was never put to the test. No such group existed or emerged."

Despite the fact that the programme McCann refers to does not transcend social-democratic reformism, he does seem to have learned *something*. But not so. After ten years of annually beating his breast over his sins, McCann still doesn't recognise that broad supra-class movements are roadblocks in the fight to win even democratic demands. Today, writing in the pages of *Socialist Review*, he supports the Anti Nazi League Carnival. Perhaps in ten years' time McCann will be apologising for his mistakes on the ANL. Like the ANL, the CAC was a means for the liberal bourgeoisie to defuse, divert and prevent any real action by the working class in defence of its interests.

McCann describes the craven capitulation of the left rather well:

"By the middle of 1969 'the left' was established as those who were most impatient and most willing to run risks, who wanted to go along the same road as the moderates, but further, faster. It was not at all established that the left wanted to go along a different road." (*War and an Irish Town*)

Burntollet and the Bogside

In January 1969 People's Democracy organised a march from Belfast to Derry which maintained the spirit and programme of pan-Catholic pacifism. This march was a complete adventure, organised with a conception of self-martyrdom. PD took a group of students through the most backward Orange country areas of the north, with an explicit policy of non-violence. They went to what McCann proudly called the "lunatic extreme" of allowing the marchers to be beaten to a pulp by Protestant followers of the fanatical reactionary Reverend Ian Paisley, without so much as an attempt at self-defence.

At this stage Protestant *workers* were not generally being mobilised against the Civil Rights protesters; it was mainly rural and lumpen elements who stood behind Paisley. But PD's pacifist antics were completely self-defeating: they were no way to win respect—let alone support—among the Protestant working class.

The rally in Derry at the end of the march dissolved into riots sparked off by the news of Paisley's attacks. The riots were the occasion for the most violent RUC rampage to date. Vigilante squads were set up to defend the Catholic Bogside after this display of Orange state repression, and barricades went up for the first time—soon to be dismantled at the instigation of the CAC. The riots continued up through July, both against provocative Loyalist parades and against the RUC. They peaked with intense battles against the RUC on the occasion of the Loyalist Apprentice Boys march on August 12, which as an "annual parade" was exempt from a ban on marches. These battles led directly to the introduction of British troops.

But with a radically different perspective from the prevailing pan-Catholic liberalism and pacifism, it would have been possible to build an organisation which could cut across the communal divide. One of the first deaths from sectarian violence was that of a Protestant worker named King who was killed in the Protestant Fountain area of Derry in early 1969. He had a heart attack after a Catholic crowd beat him up at the entrance to the Fountain.

In those circumstances it would have been crucial to say

to the people who were defending the Bogside against the RUC: "We're for a working-class defence force, we're for defending *every* section of the workers against the police and against sectarian attack. We think that those who attack the Fountain are against the working class, that we should defend the Fountain against these kinds of attacks." That approach could have begun very early on to still the communal side of the Catholic protest movement and to keep open the possibility of united class action with the Protestant workers.

Troops and the left

But the Irish left had a very different perspective. People's Democracy's pacifism and liberalism very quickly revealed its natural corollary of reliance on the bourgeois state. When the Belfast-to-Derry march finally hobbled, battered and bruised, into Derry's Guildhall Square, PD leader Michael Farrell called for the intervention of a United Nations peacekeeping force to protect the Catholics!

Eight months after Farrell made his call, an imperialist "peacekeeping" force was indeed sent to Ireland: the British army. The Catholic population was intensely relieved when it arrived, as they'd been facing three continuous days of police and B-Special riots. And the gentlemen of the left in Ireland naturally couldn't find it in themselves to call for the immediate withdrawal of British troops—though they were very outspoken against imperialist intervention in Aden.

In Britain the International Socialists, in their usual "principled" fashion, reacted to the proximity of the issue and to the consciousness of the Catholic masses by supporting the sending of imperialism's armed thugs. They said that troops would give a valuable "breathing space" (an unfortunate turn of phrase) to the Catholics. And they cut out the regular slogan in the "Where We Stand" box in *Socialist Worker* which called "For the withdrawal of British troops from abroad", changing it to "Support for all national liberation movements" without explaining the switch at all.

The International Marxist Group refused to call outright for the withdrawal of the troops, simply advising sagely that "The Bogsiders will learn that the British army will not protect them from the B-Specials." To its credit the SLL, both in Ireland and in Britain, put out a call for the immediate withdrawal of British troops. It has to be understood that imperialist intervention can never create a solution in the interests of the working class or the oppressed, in Northern Ireland or anywhere else. After a brief honeymoon when cups of tea were brewed for the troops the illusions of the Catholic masses were completely smashed, particularly by the Falls Road curfew in July 1970, when people were forced to stay in their houses for three days.

The national question and the class question

McCann drew the obvious lesson from the installation of the troops that one major problem with the Civil Rights movement was that it didn't raise the question of the border, of partition. But, lacking a working-class perspective, he simply moved from tailing bourgeois liberalism to tailing the petty-bourgeois nationalism of the Provisional IRA. That's a development which typifies much of the

guilt-ridden British/Irish left.

For us, neither the southern state nor the northern Orange statelet can in any sense be seen as an ally of the working class. Both states deny a whole series of democratic rights: one guided by pro-imperialist Protestant communalism, the other by Catholic bigotry. Vorster in South Africa once said "I would give up all my legislation for one article of the Special Powers Act in Northern Ireland." But the southern state has an equally vicious Offences Against the State Act.

So when in August 1969 southern troops were moved to the border we would have opposed their intervention, just as we vehemently opposed Britain's intervention. We reject the programme of a united capitalist Ireland, either as a "progressive step" or as a satisfactory goal, because that could offer nothing to the Protestant workers but a reversal of the terms of oppression—at best making them second-class citizens in a united Republic. To advance such a programme in 1969 and 1970, just like today, was to guarantee that Protestant workers would be pushed away from any possibility of unity with the Catholic masses and back into the arms of their "own" bourgeoisie.

But without confronting the national question and defending the right of *both* communities to exist, calls for class unity can only be abstract and empty incantation. This was precisely the problem with the SLL at that time. The national question was a distant part of the maximum programme which was not allowed to interfere with the daily economic questions; and when the SLL finally addressed it they came down on the side of Green nationalism.

The lack of an organisation fighting for an anti-nationalist working-class programme has been dearly paid for since 1968. Thus, rather than being split along class lines, the Civil Rights movement eventually fragmented along predictable, but not predetermined, lines. Karl Marx wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* that:

"The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seemed engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language."

So the streetfighters of 1969 became Republicans, exchanging the stone and petrol bomb for the gun. The Catholic working-class youth of the North, potential cadres of a proletarian vanguard party, saw no alternative in their struggle against imperialism than the petty-bourgeois nationalist Provisional IRA.

When you look at the number of personally courageous militants who have died in the service of this historically defunct cause, you realise that there has been a tremendous waste. Republicanism contains a backward-looking romanticism—the idea that each generation must give up some of its sons "to die for their country". And this warped, deformed tradition leads the working masses *nowhere*.

In Ireland, even more than most semi-colonial countries, the struggle for a bourgeois nationalist solution to the national question is an entirely futile one. The partial and deformed completion of the national revolution in 1921

undercut the social base that a nationalist organisation would need to defeat imperialism in the North, and partition hardened the division between the Catholics and a million-strong, heavily-armed Protestant majority in the North which had no desire for unity with the new Free State.

The underlying truth that there can be no democratic solution to the Irish question without the consent of the Protestants helps explain the craven approach of the Provisionals, who fight not so much to *defeat* imperialism as to bring it to the negotiating table. Hence they refuse to call for the immediate withdrawal of the troops, preferring to ask for a "declaration of intent" to withdraw by Britain. In addition, the Provos continually seek negotiations with reactionary Unionist leaders, seeing them and not the Protestant workers as potential allies.

1838 and 1938

Various left groups tell us that the programme of 1938, the Transitional Programme of Leon Trotsky, is out of date. I would say that the programme of 1838, the bourgeois programme of Daniel O'Connell's Repeal Movement, along with all its later cousins, is out of date.

Before 1972, the programme of the Provisional IRA and of People's Democracy—the programme that many Republican militants laid down their lives for—was nothing more than the abolition of Stormont. So Stormont was abolished—but, with nothing to replace it, that simply meant direct Westminster rule in the North. And today the only significant movement in the Catholic ghettos is around the demand for political status for Republican prisoners, pending a general amnesty. That's a minimum programme which, to say the least, comes nowhere near addressing the overall needs of the working class.

Against the bankrupt "tradition of the dead generations" which is Republicanism, we have a different tradition. Our programme is based on the need for the kind of united class struggles against the bourgeoisie that occurred in Belfast in 1932. That means a fight for a conscious leadership which can address the question of sectarian violence alongside the fight to get the British troops out, by building anti-imperialist, anti-sectarian workers defence squads.

That means a leadership which will fight for a socialist solution to unemployment, bad housing and the poverty-level standard of living in Northern Ireland, through raising transitional demands like a sliding scale of wages and hours, an end to all discrimination in housing and employment and a programme of socially-useful public works. A leadership which will break down the communal barriers, tearing Protestant workers from their reactionary Orange masters just as it breaks Catholic workers away from their rulers and misleaders, north and south, the Green bourgeoisie and the nationalists.

The struggle to build an organisation fighting for such a programme will not be easy. However, unlike the Republicans and their acolytes, our politics will enable us to take advantage of future Derry 1968s in the fight for an Irish workers republic as part of a socialist federation of the British Isles. ■