

NORTHERN IRELAND

Betty Sinclair

SUCCESSIVE governments in Britain, since the struggle for democratic rights opened out in Northern Ireland in the autumn of 1968, have more and more attempted to impress on the people of Britain that the struggle is one in which the main factor is that of religious differences, i.e. Protestant and Catholic differences and, since June 1970, when the Tories came to power in Britain, the need to restore 'law and order'. In the days and nights of violence; the deaths (upwards of 1,400) that have taken place; the continuance of internment since August 1971; the imprisonment of many thousands; loss of homes, jobs, small businesses and large scale destruction of property: the reason for the struggle for democratic rights has been lost sight of—or deliberately suppressed.

From the inception of the Northern Ireland statelet, which consisted of six Irish counties and contained one million Protestants and half-a-million Catholics, the determination of the Northern Ireland Unionists and successive British governments has been to maintain the one-party rule of the Unionists, in the interests of British imperialism and to enable the latter to keep a hold on the politics and the economy of the rest of Ireland (26 counties). The Unionists were given *carte blanche* in the running of the statelet, and were allowed to practice discrimination in every shape and form against the Catholic section of the population and any and all forms of political opposition which might arise—and not least opposition from the trade union and labour movement. The Government of Ireland Act, 1920, prevented the passing of any legislation which would have militated against persons on the grounds of religion, and, therefore, no legislation was passed in this respect, excepting after the second world war when a Bill which would have cut down the state payment of teachers in Catholic schools had to be thrown out.

But the Unionists had surer ways of preventing the opposition from gaining any strength. With their inbuilt majority at the polling booths for central and local government, the Unionists maintained control of all the apparatus of state. This also provided that employment in these spheres would remain a 'perk' of the 'loyal' population. In the sphere of local government, the Unionists had control of the provision of housing and in this way prevented an 'imbalance' in the voting pattern. Also, in controlling central and local government, contracts in the realm of public expenditure were, in the main,

awarded to the business people, big and small, who were 'loyal' to Unionism and the link with Britain.

As in central and local government, the pattern was repeated in the field of private industry and commerce. Before the division of the country, private industry was in the hands of those who espoused the Unionist cause, men and women who had provided the funds to buy arms in 1912 to fight against the seeming intention of the British Liberal government of the day to grant a measure of home rule to Ireland. Such control enabled these forces to give employment on a political basis to manual and professional workers who were also 'loyal'.

In order to ensure that the political opposition would be completely cowed, the Northern Ireland Civil Powers Act, 1922, was introduced and remained in being until July 1973, when the Westminster government superseded it with the Emergency Provisions Act. Under the former Act, all democratic rights could be suspended when thought necessary by the Unionist administration. Ostensibly the Act was to be used against 'republicans', but it could be and was used against the unemployed in 1932 and members of the Communist Party in 1933. The Act, as an instrument, was on a par with repressive legislation brought in by the Hitler regime in 1933 and later by the apartheid state of South Africa after the second world war. The cornerstone of the Act was the right to intern without trial and, not least, suspension of habeas corpus.

It is not surprising, in such conditions, that the number of Roman Catholics within the state never grew to any further strength; it remained, and remains, at one-third of the population: this despite all the taunts of the Unionists that Catholics had a much higher birth-rate than the Protestants, and the fear of the latter, in one of their less elegant expressions, that they would be 'outbred'. The Catholic section of the population, when they came of working age found it difficult to obtain employment and had either to live their life on the 'dole' or emigrate. Those who wanted to marry and set up homes were dependent on the local authorities, and again they found there was 'no room at the inn', and lack of homes was an additional factor in driving them overseas. After the second world war, the Unionists refused to introduce universal suffrage for local government elections. Only the husband and his spouse could register their votes for change, no matter how many persons there were in the family of voting age for the Stormont and Westminster elections.

The absence of democratic rights in the fields of employment, social needs and in politics was complete. In the whole history of the

Stormont administration, the nationalist opposition succeeded in only one instance in having a measure which they proposed accepted by the Stormont parliament—it had to do with protection of wild fowl! Never was there any likelihood of measures affecting the people they represented being accepted. The inbuilt Unionist majority threw all such proposals out at the first reading.

As far as the working class was concerned, the Unionists sought their allegiance and subservience through the Unionist Party and Orange Order, and their boast was that both catered for the upper and middle classes *and* the working class. No Catholic could become a member of the Unionist Party and no person of that party was allowed to be elected to the parliament unless he was a member of the Orange Order. The Unionist Party, in its set-up and councils, provided for the inclusion of the Order at all levels and not least in the higher councils. This was provided for the first constitution of the Unionist Party in 1905.

By these means, the Unionists could defy the efforts of workers to build the labour movement. Whilst the trade union movement was potentially strong and active in the industrial field, every effort was exerted by the Unionists to gain the adherence of the Protestant section of the working class in the political field when the Ulster Labour Unionist Association was set up in 1919. This followed the great strike in that year for the 44-hour week, when the city of Belfast was controlled by the Belfast Trades Council and its affiliated unions. The labour movement in Britain was, in those days, going from strength to strength—but the Unionists were determined that the British pattern would not be followed in Northern Ireland. When, during the long years, it was possible that the Protestant section of the working class would escape from their grasp, the Unionists would issue the old battle cries against 'Rome Rule' and an 'all-Ireland Republic'. Loyalty to the Unionist Party became synonymous with 'loyalty' to the Stormont parliament.

In order to circumvent this opposition, leaders of the Northern Ireland Labour Party maintained that the workers should fight on 'bread and butter issues', and hoped that, by accepting or ignoring the division of the country and accepting the 'constitution', i.e. the 1920 Act and the link with Britain, they would be able to win the workers and secure control of Stormont. Always the NILP were driven with their backs to the wall to accept the basic tenets of Unionism, and never succeeded in gaining more than four seats out of 52 in the Stormont parliament. On two occasions, in 1929 and in the fifties, they succeeded in having four MPs, but the Unionists

'righted' this position in succeeding elections by use of the old shibboleths.

If all those measures were not successful in holding the Protestant section of the working class in the fold of Unionism, there was the 'ultimate weapon' of the pogrom. The Catholic workers were presented as a danger to the Protestant workers and the 'Ulster way of life', and were attacked in their homes and chased from their places of employment. The history of the Stormont state is studded with pogroms which became an additional way of 'assisting' Catholic families to leave the area and seek work and peace in some other country.

The struggle for democratic rights was launched in 1968 in order to break this all-embracing stranglehold on normal politics in Northern Ireland. The first slogans which were put forward were modest indeed: the abolition of discrimination in public employment, the abolition of discrimination in the allocation of homes in the public sector and the repeal of the Special Powers Act. They were sufficient to call out full-scale resistance by the state, complete with a police force armed to the hilt and the use of the 'B' Specials (also armed) which were looked upon as the private army of the Unionist Party, especially in the border areas of counties Derry, Tyrone, Fermanagh, South Down and South Armagh.

In the years that have passed since 1968, successive British governments, Tory and Labour, never attempted to eradicate the undemocratic rule of the Unionists. Very few of the necessary reforms have been introduced, either at Stormont level, or at Westminster since the introduction of direct rule in March 1972. The Callaghan Reform Package of 1969, following the outbreak of the present pogrom, might have been useful if the Wilson government of the day had been more bold and had not expected the Unionists to carry it out. Callaghan expected the Unionists, by putting the implementation of the reforms in their hands, to cut their own throats!

The situation has gone from bad to worse, mainly because no British government, which had, and has, the prime responsibility, has ever indicated their real intentions on Northern Ireland. Hiding behind the Unionist battle cry—'You can't put one million Protestants into an Irish Republic'—and refusing to reveal the real role played in the interests of British monopoly capital, which controls the economic life of the area, they seek a middle way: to create a centrist alliance of the Protestant and Catholic middle class.

The Northern Ireland Assembly, brain-child of the British Tories,

and its hand-picked Executive (which lasted only five months in 1974) met the full wrath of the paramilitary Unionist groups in May 1974 when the area was paralysed and the forces of 'law and order', including the British Army, stood by. The Wilson government, which in opposition had supported the Tory plans, dismissed the Executive after the Faulkner Unionists gave up the ghost. The Social Democrat and Labour Party (SDLP) and the Alliance Party refused to put in their resignations and were summarily dismissed by the Northern Ireland Secretary of State, Merlyn Rees.

Direct rule was again brought in and efforts begun again to set up a centrist alliance with the aid of a Consultative Convention wherein the elected representatives of the various parties would consider proposals for a structure with which to run Northern Ireland. The parties were, and are, required to bring in proposals for presentation to the Westminster parliament which would be acceptable to the majority of the people in Northern Ireland and Westminster, and which would be based on 'power-sharing' between the Unionists and other political parties, especially the SDLP. Discussions have gone on over the past months within the Convention sittings and privately between the parties. It is clear, from recent reports, that practically all the parties have accepted the 'constitutional position', i.e. the link with Britain. All but the United Ulster Unionist Coalition have accepted the need for power-sharing. All the parties, excepting the SDLP, have thrown out the proposal for a formal link with the Irish Republic but want to have economic links based on no formal platform. The UUUC have accepted the need for a 'coalition government' in 'times of emergency'.

On the latter premise, the SDLP went a long way in agreement with the UUUC, but the UUUC proposal, when put forward by William Craig of the Vanguard Party as a means of getting together in the shortest time possible, was rejected by both Paisley (Democratic Unionist Party) and West (the Official Unionist Party). Craig spelt out his reasoning to his Central Council on October 11, and his proposals were accepted by a 128 to 78 vote. Immediately after the vote, nine Vanguard Convention representatives resigned, as well as one of their Imperial MPs (Mid-Ulster). Contained within the struggle is the fight for leadership within the UUUC, especially between Craig and Paisley. West is in a subordinate position in this struggle: he is faced with the ire of the Unionists of Fermanagh and the fears of many Official Unionists as to where the archbigot Paisley will take them, if he succeeds in dominating the Unionist Alliance.

Craig still considers his Party part of the Alliance. Paisley and company are calling for his dismissal. The defectors from his Party, whose resignation has left him in a weak position within the Alliance and Convention, will either link up with Paisley or West, or form a new party. The attempt to obtain unity of the Unionist forces, which Powell has been working for (he is now lecturing in South Africa, where Lord George Brown is also lecturing!) since the beginning of the year, has come up against the rocks of manoeuvring by Craig (he visualises that an 'emergency coalition' would last for about five years and then matters would revert to 'normal', i.e. Unionist rule) and the intransigence of the ultras led by Paisley and West who are convinced that, if they stick it out, Westminster will 'give' them back 'their Stormont parliament'.

The paramilitary groups on the Unionist ultra-right await the outcome of the political struggle. The UDA, which was responsible for the 'strike' of May 1974, are supporting Craig. The press in the Republic, Northern Ireland and Britain support the Craig proposals. Fear is growing in all circles that the political and military struggles will be joined by struggles on the industrial front as factories close down and unemployment shoots up—in 'loyalist' areas. The Belfast Shipyard is on its 'last chance'. The aircraft factory urgently requires capital if it is to continue. The Rolls-Royce factory has been excluded from plans for British industry and needs capital investment. The Royal Naval Aircraft Repair Yard is due to close. The Larne, Co Antrim, factory in the Standard Telegraph and Cable consortium (subsidiary of ITT), employing nearly 700 workers, is due to close down. The Goodyear Rubber company is pruning its workforce. In the clothing, footwear and other light industries closures and pay-offs are coming thick and fast. The fear is growing among the Protestant section of the working class that they are about to be abandoned by Britain, and their 'assured position' in employment will be lost. In the fields of employment in central and local government—stretching right over all the fields of public employment—the order of the day is for cuts in public expenditure and hence the loss of jobs, not least for the thousands of school-leavers still 'signing on' after the last school term.

The trade union leadership has been active on the employment front, and workers are again learning that the politics of the Unionist cabal are of little use to them in their desire for security of employment. They are also beginning to realise that they have little or no weapons at government level with which to fight against mass unemployment which, in September, accounted for 10.6 per cent of

all insured workers, not counting married women who did not pay the full national insurance contribution.

Merlyn Rees has told the people of Northern Ireland that they will have to come up with proposals for future structures for governing Northern Ireland. At the same time, he does nothing to bring about a normality that would enable the people to reason out their future. No attempt has been made to end the internment, the harassment of anti-Unionist areas by the British armed forces, to enact a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, or make clear British intent as far as the future of the area is concerned.

The intentions of the Wilson Labour government were adequately portrayed when, at the 1975 Labour Conference, the situation in Northern Ireland was not discussed. All attempts to have the matter put on the agenda were side-tracked. Wilson later told the BBC that they 'did not want to be seen as interfering in Northern Ireland affairs'! A likely story, especially during a period of direct rule from Westminster! The Tory Party 1975 Conference also refused to discuss the situation, and would not even allow West (Official Unionist Party, who took a 'high-ranking' delegation to the Conference) to speak in the debate on 'law and order'. The Unionist Monday Club did discuss the situation and, along with those who ran the Tory Conference, permitted the sale of a scurrilous pamphlet from Belfast which was nothing but a filthy diatribe against the Catholic population. (Later, Biggs-Davison, a Catholic Tory MP, had the pamphlet withdrawn because it attacked the Catholic Church—but he had not one word to say about the attack on other Northern Ireland organisations associated with the Catholic people. Apparently he considered them all 'subversive'.)

The attitude of both conferences clearly revealed the bipartisan policy, first formulated by the British Tories, which continues to distort the whole struggle of the people in Northern Ireland for democratic rights, and assists in confusing the people of Britain, especially those in the trade union and labour movement, about the real issues confronting the working class in Northern Ireland and the dangers that the situation here has for that movement in Britain.

The Communist Party of Great Britain will discuss the whole issue at its November congress. A resolution, which will be put forward, will make clear the real issues and the overall responsibility of the British government. The resolution states:

This 34th Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain condemns the repressive policy being followed by the British Labour government towards the people of Northern Ireland. Endless repression will never solve

the crisis. What is required is a complete turn in British policy, an end to repressive measures combined with urgent steps to introduce the necessary democratic changes, and the withdrawal of British troops.

We therefore call on the British labour and progressive movement to work for such a policy and to insist that the government reverse its present course and introduce essential and long-overdue democratic reforms.

Such an approach, if accepted and fought for, will bring lasting benefit to the workers of Britain and Northern Ireland.

WHAT'S GOOD FOR IPC. . .

John Ball

THE fact that two journalists from the International Publishing Corporation, publishers of the *Daily Mirror*, were chosen to write Harold Wilson's pamphlet arguing for cuts in living standards* should occasion no surprise. Rather, it is a reminder of the long-standing, close and growing relationship between the IPC and Labour's right wing. The *Daily Mirror*, with its spurious proletarian image and style (clipped sentences, folksy phrases, let's-talk-it-over-man-to-man approach), has oiled many an editorial supporting the Gunters, Carrons, (Lord) George Browns, Healeys, Jenkinses, Wilsons and the rest, together with their policies. Increasingly, since IPC absorbed Odhams in 1961 (and slaughtered the *Daily Herald* in 1964) the Mirror Group has been the hand-maiden of right-wing Labour policy-projection to the masses. The present pamphlet, which bears all the hall-marks of the one-sided government publicity during the Common Market referendum, expresses a coalescence of view between the government and Britain's largest publishing monopoly.

Lending their pens to Wilson for the occasion, and for the continuing propaganda war against living standards, are Lord Jacobson and Mr Geoffrey Goodman. The first, as Sydney Jacobson, started his *Mirror* life in 1952 as political editor, and switched to editing the *Herald* after IPC swallowed Odhams. He carried on as editor when the *Herald* became the (old-style, pre-Murdoch) *Sun*, was also chairman of Odhams Newspapers and more latterly was editorial director of IPC. Wilson conferred a barony on him earlier this year. Mr Goodman (formerly *News Chronicle* and *Daily Herald*) is industrial editor of the *Mirror* on leave of absence to do the Downing Street job.

* *Attack on Inflation—A Guide to the Government's Programme*: i.e. the policy of limiting pay rises at or below £6 a week, a figure which will not compensate for rising living costs.