
²⁰ John Biggs-Davidson, quoted in R Faligot, *The Kitson Experiment* (1983).

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Ireland, Nationalism, and Imperialism: The Myths Exploded

Subversion
1992

A pamphlet offering an “analysis of the war in Ireland, looking at the roles of the British state and the republican movement.” Published circa 1992 (Subversion 10 lists it as coming soon, subversion 11 lists it as out). Footnotes sourced from a scan of the original pamphlet found at <https://libcom.org/library/ireland-nationalism-imperialism-myths-subversion>. From https://web.archive.org/web/20091019211950/https://www.geocities.com/athens/acropolis/8195/ire_int.htm.

Twenty Years on a Knife Edge

“... the fate of the province [Northern Ireland] is still, as it has been for so long, poised on a knife-edge between a slow climb back to some form of ordered existence, or a swift plunge into unimaginable anarchy and civil war.”¹

These words – from the closing sentence of F S Lyons’ book, *Ireland Since the Famine* – were published as long ago as 1973. Leaving aside the misuse of the term “anarchy”, it is a measure of how little seems to have changed in the two decades since, that a similar assessment is the commonplace conclusion to virtually every present-day commentary on Northern Ireland. Just about the only sign of movement in this bloody deadlock has been the remorselessly rising death toll. In 1972 it passes what Lyons described as “the appalling figure” of 600; by 1992 more than 3000 had been killed.

“Troops Out”

As the bloodshed continues, year after year, with no end in prospect, it’s not surprising that opinion polls carried out in mainland Britain over the past 20 years have consistently shown that between 50-60% in favour of a British military withdrawal from Northern Ireland.

The reasons why such a view is expressed are no doubt diverse. Britain’s Ireland Problem, or as some prefer, Ireland’s British Problem, has a complex history stretching back for hundreds of years. Few people really understand “the Irish Question” and most have no answer to it except to wash their hands of the whole sordid mess. If the Irish want to shoot and bomb the hell out of each other, they say, why should we stand in their way – just get “our lads” out of there and let them get on with it.

¹ F S Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine* (revised edition, 1973), page 780.

The best that can be said about such people is that at least they are not organised into political groups claiming to represent the interests of the international working class ... which is more than can be said for a different element within the 50-60% who want Britain to get out of Ireland, and whose ideas we mainly want to challenge in this pamphlet.

We are referring of course to the members and sympathisers of the left-wing groups who support “self-determination for the Irish people”, and who would regard withdrawal from the “Six Counties” as a victory for the Irish people over British Imperialism. Since “Irish self-determination” is these groups’ goal, they naturally push the idea that it’s not for “us Brits” to tell the Irish people how to conduct their own national liberation struggle. If you oppose the British state and what it’s doing in Northern Ireland, you must automatically give “unconditional support for republican resistance to sectarian attacks and British terror” (so say the Anarchist Workers Group).

In this way the left present a mirror image of one of their own accusations against the British state; while they complain that “any challenge to Britain’s role in Ireland is interpreted as support for the IRA and therefore subversive”², they themselves tend to see any criticism of the IRA as justifying the actions of the British state and, therefore, as apologising for imperialism.

The way we see it, however, these “options” – to oppose the British state and support the IRA, or to oppose the IRA and support the British state – are both wholly contained within the bounds of capitalist politics. Instead of looking at the entire range of political and military groupings critically and arguing that the interests of the working class lie beyond and against this whole spectrum, they encourage the working class to line up behind one capitalist faction or another. This is one of the prime functions of the left, which it performs as usefully (for capitalism) in relation to Northern Ireland as it does with regard to many other issues.

The British State ...

It’s certainly not hard to grasp why the British state is regarded with such loathing in certain parts of Northern Ireland. For over twenty years the Catholic population has been on the sharp end of a repression which has been applied in many different ways, but mainly through the use of armed force and the legal system.

On a military level this has involved the constant presence of as many as 30,000 members of the British Army, UDR and RUC, who at their most ruthless have carried out such acts as the massacre of 14 unarmed demonstrators on “Bloody Sunday”, January 1972, and killing of over a dozen people (many of them young children) with plastic bullets, and numerous undercover “shoot-to-kill” ambushes aimed at “terrorist suspects” but frequently resulting in the violent execution of innocent passers-by unwittingly caught up in stake-outs, or of teenage joy riders speeding through road-blocks. Clearly, there are more “terrorists” operating in Northern Ireland than just the IRA!

The legal system has also played a vital role, through the use, at various times, of mass internment without trial, torture and ill-treatment of suspects during interrogation, Diplock courts (i.e. no jury), conviction of defendants on the basis of uncorroborated evidence provided by “supergrass”, and the sweeping measures of the Prevention of Terrorism Act. (During the past 10 years – 1982-1991 – nearly 14,500 people in Northern Ireland and mainland Britain have been detained under the PTA,

² Troops Out Movement, *In Whose Name? Britain’s Denial of Peace in Ireland*, page 22.

supposedly on “very real suspicion of terrorism”; of these only 230 – 1.5% have even been charged with terrorist offences, let alone convicted.³) On top of all this, there is also the systematic and calculated everyday harassment of car drivers and pedestrians being stopped for identity checks, and the frequent invasion of Catholic areas by the army and RUC in order to carry out house-to-house searches (amounting in 1990 to an average of at least one house raid taking place every two hours).

Of course, there’s little justification for any expressions of moral outrage by the IRA and its supporters about any of this. To claim, as they do, that there is a war going on in Northern Ireland, and then to criticise the British state for behaving just as any state does in war-time, is like wanting to have your cake and eat it. Nevertheless, as we’ve said, it’s no wonder the British state is hated – and that many on the receiving end of its brutalities want to fight back against it. The question is, though, by what means, and to what end?

... And Its Opponents

Although our argument is that the Republican struggle is not in itself a struggle for working class interests, there are certain things mixed up with it that we would support. Like, for example, the “Free Derry” “uprising” of August 1969, when the Catholic Bogsideers organised themselves to repel attacks by Protestant marchers and the police with stones, petrol bombs and burning barricades.

This is no different to the solidarity we have expressed in the past with the working class inhabitants of inner city areas in Britain such as Toxteth, Brixton or Tottenham, when, fed up with daily police harassment on the streets and with having their homes smashed up in raids for drugs or stolen property (the like of which is part-and-parcel of everyday life for thousands of working class people in Northern Ireland), they have erupted onto the streets and temporarily driven out the police.

We support such riots not because we think they are somehow inherently revolutionary, but for the basic reason that they show a spirit of rebellion alive within the working class and an unwillingness to put up with attacks on its conditions of living. A class which doesn’t fight back against the hardships which are imposed on it is unlikely to ever rise up and overthrow its oppressors.

We are for the expulsion of all armed gangs from working class areas of Northern Ireland – be they the British army, the loyalist paramilitaries, or the IRA. However, the type of working class self-defence against state oppression and sectarian attacks which mainly took the form of rioting seems to have become less common in Northern Ireland.

On one side, the army and the RUC have been less willing to tolerate the existence of the semi-official barricaded “no-go areas” which were commonplace in the early years of the present day “Troubles”. While on the other side, Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA have been equally determined to keep as much resistance to the British state as possible under their control: “This is a special message for young people – no hijackings, no joy riding, no stone throwing at the Brits. If you want to do these things, there are organisations to do this for you.” – Gerry Adams, President of Sinn Fein.⁴

This as an important consequence for the position we adopt towards events in Northern Ireland, because, when groups like the RCP (Revolutionary Communist

³ Home Secretary, Kenneth Baker, speaking on “The World Tonight”, BBC Radio 4, 24.2.1992; figures from *The Guardian*, 24.2.1992.

⁴ Quoted in *Organise!* no. 20, Aug.-Nov. 1990.

Party) state that “Workers who live in the imperialist heartland have a special duty to back those fighting against the British oppressor”⁵, what this largely boils down to at the present time is that we should support the “armed struggle” being waged by the IRA and the other, smaller Republican groups.

The Rise of the Provisional IRA

In our view the rise of the Provisional IRA represented a tragic step back for the Catholic working class in Northern Ireland.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the Civil Rights Association in Northern Ireland was agitating for an end to discrimination against Catholics. At the origins of the civil rights movement lay genuine working class concerns over issues such as housing and unemployment. If these issues had been taken up on the basis of fighting for working class needs, there would have been a chance of uniting Catholic and Protestant workers, since all workers have a material interest in struggling for better housing and higher wages.

However, rather than fighting for more and better resources, which could have achieved real material improvements in conditions for all working class people, the Civil Rights Association’s campaign to establish the so-called rights of a persecuted minority within civil society amounted to merely demanding a more equitable sharing out of the miserable resources which already existed. This movement was, moreover, deeply imbued with liberal illusions about achieving equality and justice – in a system which by its very nature cannot do anything but generate inequality and injustice.

The direction of this movement was driven even further away from its origins by the reaction of the Northern Ireland Unionists, who regarded the civil rights campaign as a threat to their “privileged” position. Northern Ireland was certainly no paradise for working class Protestants. Their “privileges” didn’t amount to much more than having a slightly less shitty slum to live in or a slightly less miserably paid job to go to than their Catholic neighbours. As the Dublin based anarchist Workers’ Solidarity Movement puts it, “The reality of Orange bigotry is one of 2 1/2p looking down on 2p”.⁶ Nonetheless, the civil rights movement’s demand that Catholics should have equal access to jobs and housing previously reserved for Protestants was perceived by Protestant workers as something that would undermine their own already precarious standard of living. It’s not hard to see, for example, that if a factory employed 600 Protestants and no Catholics, where without religious bias in employment there would be 400 Protestants and 200 Catholics, then 200 Protestants would feel their jobs under threat by any call or an end to discrimination.

Protestant working class hostility towards the civil rights movement was of course fostered by the Northern Ireland ruling class. Ever since the establishment of the Northern Irish state at the start of the 1920s, the outlook of the Unionist ruling class had been dominated by a mixture of aggression and insecurity aptly summed up as “the politics of siege”. It pursued its own survival through a classic policy of “divide and rule”, on the one hand demonising the Catholic population within Northern Ireland as the treacherous “fifth column” of its southern enemy, and on the other hand tossing just enough crumbs to the Protestant working class to convince them that their interests were identical with those of their rulers.

⁵ “What We Fight For”, *The Next Step*, 16.6.1989.

⁶ “Getting to Grips With Sinn Fein’s Socialism”, *Workers’ Solidarity* no. 28, Summer 1988, reprinted in Workers’ Solidarity Movement, *Northern Ireland and British Imperialism*.

Whenever Catholic and Protestant workers did show any signs of joining together, the ruling class was always quick to find a way to whip up renewed sectarian hostility, in order to destroy working class unity. The Outdoor Relief strike of October 1932, for example, when the unemployed of the Falls and Shankhill fought side-by-side against the police, was followed less than three years later by a long summer of bloody sectarian rioting in Belfast which left 11 dead and nearly 600 injured.

In the late 1960s, if the Northern Ireland ruling class needed any extra incentive to crush any signs of working class struggle within its own territory, then it only needed to look across at mainland Europe, where in France in 1968 and in Italy in 1969, the working class was defying all the sociologists and media pundits who said it had been dissolved in the “affluent society” with a series of massive strikes.

It was against this background that the Civil Rights Association’s mainly peaceful protests were frequently met with savage violence meted out by the RUC and the notorious B Specials. The IRA did nothing to halt these attacks; legend has it that its initials were now said to stand for I Ran Away. Initially Catholics had to organise their own self-defence – as they did, for example, at the start of “Free Derry”. It was in these circumstances that the Provisional IRA emerged. Increasingly, Catholics turned to the Provisionals for defence, first of all against sectarian pogroms, and later against the British army.

Although in recent years Sinn Fein and the IRA have fought a twin-pronged campaign “with the ballot paper in on hand and an Armalite in the other”, the Provisional IRA initially came together as a purely military organisation. Unlike the Official IRA, from which they had split during 1969-70, the Provos had no interest whatsoever in the sort of reforms demanded by the Civil Rights movement, since the Provos’ aim was not to modify the Northern Ireland state but to get rid of it. At first even the Stalinists of the Official IRA were denounced as too left-wing by the Provos – though “when the Provisionals came to write their own programme after the split (published as *Eire Nua* in 1972), they actually based it on an old document that the Stalinist Coughlan [i.e. Official IRA member Anthony Coughlan] had written before the split”.⁷

Revolutionary Potential?

In a relatively short space of time, therefore, the reaction of the Northern Ireland Unionists and the British army aborted a movement with its origins in working class grievances over jobs and houses, and rejuvenated in its stead, among a section of the population which throughout the 1960s had shown little explicit interest in wider constitutional issues such as partition, a military campaign for the political end of uniting Ireland.

What this says to us is that the Provisional IRA did not develop organically out of the struggles of the Catholic working class in Northern Ireland, any more than, say, the Labour Party or the trade unions are a direct outgrowth of the current struggles of the working class in Britain.

When we point this out, one response we get is that we should still support the armed struggle, even though it is controlled by the IRA, in the same way that we support strikes, even though they may be controlled by the trade unions. Or as someone who wrote to *Class War* about this issue put it: “So what if the IRA defends a Catholic, nationalist community? Would you attack strikers if they supported the Labour Party?”

⁷ “The Shame of Irish Communism”, *The Next Step*, February 1985.

In fact, this analogy only strengthens our case against supporting the armed struggle in Northern Ireland. The basic motivation of workers who join a trade union or the Labour Party thinking that it will fight for working class interests may be sound but their course of action is not. Yet a strike organised by a trade union and involving workers who support the Labour Party does have the potential to go beyond these initial limitations. This is because strikers are pursuing their material interests as members of the working class. Sooner or later this will bring them into conflict with capitalist organisations such as the trade unions and the Labour Party. If their struggle is then to proceed any further, the strikers are forced to go beyond the forms and ideas they started with, by in practice rejecting trade unionism and Labourism.

We know, both from our own experiences of direct involvement and political intervention in strikes, and from looking at the history of previous high-points of the class struggle in many different countries, that this does frequently happen. So far it has been most noticeable only among a minority of the working class, because only a minority, usually, is ever involved in the class struggle, and it is only this active involvement which is necessary for the old practices and ideas to be challenged and overturned. Nonetheless, such a process does occur.

By contrast, the fact that after 20 years of the modern day “Troubles” in Northern Ireland there is still no sign that any significant minority of the Catholic working class has gone beyond the outlook which dominated it back in 1969, nor any indication of the armed struggle developing wider perspectives than those set by the IRA, speaks volumes about the class nature and potential of the struggle in Northern Ireland.

“My Enemy’s Enemy Is My Friend”

We don’t shed any tears for the police, soldiers and politicians killed by the IRA; our only regret on seeing someone like Norman Tebbit dug out of the ruins of the Grand Hotel in Brighton after the IRA bombed the 1985 Conservative Party conference was that he was still alive. But this doesn’t mean that we automatically share a common cause with anyone and everyone who opposes the British state besides ourselves. We don’t judge the class nature of a struggle by the targets it attacks. We must also take into account the purposes and intent which motivate such actions.

As communists we oppose the state because it is the instrument the capitalist class uses to enforce and maintain its domination over the working class. In overthrowing capitalism the revolutionary struggle we agitate for will abolish ALL nation states and national boundaries. Clearly, the Irish Republican movement’s opposition to the British state is not founded on this basis. It seeks merely to re-arrange the existing national boundaries by establishing a new state with jurisdiction over the whole of the island of Ireland. This new state would be just as much an enemy of the working class struggle as are the existing British and Irish states.

The notion that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”, which leads some people to support the IRA, invariably misjudges who or what the real enemy is, and so ends up dragging the working class into taking sides with “nice” factions of the capitalist class in its squabbles with the “nasty” factions of the same class. We see this in anti-fascist fronts where the working class allies itself with “democratic” capitalists against “totalitarian” capitalists, and in anti-imperialist struggles where the working class fights its present “imperialist” bosses in alliance with its future “home grown” bosses. However, the real enemy of the working class is not any of these different factions of the ruling class but the entire capitalist system itself.

What is wrong with the working class taking sides in struggles among rival capitalists was neatly summed up during the Spanish Civil War by the council communists who published the journal *International Council Correspondence*, when they said that it amounted to encouraging the working class to “co-operate with one enemy in order to crush another, in order later to be crushed by the first” ... which is exactly what did happen in Spain, when the social revolution which also broke out in 1936 was first of all subordinated to, and then destroyed by, those who sought to preserve one form of capitalist rule (democracy) against another (fascism), and when, from May 1937 onwards, members of the POUM and the CNT-FAI were imprisoned, murdered or generally terrorised by their erstwhile anti-fascist allies, the Spanish “Communist” Party.⁸

The outcome of past “national liberation struggles” shows that the working class always ends up being oppressed just as much by its so-called “liberators” as it was by its old imperialist masters. IRA supporters, like the RCP, admit that they can see this prospect taking shape among “liberation movements” such as the ANC and the PLO, as soon as they sniff the scent of state power: “Yesterday’s freedom fighters are everywhere climbing into business suits, talking diplomacy, and looking for compromise on terms dictated by their enemies”.⁹ What makes them think that Gerry Adams and co. will behave any differently when the British government invites Sinn Fein to the conference table to settle the war in Ireland.

The Myth of National Self-Determination

Many of the left-wing groups who argue for British withdrawal from Northern Ireland do so because they believe in the principle of “national self-determination” in opposition to imperialism. The RCP, in the “What We Fight For” statement which appeared in every issue of its newspaper, *The Next Step*, declares that it supports “Irish self-determination”. The slogan of the Troops Out Movement (TOM) is “self-determination for the Irish people as a whole”. The Troops Out Movement defines “self-determination” as the “right of people within a nation to determine their own political, social and economic affairs free from external control”.¹⁰

By promoting this so-called “right” left-wing groups such as the RCP and TOM give credence to two dangerous myths.

First, to speak of “the nation” or “the people” as if these are homogeneous entities flies in the face of the reality that capitalist society is divided into mutually antagonistic classes. “The people as a whole” have never determined their own “political, social and economic affairs”. In every country, political, social and economic policies are drawn up by, and in the interests of, the ruling class. What is presented as being for the good of the nation is purely for the benefit of the bosses. Any ideology which denies this is so, is a barrier which must be broken down if the working class is to assert its own independent class interests.

Even the titles of TOM’s own publications – such as *In Whose Name?* and *Without Consent* – with their central argument that “Britain is pursuing a war in Ireland without a political mandate to do so from its own people”¹¹ tell us that the object which TOM seeks to win for Ireland doesn’t even exist in Britain. By agitating for the “right of self-determination” TOM encourages workers to waste their efforts in

⁸ *International Council Correspondence*, Sept. 1937.

⁹ “Can the IRA Survive?”, *Living Marxism* no. 23, August 1991.

¹⁰ Troops Out Movement, *In Whose Name? Britain’s Denial of Peace in Ireland*, page 5.

¹¹ *Ibid*, page 29.

chasing something which cannot be achieved.

Secondly, it is an illusion to suggest that a nation such as Ireland – or to be more precise, the ruling class within a united Ireland – could determine its affairs “free from external control”. The rulers of any newly “independent” nation-state immediately find themselves having to come to terms with a worldwide economic system dominated by powerful blocs and integrated on a global scale. Their room for manoeuvre within this framework is extremely limited.

In the twentieth century the typical outcome of national liberation struggles has been one or other of two scenarios. Either the imperialist power relinquished direct political control but continues to exert its domination at an economic level; or the client state frees itself entirely from the domination of one imperialist bloc only by switching to the all-embracing grip of a rival bloc. In neither of these instances does even a “successful” national liberation struggle result in any real independence for the local capitalists; nor is there any weakening of imperialism as a whole.

The Irish “Free” State

Any supporter of “Irish self-determination” who believes that “national liberation” is possible in any meaningful sense within modern capitalism should look at the history of the south of Ireland since it achieved “independence” in 1922.

The separation of the Irish Free State from the rest of Britain did nothing to alter the two states’ economic relationship, in which Ireland exported agricultural produce to Britain, and Britain sold manufactured goods to Ireland. At no time before the Second World War did Ireland send less than 90% of its total exports to British markets. And, as the south was so dependent on “free trade”, it could not risk placing the sorts of tariffs on imported manufactured goods which might have encouraged growth in its own feeble industrial sector.

In the early 1930s de Valera’s Fianna Fail party came to power determined to free Ireland from British domination through a policy of economic nationalism. They believed that Ireland could become “a self-contained unit, providing all the necessities of living in adequate quantities for the people residing in this island at the moment and probably for a much larger number”.¹²

Predictably, however, the protectionist policies which were implemented in pursuit of this drew retaliation from the south’s economic competitors. It didn’t help either that the policy of economic nationalism was set in motion in the midst of a global economic depression. The gap between the cost of imports and the income earned from exports widened greatly to Ireland’s disadvantage. This constant trade deficit drained the nation’s foreign currency reserves which further weakened Irish capital’s standing in the world market. Also, even extensive state intervention in the economy, intended to stimulate Irish owned domestic manufacturing, could not provide sufficient capital to build up industries capable of competing against Ireland’s far more advanced rivals on the world market.

Between 1931-39 the average income per head in Ireland dropped from nearly two thirds of what it was in Britain, to just under half. “The Irish people” showed just how much they had in “determining their own affairs” by deserting “their nation” in droves: more than 300,000 people emigrated during the period 1936-51, followed by a further 400,000 over the next ten years to 1961. It was only this massive export of “surplus” population which kept standards of living for those who stayed behind from declining even more steeply.

¹² Sean Lemass, quoted in F S Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine*, page 610.

By the late 1950s the dream of economic self-sufficiency had been exposed as an unattainable illusion. Protectionist policies were abandoned and the south set about wooing investment by foreign capital. Ever since then, as had been the case beforehand too, the south of Ireland has been completely bound up with the fortunes of the world market, and no more able to escape from the inevitable booms and slumps of the global economy than any other nation state.

The Policies of Sinn Fein

We would be stretching our argument beyond credibility, however, if we gave the impression that the supporters of a united Ireland are fine idealists whose best intentions would sadly be frustrated by the economic dictates of world capitalism. Of course Sinn Fein and the IRA say (as every other national liberation movement has said – before coming to power) that the working class would be better off in its “Thirty Two County Socialist Republic”. But whereas for us socialism means the complete abolition of money, wage labour, the market system and the state, Sinn Fein’s so-called “socialism” amounts to nothing more than a mixture of state capitalism and self-managed (i.e. self-exploited) agricultural co-operatives which has never been of any benefit to the working class whenever or wherever such measures have been implemented in the past.

If Sinn Fein’s economic programme leaves everything to be desired, its stance on many social issues is equally unattractive. In February 1992, amidst all furore which followed the Irish Attorney General’s initial decision to prevent a 14 year old rape victim from travelling to England to have an abortion, Sinn Fein’s annual conference endorsed a women’s policy document which stated: “We accept the need for abortion only where a woman’s life is at risk or in grave danger.”¹³

“Popular Justice”

It’s not just the long-term aims the IRA is fighting for which make it an enemy of the working class. There’s also the IRA’s present-day role in policing Catholic communities in Northern Ireland.

According to an article which appeared in *The Guardian* on 22 October 1990, the IRA had so far that year carried out 89 punishment shootings (a bullet in the ankles, knees, wrists or the base of the spine) and 56 beatings (prolonged assaults with iron bars or baseball bats producing multiple injuries). In addition it had also ordered another 20 or 30 “offenders” to get out of Northern Ireland – or else face the consequences. Since then “expulsion orders” have been on the increase and by February 1992 they were said to be running at 3 a week (i.e. 150 a year).¹⁴

Recently the IRA has also developed less thuggish ways of policing the Catholic communities, such as manipulating the courts and social services into administering what are in effect custodial sentences. Youths who it has been made clear are under threat of punishment by the IRA are given “place of safety” orders by the magistrates courts for their own protection and have to serve their time in young offenders centres until the IRA decides that it is safe for them to return to their home.¹⁵

We ourselves see nothing wrong with working class communities organising themselves to take direct action against anti-social elements such as drug pushers or burglars who rob from working class people’s houses. Some of the “petty criminals”

¹³ *The Independent*, 24.2.92.

¹⁴ *The Observer*, 23.2.92.

¹⁵ *The Observer*, 23.2.92. *New Statesman and Society*, 28.2.92.

dealt with by the IRA may well fall into this category and deserve some sort of punishment – then again, you could say the same about some of the people punished by the ruling class's legal system. The point is that a lot of them don't deserve it. There's nothing necessarily "anti-social" about, for example, people who steal from shops – yet they too fall foul of the swift, brutal, self-appointed policing of the IRA.

Many of the victims of IRA punishments are joyriders. The police are reluctant to respond to reports of stolen vehicles for fear of IRA ambushes and booby trap bombs. The IRA steps into this vacuum and takes action against joyriders under the guise of "reluctantly responding to community pressure".¹⁶ In this way the IRA takes credit for clearing up a mess which it has largely contributed to creating in the first place!

Once again though we must look not at the IRA's targets so much as its reasons for attacking them. The IRA's main reason for carrying out punishments is to reinforce its rule over the territory it controls. People are encouraged to contact the "Republican movement" if they are concerned about crime, rather than calling the police (or doing something about it themselves). The less the RUC enters the Catholic ghettos, the better the IRA likes it, since it gives their members greater freedom to go about their activities. Anyone who, even inadvertently, fouls up an IRA operation by calling the police into a Catholic area instantly turns themselves into an informer and faces the ultimate penalty: death.

The IRA's so-called "popular justice" may be an alternative within the Catholic communities to the policing carried out by the RUC, but only in the same sense that the Labour Party is an alternative to the Tories: it is not qualitatively different. This conclusion – that there is nothing to choose between being policed by the IRA or by the RUC – is one that has been voiced within the Catholic community itself: "When you have Sinn Fein and the IRA talking about human rights abuses in the likes of Castlereagh (the RUC interrogation centre), its sickening for them to dish out summary so-called justice like this".¹⁷

We might also point out that at the same time as it is going around crippling petty thieves and teenage joyriders, the IRA itself is raising funds through all sorts of rackets which, far from being petty, net it an income amounting, according to one estimate, to around 10 million pounds a year.¹⁸ But then again, the whole of capitalism is based on robbery, it's just that the ruling class decides what sorts are legal and what sorts are not.

The Future

While both the IRA's present actions and the goals it is fighting for mark it out in our eyes as an anti-working class organisation, speculation about what a united Ireland governed by Sinn Fein would be like is largely academic – because it's highly unlikely to come about. Although high-ranking British military officers have admitted on many occasions that they are never likely to be able to wipe out the IRA completely, the British state can still just about manage to sustain the political, social and economic costs of containing the impact of the "Troubles" at a tolerable level.

There is no way that any Dublin government could cope in the same way with 900,000 hostile Protestants in the north of a united Ireland. Even the IRA doesn't expect that the Protestants would integrate themselves happily into a 32 County

¹⁶ Alex Maskey, Sinn Fein member of Belfast City Council, quoted in *The Guardian*, 22.10.1990.

¹⁷ Henry Robinson of Families Against Intimidation and Terror, quoted in *The Guardian*, 2.1.92.

¹⁸ *The Guardian*, October 1990.

Republic, and has to concede lamely that “They are a tiny national minority who must be given guarantees within any united Ireland”¹⁹ – which is about as plausible as arguing that if the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland was given “guarantees” by the British state the IRA would agree to the continuation of British rule in the north. This is the main reason, then, why British troops remain in Northern Ireland: to prevent an escalation of the “Troubles” which would plunge Ireland into chaos, thus threatening NATO’s strategic interests and British, U.S. and EEC economic interests.

So, we do not foresee any change in the constitutional set-up in Northern Ireland in the near future. Nor are there many signs – at the moment – of any resurgence in the currently very low level of the class struggle there. The two communities, Catholic and Protestant, seem to be pitted against each other every bit as much as the ruling class wants them to be, since there is every advantage for British capitalists in maintaining the policy of “divide and rule” which keeps workers’ living standards in Northern Ireland so much lower than in the rest of Britain.

This isn’t to say that these divisions couldn’t be overcome in the course of massive class struggle, but where this mass struggle will come from is hard to foresee. At present, the fear once expressed by some members of the ruling class, that “If we lose in Belfast, we may have to fight in Brixton or Birmingham”²⁰ – in other words, that the struggle in Northern Ireland could be the spark which ignites the flames of insurrection on the mainland – seems less well-founded than the prospect of a working class revolution which spreads from the Republic, Britain and the rest of Europe. But this doesn’t mean that the prospects for the class struggle in Northern Ireland can be written off. The inherent instability and unpredictability of capitalism, and the impossibility of eradicating the class struggle altogether, means that we can never predict for certain where or when the next upsurge in working class struggle will occur.

Until this happens, no doubt the war in Northern Ireland will drag on. But we should be in no doubts about what sort of war it is. The fact that thousands of Protestant workers have sided with the British state and its Loyalist appendages or that thousands of Catholic workers give their support to Sinn Fein and the IRA does not alter the capitalist nature of the conflict. The ruling class – or those who aspire to become the ruling class – have always been able to rope the working class into fighting their battles for them. Our attitude to the situation in Northern Ireland may not find much of an echo among workers there at present, but for genuine revolutionaries there can be no alternative to calling for a united working class struggle against both sides!