The Orange strike which defeated Britain

By Thomas Carolan

BRITAIN ABOLISHED Home Rule in Northern Ireland in March 1972, after 50 years during which the Six Counties had been governed from Stormont Castle outside Belfast. For the 23 years since then Northern Ireland has been under British direct rule. Through all its 50 years "Stormont" had been a Tory-Unionist government of one-party Protestant rule and an organiser of sectarian discrimination against Catholics. Catholics were never less than one third of the population of the Six Counties: they are 45% now.

The destruction of "Protestant home rule" was worked by the Provisional IRA, whose shooting and bombing campaign was almost exactly a year old when "Stormont" fell. Stormont's abolition — that is, the abolition of Protestant majority rule — was the single major achievement of the Provisional IRA's 23 year war. A quick and deceptive success. Yet, if it was the Catholic Provos who brought down the old Stormont, it was the Protestant majority who stopped London setting up a new, non-sectarian Belfast government of its choice to replace it. Their weapon was a 14-day general strike.

Despite its peculiar features, the Northern Ireland general strike of May 1974 was perhaps the most, certainly one of the most, successful general strikes in history. It shaped everything that came after it for 20 years, up to the ceasefire of 1994. How did that happen?

In 1972 Britain had no intention of assuming indefinite direct rule. The Heath government wanted to replace the 'old "Protestant" Stormont with a government' in which Protestant-Catholic powersharing would be normal, and constitutionally guaranteed. So, after abolishing Stormont, the Tories set out, and with some vigour, to remould and reshape Northern Ireland's political institutions.

In March 1973 they held a referendum. Predictably, a Northern Ireland majority opted to stay in the UK. In June, elections were held on a basis of proportional representation for a 78 seat Six County Assembly: under the terms of the 1973 Constitutional Act, it would be allowed to form a government only if enough of its members could agree on Catholic-Protestant powersharing. Control of "security" would remain with London.

At Sunningdale in November 1973 an extensive agreement was reached between Protestant politicians led by Brian Faulkner, Stormont's last Prime Minister, and the constitutional nationalists of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), representing about two-thirds of the Catholics. Both "London" and "Dublin", whose representatives had taken part in the Sunningdale negotiations, guaranteed the agreement. A new powersharing government at Stormont would be set up; so, after a few months, would a cross-border Council of Ireland. This would have an "Advisory Assembly" and a 14 member council of ministers; but the ministers could act only by unanimous decision. A "Council of Ireland" had been part of the British-Irish Agreement of 1921, under which 26 of Ireland's 32 counties achieved effective independence. It never came into existence. In 1973 it was intended as a concession to Six Counties Catholic aspirations for a united Ireland. Thus, the politicians thoughts, would the conditions and the memories that bred and sustained the Provos be eliminated, while the legitimate concerns of the Protestant majority were protected. Peace would be restored.

The problem was that most Protestants — sections of the Protestant middle class were the exception — did not want any of it. They wanted "majority rule", that is the Protestant rule Britain no longer felt it could allow to them, the majority population whose rights the sub-state had been set up to guarantee.

Democratic logic lay with the Protestant and Unionist demand for "majority self-rule", but for London to concede it was simultaneously to concede the Protestants' right to rule over the big Catholic and nationalist minority, some of whom had been driven to take up arms against such rule and against the partition of Ireland which enshrined it. In the Six County entity, "democratic logic" was also sectarian logic.

In this way the fundamental contradiction of the "Protestant" state was exposed like jutting rock from which the soil has been stripped away: because of the size of the anti-Unionist minority — and they were the majority in about half of the Six County territory — a state based on the Six Counties could only be a sectarian cockpit. That was the lesson of 50 years of Northern Ireland Home Rule, but London refused to face it. Instead, London — with the agreement of Dublin's then Fine Gael/Labour coalition government — tried to graft on to the Six County state institutions from an altogether different sort of society: amicable powersharing, where there was savage, underlying, communal/national conflict; and a Council of Ireland where there was convulsive fear in the Unionist majority that Britain was beginning to force them into an all-Ireland state under Catholic majority rule.

Still, by January 1974, they had managed to get powersharing in place. How? By combining pieces of the old Unionist Party, which had fragmented under British pressure and Catholic revolt, with the main Catholic organisation, the Social Democratic and Labour Party. Ulster Unionism, which had from the '20s been one great monolithic party, had begun to break up in the early '70s. Large sections of the working class had broken loose from allegiance to the bourgeois and pseudo-aristocratic old Unionist Party leaders — but only to go

*"14 May Days" By Don Anderson (Gill & Macmillan, £7.99).

The strike co-ordinating committee: Bob Pagels, Bill Hannigan, Lt Col. Edward Bush, Huge Petrie, Ken Gibson.

to Ian Paisley, who combined "lower orders" populist demagogy with shameless sectarianism and Unionist chauvinism. Middle-class, anti-sectarian Unionists had formed the Alliance Party. And the fragmentation was not over yet.

Led by Brian Faulkner, who had been Northern Ireland Prime Minister at the abolition of Stormont, it was an Official Unionist Party being shaken apart which contested the 1973 elections for a new Northern Ireland "Assembly".

Faulkner had introduced internment without trial for Catholics in August 1971. But he was a pragmatic professional politician who tried to make the best of the hand dealt him by London. Where, during the 1973 elections, did the Faulkner-led Official Unionists stand on "powersharing"? They seemed to be against it. Some, like Faulkner, used ambivalent forms of words to falsely present themselves as opponents of powersharing. They won 32 seats. Then, once elected, Brian Faulkner negotiated an agreement at Sunningdale to share power with the SDLP (which had 19 seats), and the Alliance; he agreed to the setting up of a Council of Ireland. On 4 January 1974 a conference of Faulkner's Official Unionist Party voted 427 to 374 to reject the Sunningdale Agreement. The Unionist Party split, but Faulknerites numbered 20 out of 32 of the party's Stormont representatives. Together with their coalition partners, they commanded a majority in the Assembly.

The powersharing coalition government set up on 1 January 1974, whose main stable base was now the middle-class constitutional nationalist SDLP, remained in being. Two thirds of the Unionists in the Assembly were bitterly, loudly and sometimes violently in opposition. There was much shouting and abuse and fist fights broke out. The anti-Sunningdale majority of Faulkner's old party, the Official Unionist Party, joined with the Paisleyites and William Craig's Vanguard Unionists to form an opposition bloc, the United Ulster Unionist Council (UUUC).

The powersharing executive was a government that represented only a minority of the Six County population. The Faulkner Unionists did not even represent those who had elected them. The powersharing executive was a minority government. Yet the Protestant majority was, in parliamentary terms, reduced to impotence; effectively they had been disenfranchised. Still, the powersharing executive was in place, for as long as the Stormont parliamentary majority held. British money would be forthcoming. Faulkner could hope over time to win back a sizeable Protestant base of support.

Now industrial action made a decisive appearance in Northern Ireland affairs — the British miners' strike brought down the Heath government. The miners struck and Prime Minister Heath appealed to the electorate against the miners in a snap general election. It proved disastrous for Heath, and for the Northern Ireland "settlement": the boxed-in, disenfranchised Protestants had an unexpected, unscheduled chance to register their opposition. In the 28 February election, anti-Sunningdale Unionists won 11 of the 12 Northern Ireland Westminster seats (Northern Ireland now has 17 seats at Westminster). The moral and political authority of the powersharing government had received an open crippling blow.

Though the two main parties were always uneasy partners, buffeted by pressure from their constituencies, they soldiered on — until the general strike gave the executive the *coup de grace*.

Industrial action for political purposes had been an intermittent feature of the Northern Ireland Catholic-Protestant conflict since 1971 when, in response to the first months of Provisional IRA bombing, shipyard workers led by shop steward Billy Hull — a one-time Northern Ireland Labour Party member — marched through Belfast demanding the introduction of internment. There had been strikes when Stormont was abolished in March 1972. An attempt at a one-day general strike was made in February 1973, ending in sectarian violence and fiasco — and exchanges of shots between Protestant paramilitaries and British troops. Half a dozen people died. By 1974, the Loyalist Association of Workers (LAW), which had organised these industrial actions, did not have too much credit left. It was too closely linked to the Protestant paramilitary organisations. (The main one, the UDA, since outlawed, was then a legal organisation.)

At this point the "Ulster Workers' Council" (UWC) came into being and immediately began planning for a general strike to win a restoration of "democratic government" — that is, majority rule, with all it implied. The UWC's central organiser at the start was Harry Murray, a shipyard shop steward who had once had connections with the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP). Murray was determined to create a working-class Unionist centre of action independent of both Unionist politicians and — unlike LAW — of the Protestant paramilitaries.

He failed in that objective: without the Unionist paramilitaries there would have been no general strike. In fact, it seems, the UWC was always a very weak organisation. Its 21 member executive, which was supposed to bring representatives from the whole Six Counties together, existed only on paper. Yet within six months of coming into a flickering shadow of an existence, the "UWC", which was never other than a flimsy structure, had organised a general strike, brought down the Belfast powersharing executive and torn up the British government's strategy for the Six Counties. How did this happen?

Two things allowed it to happen: the extensive network of Protestant paramilitary organisations stepped in behind the UWC and kickstarted the strike in the first days; and, once it got going, the majority of Protestants realised that they had found the weapon they needed. The strike, which begun with much UDA coercion and bully-boy stuff then became a powerful, self-powered movement of the Ulster Protestants.

After a number of dates for strike were set and then cancelled — the earliest was 8 February 1974 — the real date, 14 May, was finally set at a meeting at UDA HQ on the Shankill Road. Despite Harry Murray's initial intentions, the UWC had become a facade for the paramilitaries. The Unionist politicians, however, kept out of it at the beginning, dismissive of the strike call.

The call for a political protest strike that finally went out on the evening of Tuesday 14 May was linked to a debate in the Assembly about the Constitution — that is about compulsory power-sharing.

The following morning, 15 May, all the signs of failure greeted the "UWC." Most people went to work. Then Andy Tyrie, central leader of the UDA, called his "brigade staff" together and told them: "It's going to be up to us to do the dirty work again." Instructions were sent out that it was to be "non-violent" — overt violence had proved counter-productive in 1973 — but that was loosely interpreted. There was a lot of low-level street violence.

The UDA set to work setting up

road-blocks; it sent mJ2

en in military fatigues armed with big clubs to persuade shopkeepers to close up.

A dinnertime mass meeting at Harland and Woolf's shipyard had a motion put that the workers there were opposed to "Sunningdale" and when, inevitably, it was passed, the workers were then told, "Right, you're out." Chief shop steward Sandy Scott was at that stage hostile to the whole enterprise: like many tens of thousands of others he would change his mind once the strike had taken hold. 1974 was in the middle of the three-year wave of sectarian killings in which hundreds of Catholics picked at random were butchered: the paramilitaries must have found it easy to inspire real terror even in many of "their own", easy to exert the massive intimidation that got the strike going.

Yet, even at the beginning, it was not only intimidation. The strength of the strike lay in the strong support it had amongst power workers right from the start. It meant that they could at will escalate the strike and, if they chose to, shut down pretty much everything in the Six Counties. Playing their strongest "card" subtly, they kept electricity production at around 60% of capacity.

There was nothing the British authorities could do about it. The British army believed that if they went into the power stations and attempted to run them, this would cause an all-out strike by power workers and the result would be to wipe out electricity production entirely: the army did not have men capable of doing the most skilled power station jobs. The support of the Protestant power workers gave the UWC a commanding position throughout the strike.

Further complications arose at a power station near Derry where half the workers were Catholic and would, naturally, have worked with the army to frustrate their striking Protestant colleagues: the Provisional IRA, men and women of principle, told them that they might face Provisional IRA retaliation if they worked side by side with the army!

After the first day most factories were shut.

At first the strike was run by an unwieldy 60-strong co-ordinating committee of UWC and paramilitary leaders — which met at the headquarters of the Unionist splinter group Vanguard — but then the number was reduced to 15. Over the two weeks of the strike this committee assumed many of the functions of a government: it regulated the production of electricity, decided what were and were not "essential services"; it issued — and refused — travel permits. By the end it effectively controlled commerce, transport, industry and farming. Glen Barr, the personable UDA man who fronted for the UWC as its Chair, talked publicly at one point — though not seriously it seems — of setting up a provisional government.

Massive intimidation had, as we have seen, got the strike going. It would not have got going without the paramilitaries. It might, even with the paramilitaries, have been nipped in the bud by resolute police and army action on the first day. But, once started, it took on a momentum of its own: the strike that finally tied up all of Northern Ireland, and allowed the UWC to act like the real government, did not depend on coercion to keep it going. The Protestant majority, outraged and embittered at their effective disenfranchisement, and gripped by fear for their future, had found and recognised their weapon — a way to make good what their vote on 28 February had been impotent to decree.

Glen Barr and Ian Paisley celebrate victory

From the beginning, the power-sharing executive had been sidelined. Control of "security" rested solely with the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Merlyn Rees. The executive led by Faulkner wanted to crack down hard on the paramilitaries but they had no power to do so. Rees hesitated, perhaps at first using the strike to put pressure on the executive to "implement" Sunningdale — that is, activate the Council of Ireland provision.

Yet the Council of Ireland — seen as a "first instalment" of a United Ireland — even more than powersharing, was what stirred up Unionists. The Faulknerites who had reluctantly conceded it in bargaining with the SDLP now, under pressure of the strike, and trying to use the strike to put pressure on their SDLP partners, proposed to "reschedule" it — the full Council of Ireland should not come into operation for three or four years. They urged SDLP leaders Gerry Fitt, John Hume and Paddy Devlin to agree that it should be "phased in", provoking a crisis in the executive. The SDLP almost resigned in the middle of the strike and almost brough down the executive a week earlier than it fell. Under pressure, the SDLP agreed finally to "phasing in" the Council of Ireland.

Once the strike took hold, the executive hung in a void, without Protestant support and without the active backing of the British state. Their appeals to the British government to act against the strikers led to nothing. Why, is one of the continuing mysteries. The idea that the army brass refused to act, out of Unionist Protestant sympathy, has currency and belief. It may be so, but you don't need it to explain army inaction. A general strike is, after all, a potent thing. The army could not run industry; it could not, they discovered, even run the power stations. They were loathe to clash with the UDA and thus provoke a shooting war

on two fronts, with the Protestant paramilitaries as well as with the Provisional IRA.

Those left wingers who say that the army could at will, if not for conspiracies, have crushed the strike sound curiously like the right when it discusses working-class action of a more normal sort. It is to seek for echoes of the "Curragh Mutiny" of 1914 — when officers at the Curragh military base in Kildare announced that they would resign from the army rather than coerce Ulster should the Liberal government in London order them to. But the situations were radically different.

In 1914 the British ruling class was split down the middle on Ireland, and so, inevitably, was the officer corps of the army. The Tory Party led the revolt against the Liberal government. In 1974 the ruling class was united. None of them had much time for the Northern Ireland Unionists. It was a Tory government which had abolished Stormont and legislated for powersharing. Right-wing Tories in the secret service may indeed have been — and probably were — plotting. But you don't need such an explanation. After the first day, or two days, the army could not have crushed this movement without massive bloodshed. The fact that the army could not have smashed that strike, once it got going, without massive levels of brutality and coercion — on a fascist or Chilean Junta level, at worst — is sufficient explanation.

And what about the official Northern Ireland labour movement, which was, on the face of things, quite powerful? It denounced the strike and called on workers to return to work. On 21 May they attempted to organise a "back to work march." Len Murray, General Secretary of the British TUC, a university-educated career trade union bureaucrat, did the bravest deed of an inglorious trade union life by turning up to lead the march. Two hundred people joined him, the majority not workers at all. Flanked by Andy Barr, Chair of the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions, and Jimmy Graham, AUEW General Secretary in Northern Ireland, both of them Communist Party of Northern Ireland men, Len Murray and the brave 200 faced jeers and catcalls from the workers for whom they tried to substitute themselves, as if by sympathetic magic to conjure up a different Northern Ireland working-class movement.

That the Northern Ireland trade union movement was far from healthy was thus demonstrated to those who hadn't already known it. Unity of Catholic and Protestant existed in those trade unions, but it was a unity maintained by tacit agreement over many years to ignore the job discrimination, and the other discriminations, against Catholics which were a central fact of Northern Ireland's social and political life.

More than that, a number of Stalinists, like Barr, Graham and Betty Sinclair of the Belfast Trades Council, were prominent leaders of Northern Irish labour. They could ensure that "progressive" and even pro-nationalist resolutions were passed, and they did. But they worked as bureaucrats manipulating the membership, not as serious socialists work, by trying to re-educate those needing it, confronting them when necessary on day to day issues. They settled for a facade, a sham, and it proved worthless. It was the same with the Communist Party in British industry: for example, the London dockers who in 1968 marched for Enoch Powell after he made a notorious racist speech, had CP leaders in day-to-day trade union affairs. In Northern Ireland the Stalinists played little games of bureaucratic manipulation, fooling themselves in the first place. On 21 May the truth came out, spitting. The official Northern Ireland labour movement counted for nothing.

Neither did the British government, unwilling or unable to use massive coercion. Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson went on TV to denounce the strikers as "spongers" — and the feeble abuse expressed his impotence. That is how it was taken on both sides in Northern Ireland. Next day, the Northern Ireland Protestants went around proudly wearing bits of sponge in their lapels!

"In May 1974 the Protestant men and women of no property erupted onto the stage of Irish history."

The end came with the collapse of the Executive on 28 May, 14 days into the strike. While the Unionists proposed to open talks with the strikers Secretary of State Merlyn Rees said he would not negotiate "under duress." The executive then resigned. The UWC was victorious. Northern Ireland went back to work the following day.

Without the paramilitaries it would not have happened. They, in the first place the UDA, acted like an armed political party. But that alone could not have created the strike — all they did or could do was channel the mass Protestant discontent into an activity: their ultimate success depended on that activity making sense, once it had started, to the Protestant working class. It did. It is a myth — usually a myth of the right — that political parties, even armed political parties, can at will create great social movements, that "agitators" create strikes. An account of the UWC strike based on a "left" variant of this myth is not useful.

Lenin described the Tories who resisted the Liberals on Home Rule in 1914, threatening civil war, as "revolutionaries of the right." Were Murray, Tyrie and the others "syndicalists of the right"? Yes, but "right" and "left" here lose their meanings. This was a movement of the working class of a people who espouse an identity distinct form that of the rest of the Irish. It was a movement against forced powersharing and a Council of Ireland, things which were seen as the beginning of an attempt to push the Protestant-Unionists into a United Ireland, where they would be a powerless minority, their identity submerged.

Since the days of Wolfe Tone in the 1790s, the idea has been raised again and again by left-wing republicans abandoned and betrayed by the bourgeoisie: rely only on "the men of no property." Tone's words were repeated by the left-wing republican, Liam Mellowes, writing from what proved to be his death-cell in Mountjoy jail in 1922. Trying to work out why the Republic proclaimed in 1916 and again, after Sinn Fein's victory in the 1918 election, in 1919 — had collapsed, and concluding that the "stake in the country" people sold out, Mellowes wrote: "We are back to the men of no property." In May 1974 the Protestant men and women of no property erupted onto the stage of Irish history. It was decisive evidence for those who still needed it that the "Irish question" is now fundamentally a matter of internal relations between the peoples of Ireland.

What happened after the strike? In effect, from now on Britain ruled within the parameters of two vetoes: the Protestants exercised a veto on powersharing and on a United Ireland, or any approximation or steps toward it, and the Catholics exercised a veto on Protestant majority rule in Belfast. Twenty years would pass before that "balance" broke down. They were not uneventful years.

British governments remained — and remain — committed to powersharing. In 1975 a "constitutional" assembly was elected in Northern Ireland, charged by the British government to meet as a Parliament and work out a constitutional arrangement for Northern Ireland be acceptable to both Protestants and Catholics. Governmental powersharing had to be part of it, they insisted. All through 1975 and into early 1976 the constitutional parliament met at Stormont — against the background of a prolonged IRA ceasefire — but they could not reach an agreement. "Majority rule or nothing", the Protestant Unionists said. Vanguard leader William Craig was a Unionist hero, the Northern Ireland Home Secretary who had ordered the police to baton peaceful demonstrators in Derry in October 1968 in the incident that inaugurated the "Troubles." When he came out for conditional powersharing in 1975, he was cut down by his own organisation, his political credibility destroyed. The constitutional parliament was prorogued early in 1976. The IRA resumed its campaign.

The destruction of the Sunningdale Agreement and the powersharing executive that grew out of it by the Protestant general strike of May 1974 reverberated down the years for two decades, until the Provisional IRA ceasefire of 31 August 1994. It was, indeed, one of the most effective general strikes in history.