

Provos, Protestants, and working-class politics — an imaginary dialogue

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By Sean Matgamna

The decision of the recent Sinn Fein Ard Fheis to recognise and urge support for the Police Service of Northern Ireland removed the last fundamental distinction between the Adams-McGuinness movement and the other constitutional nationalists, the Social Democratic and Labour Party.

It was the culmination of more than a decade of political evolution. It will surprise no one acquainted with the history of Irish nationalism. Adams, McGuinness and their comrades are on a well-worn path down which once walked Michael Collins and his section of the Second Sinn Fein Party (1917- 1922), DeValera's Fianna Fail Party, Sean McBride's Clann na Poblachta, Tom Gill's and Cathal Goulding's Workers Party. They too transformed themselves from physical force Republicans into straightforward bourgeois politicians.

There is even a fair chance that Adams' party will join a Fianna Fail led Dublin Coalition government after the next 26 County general election. Certainly, Adams and McGuinness want that.

The completion of Sinn Fein's development towards straightforward bourgeois constitutionalism, has evoked only a discreet, and yet very eloquent, silence from those on the international "revolutionary left" who have spent decades weaving "socialist" fantasies around the communal war which the provisional IRA-SF was waging in the Six Counties.

The Provo war, they used to insist - that was the "Permanent Revolution" unfolding in Ireland! It would surely end in an all-Ireland socialist revolution. Gerry Adams would be Ireland's Fidel Castro; a Provo-ruled Ireland would be Europe's Cuba. For decades, the Alliance for Workers' Liberty and its predecessors came in for much denunciation and more abuse because we refused to buy into these fantasies, and because we insisted on describing and defining things as they are in Northern Ireland.

We have waited in vain for their account of what has happened to the Provos - the Provos of their political opium-dreams! - and to their old "revolutionary perspectives" for Ireland.

In the past as now, it was always extremely difficult and usually impossible to get them to engage in rational discussion about Ireland. A rare exception to this political "shyness" was the discussion that took place in Socialist Organiser, over a period of months in 1983. Triggered by an article I (as John O'Mahony) wrote (see the appendix), it called forth not only - much! - abuse, but also political contributions that represented all the different viewpoints on the "revolutionary left". These discussion-pieces were collected together in Workers' Liberty No 5, in 1986.

Alongside them in that issue of Workers' Liberty was published the attempt at a Platonic dialogue that follows this note. In this 'discussion', all the issues of politics and Marxist theory raised by the Provo War are discussed, in some detail.

The dialogue that follows sums up the state of the "Irish Question" on the "revolutionary left" in the 1980s. The arguments in favour of spinning "anti-Imperialist" and "socialist" fantasies around the provo war, and the socialist fantasies which were spun, which are used by one side in this dialogue were, in the 1970s, '80s and early 1990s, common to the "Trotskyist" and Trotskyist left throughout the world.

It would be good if the republication of the Dialogue here were to generate a belated discussion of the Provo war as seen, while it was raging, by most of the international revolutionary left, on how they see things now that, so to speak, the "returns" are in.

Sean Matgamna
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Session One: The issues stated and explained. The participants introduced

The scene is Belfast in July 1983, on a Saturday, about 10 am. A 'Troops Out' delegation has been in Belfast, where it has talked to Republicans on the Falls Road, been to look close up at soldiers on patrol, examined plastic bullets and photos of their victims, and talked to Catholics in Andersonstown.

Two men and a woman have detached themselves from the delegation and crossed the short distance from the Catholic Falls Road through part of the city centre to where the Shankhill begins. Nervously, they make their way up the Protestant Shankhill Road, which is festooned with red, white and blue bunting, where even some of the coping stones on the pavement are painted red, white and blue.

Following a hand-drawn map, the three eventually make their way to a house in a side-street. After double checking the address and the house number with the map, one of them knocks at the door, which opens almost immediately. The man who opens the door recognises one of the visitors and greets him warmly.

The three enter, and are led into a back room where two men are waiting, both still wearing their jackets. Introductions all round, and everybody shakes hands, and then they sit down. Beer and whisky are distributed according to choice.

The man of the house, who had opened the door, then assumes the role of chair and begins to speak.

JACKIE:

We've set up this discussion because some of us think there should be more dialogue between the British labour movement and the Northern Ireland Protestant people. To be more precise, I set it up.

When Tony here wrote to me and said he was coming on the delegation, it seemed too good a chance to miss, so I wrote back proposing that at least some of the "troops out" delegation should try to meet representatives of the Protestant working class and hear their point of view.

Tony was very reluctant, concerned I think about what the rest of the delegation would think, but he finally agreed. I'm glad he did. He's an old friend of mine.

So, I suggest we get started. I'm taping the discussion, if no-one objects. No-one does? Right then.

I suggest we should introduce ourselves more fully. I'll introduce the Belfast people, and I suggest that Tony does the same for our visitors'.

Robert used to be an engineering shop steward, but he's now unemployed, like so many others in Northern Ireland whose jobs have disappeared in the last few years. He was a

member of the Northern Ireland Labour Party until the mid-'70s.

Jimmy is a steward at Harland and Wolffs shipyard. He was in the Northern Ireland Communist Party for a while, until the late '60s. He was a supporter of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association until 1969.

In 1974 he helped organise the Loyalist workers' strike, the political strike that brought down the power-sharing Executive in May of that year. Say what you like about its political objectives, that strike was one of the most successful political general strikes in history.

I'm not sure what Jimmy thinks about it all now, though. Unlike the rest of us, Patrick comes from the Catholic community. He started out supporting the old Nationalist Party and then supported the SDLP, which effectively superseded it as the constitutional nationalist party. After internment in mid-71 he joined the Provisional IRA. He was himself interned for three years, beginning in 1972.

My name is Jackie. I'm a school teacher now, working in one of the few mixed Catholic-Protestant schools here. I do a wee bit of trade union work. I suppose I'm still a Trotskyist. I used to be a Trotskyist, at any rate.

I keep in touch. I subscribe to the British Marxist papers. I was on the National Committee of the Young Socialists, the youth wing of Gerry Healy's organisation, which had a sizeable section in Northern Ireland until 1966 or 67, and a hit even after then.

Robert, Jimmy, Patrick and myself together with two or three others who can't make it today, have been having what we refer to as the "Discussion Group" for the last 18 months or so, since soon after the hunger strikes ended. We are of course very loose, not a "Group".

We've been discussing socialism and Marxism and our varying experiences over the last dozen years. That may seem rather tame to you, Tony, but the scope for working class politics that try to bridge the two communities is very limited here. We spurn the childish politics of Militant, with their silly pretence that all the main questions of politics, in the first place the 'constitutional question' can be just ignored as you preach the jargon of a socialist solution that cannot happen unless the working class can be shown a way forward out of the communal impasse that has dominated and shaped Northern Ireland political life for the last dozen years.

Anyway, that's what we are. We do have contact with various people who say they are socialist or for the working-class interest.

Perhaps I'd better introduce Tony. before he introduces his friends.

Tony works in the motor car industry. He has been a Trotskyist since the early '60s. He now supports Socialist Organiser, I believe. Tony, I suggest you introduce the others.

TONY:

This is Anne-Marie. She's a public sector worker and a shop steward in Oxford.

And this is Mick. he's a building worker. I should add before we begin that though Anne-Marie, Mick and myself all support SO, there are a number of different strands of opinion in and around SO. Anne-Marie and I represent one strand, Mick here supports another.

You may have seen, Jackie, that we have sharp divisions on Ireland, and we've been discussing the question in the paper for some time now.

JACKIE:

Yes, I subscribe to the paper, so I've been following it. That was one reason why I thought this discussion would be worth while.

Tony, perhaps you could give Jimmy, Robert and Patrick some idea of what your divisions of opinion are.

TONY:

Well, as I see it, it's a division between a revolutionary and a reformist perspective on the national question in Ireland...

JIMMY:

What national question?

TONY:

Well, the struggle against imperialism for a united Ireland, of course.

ROBERT:

Hold on! You can't assume we're all in favour of a united Ireland. I find it difficult to see anything socialist or democratic about going in with the South.

JIMMY:

Right you are! A united Ireland would mean Rome Rule. That's a big part of the problem. The Northern Catholics do have reason to complain. I know that, and I too marched for civil rights in 1967-8. They are an artificial minority in the Six Counties. They have been repressed. I am in favour of removing all their social grievances. I want to end sectarian discrimination in employment. I'm a long-time trade unionist. I want to root out from the unions their tacit acceptance of job discrimination against Catholics. I want class unity in Northern Ireland between Protestant and Catholic, and with British and 26 County workers too. I'm very much in favour of working-class unity across the Border. I supported the recreation of an all-Ireland trade union movement over 20 years ago, when links were re-established across the Border after a split lasting almost two decades.

Yes, but why should I come into a united Ireland where the Protestant community will be a permanent minority? Where the state may very well be dominated by the Catholic Church, as the 26 County state has been? Where the Catholic

Church will insist on sectarian education - it is the Catholic Church that particularly insists on it in Northern Ireland? Robert: Exactly. How will the basic law of the 32 County Ireland be established? Do we non-Catholic Northerners accept those democratically decided laws of the 26 Counties which reflect Catholic teaching, on divorce and abortion for example? After all, it's to be a unitary state, and we are plainly a minority. Or is there to be negotiation, and agreement on new laws excluding the influence of the Catholic Church? But the Protestants can't initiate that.

Why haven't the Southern bosses already reformed the laws to prepare to receive us? They were against partition 60 years ago: why did they go ahead and create a sectarian Catholic state from the first years of independence?

JIMMY:

A decade ago the special place of the Catholic Church in the South was abolished, but that's just cosmetics. Look at the movement now in the South to add to the law against abortion by writing it into the constitution. The Southern Protestant churches have denounced this as sectarian, yet both Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, led by the 'liberal' Garret FitzGerald, are committed to introducing it.

You talk about the Six Counties as a sectarian state. The 26 Counties is far more a real sectarian state in the usual meaning of the term, with laws derived from religion. In the North, it's a matter of social oppression rather than any formal anti-Catholic sectarian laws.

ROBERT:

And if the Catholic Church won't abandon its insistence on religious segregation in Northern Ireland schools - and it has always refused to - why should I think that it will abandon its position of power and influence in the South? Or suppose a miracle happens and the Catholic Church in the South is prepared to see all the legislation based on its doctrine replaced by secular legislation acceptable to Northern Protestants - where is the guarantee that there will not be a relapse once we are 'in' and a safe minority?

TONY:

Guarantee? You could have constitutional guarantees. A Bill of Rights, even. But in fact you are talking about a bourgeois united Ireland. That's defeatist. None of you believe in the permanent revolution. The answer is to start to fight for a socialist united Ireland.

PATRICK:

I think Jimmy has got a point, Tony. Of course if Ireland had had Home Rule back in 1886 when the Liberal government first proposed it, then maybe the coexistence of Protestants and Catholics in a united Ireland would have led to a pluralist society. (Even then, you can see in retrospect, it would have had to be some sort of federal Ireland: Gladstone didn't propose that publicly, but he talked about it privately).

Maybe. But other things were possible too. Look at the example of Ceylon - Sri Lanka. They had independence in 1948 as a secular state, and inside of a decade the Tamil minority was subject to a vicious Sinhalese chauvinist drive for dominance. Why should we trust the Southern politicians? As early as 1925 they got rid of divorce, for

god's sake! And it was far from a liberal divorce law even before 1925.

ANNE-MARIE:

But the Provos are socialists!

We're not talking about a united Ireland which would look like the 26 Counties, but a revolution changing both North and South!

JIMMY:

I'd like a socialist revolution in Northern Ireland, and in Southern Ireland, and in every other country too. But what has that got to do with uniting Ireland now?

JACKIE:

I'm for a united Ireland, I think, under certain conditions. But Jimmy has a point, Anne-Marie: you seem to be saying that you're not for a united Ireland now, but only after a socialist revolution. But after a socialist revolution why should uniting Ireland be of any importance? I'd see it in terms of a united socialist Europe, not just Ireland.

ROBERT:

Anyway, there's no socialist revolution going on now! As for Provos: they say they offer the Protestants equality before the law within Ireland. Equality before sectarian Catholic laws! The Provos have little scruple about killing Protestants in the UDR, etc - and that to my mind is sectarian killing, or most of it anyway. They have let off bombs which massacred the innocent - Bloody Friday, Le Mon restaurant, etc. The left Republicans are sectarian towards Protestants.

JIMMY:

In the words of David O'Connell, they have withdrawn the hand of friendship they offered to the Protestants in 1972 with the proposals about a federal Ireland. And if what we had between 1972 and 1981 was the hand of friendship, God help us in future!

JACKIE:

I wouldn't disparage the sincerity of those in the Provos who say they are socialists. Their tragedy is that they are limited to one community. And you won't get socialism in one community, Tony! As a movement the Provisionals are Catholic. Whatever the socialist noises a few sophisticated representatives make, the ranks are Catholic through and through. What they offer us is forcible incorporation into a unitary Catholic state.

JIMMY:

What can we hope for if we let ourselves be forced into such an arrangement?

PATRICK:

I agree, Jimmy. And I respect your efforts to fight sectarianism. But you have to look at the record: however hard we fight, sectarianism is built into this Six County state. It offers no basis for any conciliation between Catholics and Protestants, and we've had a simmering civil war for 14 years to prove it.

I think, therefore, that we've got to seek a solution in a wider framework.

That has to be some sort of united Ireland - a united Ireland with Protestant autonomy. Perhaps that means a federal Ireland, and maybe it would have some federal or confederal link to Britain.

ROBERT:

Yes, I know about the sectarianism in this state. But you'd get the same thing in a united Ireland - with one million Protestants oppressed instead of half a million Catholics!

MICK:

That's why a federal Ireland is the answer. The debate in SO is about how to get a united Ireland, it's true. The problem with your view, I think, Tony, is that you just pose a united Ireland as a moral ultimatum, a test of anti-imperialist virtue, to Protestant workers.

Socialist and democratic propaganda may convince Protestant workers to oppose sectarianism, to desire class unity, to be internationalists. No force on earth can convince them that they have a moral obligation to be green nationalists.

JACKIE:

I think the core issue is not 'federalism' but the attitude socialists should take to the Protestant community. Does it have rights as a community, or, if you prefer that definition, as a national minority? That's the basic issue for working-class socialists. It's also the basic issue for Wolfe Tone Republicans. Jimmy will have some sympathy for that Republicanism. I don't know about you, Robert, with your NILP background, but bear with me.

The Irish Catholic majority, of which the Six County Catholics are part, have got to answer a fundamental question about the Protestants. Either the Protestants are to be treated as aliens and foreigners, to be subjugated and driven out if the majority is strong enough to do it. Or they are accepted as an integral part of the population of Ireland, recognised to have the right to be here.

Thus the question is this: what is to be the relationship of the minority to the majority? What rights can they legitimately claim as a community? What rights can the majority claim over the minority?

Gerry Adams, for example, says that the minority must submit completely to the all-Ireland majority - that the minority "cannot have any say on the wishes of the majority of the Irish people".

That takes us back to the scenario of 'drive them out or conquer them'. The Republicans now have no alternative, even in theory, but to try to conquer the Protestants. They leave themselves no alternative but the hopeless job of trying to 'reverse the conquest'. I think that's been said in SO.

Of course it's nonsense - and reactionary nonsense at that. It's also anti-Republican, in Wolfe Tone's sense of Republican. As long as 200 years ago, secular and democratic Irish Republicanism adopted the policy of conciliating and accommodating the descendants of English and Scottish settlers in Ireland. Wolfe Tone expressed it in its most basic terms: 'for the former denominations of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter, to substitute the common name of Irishman'.

It is sometimes forgotten what a major break with the past such ideas were. Ireland's history in the 17th century was a series of land confiscations by the dominant political or religious faction. For example, the Dublin Jacobite parliament of 1689.

Tone's is the irreducible basic principle of secular Irish nationalism and Republicanism, and of course of Irish socialism. It is the foundation on which democratic Irish politics has been built for two centuries. Anything less than that is inevitably a lapse from Irish nationalism into sectionalism, communalism, Catholic 'nationalism', and Catholic-Irish revanchism.

Without Tone's basic attitude Irish nationalism does not exist. It gives way to 'two-nations'-ism: for there is no middle ground. Either the Protestants are an equal part of the Irish nation, or they are not, they are excluded from it, and 'the nation' is defined as the same thing as the Catholic communities, North and South.

Today the Provos, having abandoned federalism, have lapsed back into history to before Wolfe Tone - back towards the politics of the Catholic Parliament of 1689. 'Remember 1690' is a popular Protestant slogan: it means, remember the Protestant victory over King James and the Catholics. Now 'Remember 1689' could well be the Catholic slogan!

Accepting the right to existence of a distinct community, and rejecting the alternative of conquering, subjugating or driving them out, implies a search to find ways to coexist with them and to take account of their concerns and fears in so far as that is possible. Even where a community like the Protestants is 100% identified with a colonial imperialism with which the majority community is at war for its liberation (and it isn't) consistent democrats will search for formulas for coexistence that will have at least the possibility of breaking the minority community from imperialism.

A '1689' policy towards the minority of 'undoing the conquest', 'driving them out of the land', imposing alien rule on them - that of course would rule out any such approach. Leaving aside the zig-zags of history, for the last 60 years the Protestants have seen in Southern Ireland the operation of a sectarian Catholic state, where laws have narrowly reflected Catholic doctrine and the priests have had tremendous power. They have seen their nightmare of Rome Rule in operation.

Incorporation into this state as a permanent minority is what's on offer for them right now. That is what the Provos offer them in fact, whatever about the socialist and Republican rhetoric. The Provos are a Catholic movement, not only in the background of their members and supporters but also in their ideas. The eradication of Catholic sectarianism is our programme: it requires a tremendous revolution in attitudes in Ireland which hasn't happened yet.

So the only conceivable bourgeois united Ireland is one in which the special concerns of the Protestant community are taken full account of. A socialist united Ireland can only be created by the working class - including the Protestant workers. It therefore presupposes a programme to reconcile the Protestant and the Catholic workers.

The old Bolshevik policy is therefore acutely relevant to Ireland. I'll read out a quotation that appeared in SO, which I think expresses that policy.

"Insofar as national peace is in any way possible in a capitalist society based on exploitation, profit-making and strife. it is attainable only under a consistently and thoroughly democratic republican system of government which guarantees full equality of all nations and languages, which recognises no compulsory official language, which provides the people with schools where instruction is given in all the native languages, and the constitution of which contains a fundamental law that prohibits any privileges whatsoever to any one nation and any encroachment whatsoever upon the rights of a national minority. This particularly calls for wide regional autonomy and fully democratic local self-government, with the boundaries of the self-governing and autonomous regions determined by the local population".

This does not mean us accepting Catholic sectarianism or Protestant sectarianism within Catholic or Protestant areas. It means trying to find an answer to the immediate acute crisis on the basis of present-day realities. It would undermine sectarianism, because it would take the hardening antagonism out of Catholic-Protestant relations.

JIMMY:

Of course the Northern Ireland Catholics suffered injustice. Of course the result of partition has been to create an artificial Catholic minority in an artificial Six County state in place of the natural Protestant minority in all Ireland. As I say, I want to do everything I can to undo that - short of committing hara-kiri, short of telling the Protestant community to commit political suicide.

JACKIE:

The problem, Tony, is that what you are proposing in fact, whatever you think you are proposing, is to make the Northern Ireland non-Catholics, Scots-Irish, 'British-Irish', or whatever name you choose, into an oppressed minority in 32-counties Ireland: to replace the oppression of half a million Catholics in the Six Counties with the oppression of one million Protestants in the 32 Counties.

ROBERT:

No thanks!

PATRICK:

Part of the problem, Tony, is that you people in the British left think of the entire Protestant community as if they are all big and small Ian Paisleys. But lots of the most bitter opponents of a united Ireland are trade unionists who voted N I LP or even CP at one time. The CP was proportionately a big party here during the war and after. But you refuse to believe that there can be a rational basis for Protestants who are not bigots to oppose a united Ireland - and if necessary to fight against it. There is a rational basis for it. That's the tragedy - and we may still be a long way from having experienced it in full. It is on one level a question of two rights in conflict, right against right. It's the right of the Protestants not to be - as they see it - engulfed in a Catholic state, versus the right of

the Six County Catholics not to be an artificial minority in an artificial state.

There are probably a lot of Northern Ireland Protestants who would go along with much of what Robert, Jimmy and I are saying - the sort of people who have in the past voted NILP or who took part in the mass, mainly Protestant, unemployment demonstrations of 20 years ago. Or who gave Muriel Tang 684 votes in East Belfast last June.

Socialists who support the Provisionals and their operational goal of coercing the Six County Protestants into a Catholic-dominated united Ireland (or coercing Britain into coercing them) need to give us some answers. What do you say to us, Tony?

ANNE-MARIE:

It's nonsense that what the Provisionals want is a united Catholic Ireland. They are socialists.

Tony: I criticise the Provisionals' policy of consciously antagonising the Protestant workers. But the answer is to build an alternative revolutionary leadership to wage the national struggle on a socialist basis.

JACKIE:

Yes, you can deny that what is actually on offer is a Catholic Ireland. You can do that on one of two possible bases. You can knowingly tell lies, beginning with telling lies to yourself. If you'll forgive me for saying so, Tony and Anne-Marie, that's what you do: you couldn't hold your position otherwise, not without telling yourselves ideological lies. Or you can fantasise that it will be a transformed and different Ireland as a result of the struggle. Well, I'm pretty sure it would be different - but not like you think it would! The average Protestant worker will not believe you. The present struggle is a Catholic struggle. That's a shame, but you must face facts. The Southern state is still Catholic Church-dominated.

MICK:

What I'd like to know is, on what principle would we advocate self-abnegating 'descent' by the Protestants into a Catholic Ireland?

Democracy? Such suppression of minorities is not our version of democracy. Anti-imperialism? What anti-imperialism? The subjugation of the Protestant working class would mean the destruction of the real - working class - anti-imperialist potential in Ireland.

TONY:

If we said, make it a socialist Ireland, Protestant workers might be won over.

MICK:

But that means winning Northern and Southern workers to it. I think Jimmy and Robert are representative of Protestant workers when they say that they don't see why a united Ireland has much to do with socialism.

TONY:

Well, they should see why! The Catholics are oppressed and in revolt; the only sure way they can escape from oppression by the Protestants and their British masters is in a united

Ireland. We should support their historically justified demand for a united Ireland.

JIMMY:

Why? There is at least a good chance - and I believe it's a high probability - that immediately or quickly a united Ireland would lead to the replacement of the oppression of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland with an oppressed Protestant minority in the South. You'd exchange an oppressed, frustrated, and alienated minority of half a million for a similarly alienated Protestant minority of one million in a united Ireland.

It seems to me that you have no appreciation of the fundamental problem, which (leaving the relationship with Britain aside) is of a Protestant minority. You want to fight imperialism. You go along behind events impressionistically. But your politics are either short-sighted or a hypocritical form of Catholic nationalism. The Provisionals are pretty blatant Catholic nationalists -and only those who want to be taken in will believe otherwise. A United Ireland is not a solution to anything. It's Irish bourgeois nationalism.

JACKIE:

I'm not sure about that. Because the Catholic and Protestant communities are so intermeshed, the best solution is a united Ireland with autonomy for the Protestants, and probably also with some renewed links between Britain and Ireland - links that would not block the desire of the Irish majority for independence.

MICK:

Given the realities of modern Irish history, I think it is, as far as it goes, perfectly reasonable for the Protestants not to want to go into the South, where they risk being the equivalent there of what the Catholics have been in the Six Counties. The Protestant workers are socially vulnerable, unlike a lot of the 26 Counties Protestants after 1921, who were upper class.

Tony:

But we want a socialist Ireland! Ireland will be reshaped and changed beyond recognition in the struggle, transmuted into something else by the heat of the revolutionary upheaval.

Jimmy:

The option of going into a secular Ireland is not in existence. Face facts, man, for god's sake! There is no feasible action in unity with the Catholics on offer to the Protestants to change that.

Of course there was no possibility, either, of Catholic activity together with the majority of Northern Irish Protestants to change their condition. There was some chance of unity with a section of Protestants for civil rights in the late '60s - but the Paisleyites and the Provos put paid to that, too.

Mick:

What choice did the Catholics have but to revolt? That's the tragedy - right against right, community against community, irreconcilability and incompatibility.

Tony:

You are incredibly defeatist! The Provos have got the British on the run, they call for a united socialist Ireland. And all

you can see is looming tragedy. You need revolutionary optimism, not petty bourgeois pessimism!

Mick:

Trotsky used to say that people who could only remain revolutionaries by keeping their eyes shut from reality weren't much good, and he was right. In fact Trotsky said they were harmful because they substituted fantasies for appreciation of reality. Instead of facing the real problems and defining revolutionary socialist tasks from the real situation, they fantasised themselves into a different, imaginary, situation. At best that renders you irrelevant.

Look, for one example of this, at the history of the political current now calling itself the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (and its splinters like the Lambertists, Healyites etc.) Always 'revolutionary perspectives', always optimism, every conference recording a 'new rise in the world revolution'...

I do think that everything Jimmy and Robert have said is logical from their point of view, and that you have no answer for them - unless you can convince them to plug into your technicolour fantasy world.

You know my answer to the basic problem they pose: why should the Northern Ireland workers consent to submit themselves to green nationalism, and green Tory nationalism at that, which is what's on offer. They shouldn't - and anyway they won't.

The solution is in the formula: self-determination for the Irish people as a whole, with as much autonomy for the Protestant minority as is compatible with the rights of the majority.

Jimmy:

That answers my objection about Catholic domination. That form of united Ireland would logically be acceptable. But it's a bit abstract. How is it to be brought about? And isn't it a bit late - 12 years into the war? It doesn't fill me with much enthusiasm, I'm afraid.

Mick:

I didn't expect it to. It isn't a new idea. De Valera started talking about it in the early '20s. And it's no panacea. In and of itself it won't create a mass following or be a miracle cure for Northern Ireland. But it is the only conceivable form of united Ireland - certainly of a bourgeois united Ireland, and very probably the only form too even of a socialist united Ireland. In any case, if the distinct Protestant community want autonomy, even under socialism, they should have the right to it. Therefore it must remain a basic part of our programme.

Tony:

Look, the people here are obviously more likely to agree with John O'Mahony's pro-imperialist and defeatist position than with our anti-imperialist position on Ireland. But I don't understand you, Jackie: you've been an anti-imperialist for a long time.

Jackie:

Well, I'm an "anti-imperialist", of course, Tony. But, if I've understood it properly, the discussion in SO hasn't been an argument between pro-imperialists and anti-imperialists, or

between reformists and revolutionaries - though I know people get carried away in the heat of polemic. As I've read it, anyway, it's been an argument about how sensible it is to see the situation in Northern Ireland in terms of a classic anti-imperialist or anti-colonial struggle.

Tony:

What? This is outrageous! I thought you were a Trotskyist!

Jackie:

Well, I think I am a Trotskyist. But let me finish, Tony. The discussion in SO has been concretised as a discussion on 'federalism' rather than on the less specific formula I would favour - recognition of the general right of autonomy for the Protestant minority, leaving the details to be filled in later. The focus in the SO discussion, I suppose, is what it is because the Provos have discarded the 'federal solution', and some of you see Catholic sectarian implications in them dropping it.

In fact the Provos' version of 'federalism' was always a peculiar one: they proposed a Northern sub-state consisting of the nine counties of old Ulster. I did not and would not support this form of "federalism" Nevertheless it did contain the core idea of Protestant autonomy which could have been refined and rendered more rational in negotiation and discussion. It was therefore basically on the right lines, broadly progressive. At least it held the door open. That was what I supported and continue to support in the Provos' now-discarded "federal" policy.

But I think that to focus on "federalism" is to crudify and distort the argument. The general formula SO has used for many years is much better. The rest is concrete detail which would have to be worked out by discussion and by a vast range of local consultations.

Tony:

Consultation with whom? With the pro-imperialist Protestants? With Paisley, perhaps?

Jackie:

Yes, Tony, with the Protestants, who else? It might not be just 'federalism' in the sense of a Protestant block and a Catholic one. There might have to be all sorts of degrees of autonomy for 'alien' pockets within the predominantly Catholic and Protestant areas.

Tony:

Christ, you're worse than O'Mahony!

Jackie:

Well, I do my best, Tony!

Session two: Does autonomy mean "a foothold for imperialism"?

Tony:

Let me try to state my position. The Protestants do have a right to be here. They have a right to be equal citizens. But they do not have a right to retain their sectarian privileges over the Catholics, to retain their sectarian state, or to give Imperialism a foothold against the anti-imperialist struggle of the majority of the Irish people.

I'm for democratic rights for Protestants in a united Ireland, the right to practise their religion, and so on. I'm for divorce and abortion rights. But that's different from autonomy. You talk about autonomy giving the Protestants the right to defend their separate identity. But what is that separate identity apart from religion? It's nothing but sectarian privilege!

I don't know how this autonomy would work. But however the Protestant area was defined, there would be a lot of Catholics within it. So O'Mahony's scheme means abandoning the Belfast Catholics to the sectarian rule of a Paisleyite regional administration!

Autonomy means allowing the Protestants to keep their privileges, allowing them to keep their sectarian state in some form, and giving Imperialism a continued hold over Ireland through this Protestant sub-state. It's a reformist solution, a readjustment which allows Imperialism to defend its essential interests, rather than a programme for a revolutionary victory against Imperialism.

That's why I'm against "autonomy". I do recognise the fears of the Protestant workers about Catholic sectarianism, but the answer to those fears is to build a revolutionary leadership North and South which fights for a socialist, not a capitalist, united Ireland.

Let the Protestants have their democratic rights! Let them have their religion. I'm no Catholic bigot! But the right to any sort of local autonomy - no. That would leave them their privileges. The essence of their entire position is privilege. That's why they might want autonomy or self-determination. And if it does not guarantee them that privilege, they won't want it.

Jackie:

They would want it - minimally as a guarantee that they would not be steam-rollered.

Protestant privilege over the Catholics is a serious, indeed an immense, problem. But the problem is fundamentally separable from Protestant state power - the Protestants haven't had state power since 1972, remember!

The core of the problem is the solidarity of one community with its own, and against those felt to be aliens - threatening aliens - in their midst.

Patrick: Clearly there could be no form of federalism or autonomy within a united Ireland which allowed any sort of formal discrimination. But unless you physically break up the Protestant social structures there will have to be a long haul to eradicate discrimination based on communal solidarity and communal hostilities.

To identify the process of breaking down discrimination with the IRA war is to say: conquer, subjugate and disperse the Protestants. That is an ultra chauvinist programme!

Tony: There then: you admit federalism or autonomy would mean accepting continued privileges for the Protestants! I knew it.

Patrick:

I admit that there is a real problem. But Protestant and Catholic communalism is not inextricably tied to Protestant

state power or even local government power. It predates Partition, and it is logically separate from Partition.

Today it is partly linked to local government power. But the only way a single unitary Irish state would eradicate it would be to abolish all forms of local government for the Protestant areas.

Discrimination doesn't just rest on provincial or local government patronage: the problem is as profound as the communal antagonism. As Marxists we should see the solution as linked to an easing of communal tension and to the improvement of the material conditions of life.

Jackie:

One of the major reasons why the miserable and petty privileges of the Protestants were so important in Northern Ireland - the Protestant workers came very cheap! - was the mass poverty and unemployment. Trotsky once truly said that the greatest of all possible privileges is a dry crust of bread when everyone around you is starving.

Conditions in Northern Ireland today are worse than at any time since the '30s. The Protestant workers feel it most. Many of their old privileges have jack-knifed and turned into their opposite, as they have been hit harder by the collapse of industry. If it were not for the war and the communal antagonisms, the economic conditions in Northern Ireland would lead to mass protests from the Protestants.

Mick:

I think you're probably right about that, though you can't be sure. There were some big mainly Protestant anti-unemployment marches in the early '60s, weren't there?

Tony:

I told you - you downgrade the National Question. You wish it would go away!

Mick:

I'm calculating and reasoning about the world around me as I think it actually is. You refuse to. You deal in symbolic shadow plays, not real class struggle, or national liberation struggle.

Jackie: The Trotskyist answer to the basic problem of poverty, discrimination and privilege is clear and obvious: "transitional demands", that is, we demand that the governments build houses, create jobs, develop public works, etc.

Mick:

O'Mahony and others put out such ideas in the days of the civil rights movement, when inevitably divisive, though just, slogans were raised by the civil rights and student activists, like 'one man, one vote', 'one man, one house', and 'one man, one job'.

Inevitably the Protestant workers thought they were faced with losing what they had, and were very hostile.

Whether you like it or not, the war now makes any unity on the basis of economic "transitional demands" near impossible. Before, it was a question of the Protestants' vested interests; now that the grim reaper Thatcher is levelling down hundreds of thousands of 'Protestant' jobs, it is the nationalist form of the Catholic revolt.

I don't condemn the Catholic revolt, Tony. You mistake defining its negative features for condemning it.

Anne-Marie:

That's another distinction we don't recognise. Of course you condemn it! You betray your basic wishes and sympathies with such ideas. You are a workerist! You don't see the National Question as central.

Tony:

As I say in my document - let me quote it exactly: "Of course we don't want a bloodbath. We want the best conditions for the struggle for independence - that means the least lives lost. But the struggle for independence is a precondition for the development of the Irish working class for social revolution."

That's the permanent revolution for Ireland. Protestant privileges must be smashed.

Patrick:

I think you misevaluate the question of privilege. This is very important in understanding the division in the Northern Ireland working class between Catholic and Protestant. It has no bearing on the social relations of the Orange workers to the capitalists. If I didn't know you to be a longtime Trotskyist, Tony, I'd think you had Maoist tendencies the way you talk about the Northern Ireland working class, which is mainly Protestant.

All sorts of Maoists condemn the working class in the advanced countries as privileged exploiters of the peoples of the Third World. Some of the stuff I've read by British romantics who support the Provos reproduces that pattern for Northern Ireland. The Protestants, including the Protestant workers, are cast in the role of the metropolitan workers, and the Catholics in the role of a Third World people. It is utter and absolute nonsense!

More than that: privileges are important for the Protestant working class. But you cannot characterise the Northern Ireland Protestant population entirely in those terms. If you do that you are abusing an idea that is very important in understanding the split in the working class by elevating it to a general explanation. To use the idea of Protestant privilege as a general explanation takes us back to the political time before Wolfe Tone. That's what it implies, anyway. We are back to the position Jackie raised at the beginning of the discussion: do you accept that the Protestants have the right to be here, or don't you?

For of course the primal Protestant 'privileges' came from the act of displacing the Catholics. It was this that gave the Protestant rural community a fundamental privilege, out of which everything else grew.

So which is it? Do they have the right to be here, or don't they? Does their ill-treatment of the Catholics invalidate those rights all Republicans since Wolfe Tone have accepted for the Protestants - the basic right to be here? Does it lead us, in the fight against Protestant privilege, to advocate 'undoing the conquest' by subjugating the Protestants and thus destroying the historic 'privilege' on which so much has been built? How far back must the wiping out of Protestant privilege go?

Implicitly the Provisionals' answer here is: subjugate the Protestants! In any case they now explicitly leave themselves no other option. This approach is the direct opposite of any sort of socialist perspective - the perspective of working-class unity to create a new society.

For it is the politics of redivision of the inadequate social resources that now exist and the politics of narrow nationalism and communalism.

I'm for the Catholic community - but I'm a socialist first. And I think Wolfe Tone was right and Gerry Adams wrong.

Adams can spout socialism and vague leftism for the British left as long as he likes. But in Ireland Adams stands for a narrow Catholic sectarian approach to politics. That's another reality you have to face up to, Tony.

Jackie:

To get back to the point, even the 'Trotskyist' left does not differentiate from the immediate objectives in relation to the Protestants of the Provo movement. But the entire Catholic political struggle is, for the Protestant - even the socialist Protestant worker, like Jimmy or Robert here - aimed at coercing them towards the status of a permanent minority. We can convince Protestant workers to support equality, civil rights, class unity - but we cannot conceivably convince them to adopt the Catholic viewpoint.

In reality, equality is not on offer now to the Protestants - what is on offer is descent into second-class citizenship in a Catholic Ireland.

Individual Protestants, perhaps attracted by socialist rhetoric or revulsion at Protestant sectarianism, can go over to the Catholic viewpoint. Such a one was Ronnie Bunting, son of a one-time prominent Paisleyite: he joined People's Democracy, and was reputedly Chief of Staff of the INLA at the time of his assassination a couple of years ago. The Protestant community will never make such a choice. They will fight to the last breath against it.

Tony:

You are still missing the point. We should fight for a socialist Ireland, and see the Catholic movement and the IRA as part of the permanent revolution.

Mick:

The option of going into a socialist united Ireland does not exist, nor is it conceivably going to come into being by any development of the current IRA war. You, Tony, as usual, I'm afraid, together with lots of others, live on fantasies that the present IRA/ Catholic movement is in its logic socialist. Try explaining that to the average Protestant worker!

Tony:

Your trouble is that you don't believe in the Permanent Revolution for Ireland! All these calculations and considerations you outline are mistaken because you see the picture statically. You make calculations with the existing quantities and the relationships now existing between them. That's not dialectical, comrade! Everything will be changed in the struggle. New options will arise as the struggle develops. We advocate a clear socialist solution. We offer Protestant workers the option of equality in a socialist Ireland in which the power of the Catholic Church will be broken.

Jimmy: Of course, Tony, I know that what you want instead of capitalism, including foreign capital investment, is a

working-class takeover from the capitalists. That's what completely mystifies me, though. I thought you Trotskyists believe that the working class is central to all this - that 'the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself', as Marx and Engels put it over a hundred years ago.

If only the working class can win socialism, then inescapably the central concern of your politics must be the working class: working-class unity, and not "Republican" physical-force-on-principle and war on England now, even though a big part of the Irish working class stands between the petty bourgeois nationalists and England, and is prepared to fight to stop England making any concessions.

Patrick: Perhaps I'm naïve, or even 'Kautskyite', but you seem to believe that the socialist revolution will be made - or initiated - in Ireland by a small military elite, supported by a smallish fraction of the people of Ireland and opposed by most of the Northern Ireland working class. You seem to think that the Catholic movement can expropriate economic imperialism in one and the same act as driving Britain out of the country, and if necessary driving the Protestants into Belfast Lough!

Mick:

Of course Jimmy's right on this. I want socialism. I want to expropriate Irish, British and international capitalism. I want the workers to take over. But that's not what you're talking about, Tony.

Patrick:

Because you make a fetish of the "armed struggle" and don't look at it concretely, you don't suspect that the "armed struggle" has become one of the problems. The existing "armed struggle" works totally against the possibility that the working class in Northern Ireland, or Ireland, can carry through a socialist revolution, because it sharpens the divisions in the working class.

You construct fantasies in your head from elements in reality that you abstract from their context, and those fantasies then harden like scales on your eyes, and prevent you looking at the reality.

Bloody sectarian civil war which would repartition Ireland and set the working class back decades (and leave England in the North!) appears in your fantastical political vision as a liberating anti-imperialist socialist revolution!

Jackie:

And let me add a small matter of fact. If the imperialism you are fighting in Ireland is represented there by foreign investment, then Britain is not now the main enemy. Consider the following facts. Between 1960 and 1978 656 manufacturing enterprises from overseas set up with help from the Industrial Development Authority. Of the 656, 215 were from the US, 176 from the UK, 99 from West Germany, 37 from Holland, 21 from Switzerland, 18 from Sweden, 17 from France, and the rest from Japan, Canada, etc. (In the late '70s foreign-owned firms provided only one quarter of all jobs: so don't go telling me that there is no Irish bourgeoisie!)

What has driving out Britain from the North got to do with changing that situation? What has a willingness to try to conquer the Protestants because they are 'pro-imperialist' got to do with it?

Robert:

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And who says the Protestants are 'pro-imperialist'? The US is the biggest imperialist power in the world - and, as Jackie just told us, the biggest power in terms of investment in Ireland - and US policy is to push Britain into pushing us Protestants into a united Ireland.

The EEC has a similar attitude. And I reckon the British boss class would love to dispose of us to Dublin if they could.

They've been stopped only by the pressure of the Protestant workers here. We're the people who have defeated the plans of imperialism!

Jackie:

You're overdoing the argument a bit, Robert! You know that most Protestant workers vote OUP or DUP. That's not very anti-imperialist. But then voting SDLP isn't either.

Anne-Marie:

And voting Sinn Fein?

Robert:

Vote for SDLPers with guns rather than SDLPers without? That too, is not very anti-imperialist.

Jackie:

The point is that 'pro-imperialism' and 'anti-imperialism' are concepts which don't have much grip on the situation. If expropriating foreign capital under a working-class government is the task, then the attitude 'smash the Protestants, who are the imperialist garrison in Ireland' is not irrelevant - it is positively harmful! Only the working class can expropriate Irish and foreign capital. We need workers' unity.

Tony:

You're still not being Marxist. You can't be a Marxist unless you are first and foremost an anti-imperialist.

Plainly you don't want to fight imperialism. You are just rationalising your pro-imperialism. You are bending under pressure of the British state. You don't want a united Ireland. All you Protestants are pro-imperialist. You must be either pro-imperialist or with the Republicans.

Robert:

Of course I don't want to go into a united Ireland. Didn't we explain at the beginning? It would mean exchanging a one million Protestant minority in a united Ireland for a half-million Catholic one in a divided Ireland.

Tony:

I knew it!

Robert:

But I am a socialist, and an anti-imperialist too. The point is that the Northern Ireland situation cannot be explained in terms of imperialism and colonialism - whatever about Ireland's terrible past under English rule.

Tony:

No, you're not an anti-imperialist, and therefore you're not a socialist either. You don't want to fight the Tories. You don't believe in Permanent Revolution for Ireland.

If you understood the Permanent Revolution, then you'd understand that the national question can grow over into the socialist revolution. You'd understand that you should subordinate your petty sectional interests to the majority nationalism. The only road to working class unity and socialism in Ireland is for the Protestants to accept the nationalism of the Catholic majority, now represented by the

Provisionals. That's the only road to socialism in Ireland - finish the bourgeois revolution by solving the national question, just like in China and Vietnam!

Jackie:

As you like. In your notion of a socialist revolution in Ireland - something made by a military elite! - then of course I'm not a socialist. And the same with imperialism. You seem to think anti-imperialism is the same thing as anti-colonialism. Even if your view on the Irish situation as a colonial one were true - and it's simply ridiculous - that would not be an adequate view of imperialism.

Lenin, who lived 60 years ago, when it was a world of colonial empires and neo-mercantilist trade blocs policed by imperial military force, had a far more complex and comprehensive conception. He distinguished clearly between the struggle against colonialism and the struggle against economic imperialism. He was a 'nationalist', for national liberation, against colonialism, and an 'anti-nationalist', a working-class internationalist, against economic imperialism. Only the international working class could eradicate the economic mechanisms of imperialist exploitation. He denounced petty bourgeois anti-imperialist economic nationalism as reactionary, retrogressive and not working-class policy. You are very close to endorsing it.

Tony:

No I'm not.

Jackie:

And what about the facts I cited ?

Tony:

Facts! Whose facts? You can do anything with facts. I'll find my own facts! And what about James Connolly?

Robert:

Connolly would have been better off if he hadn't been a Republican.

Anne-Marie:

You're bound to say that. Jo Quigley said the same thing at the SO summer school.

Mick:

Yes, I was there. John O'Mahony argued that this view was a-historical, and that Connolly was right to base himself on the revolutionary tradition of the Irish people, the Fenians, the land struggle, etc. That's a possible view. But this argument has no relevance now. Connolly was defeated. The Southern state is a straight bourgeois state.

Tony:

O'Mahony didn't mean it. He's just trying to cover his tracks. He's a two-nations man, you know.

Jackie:

I read a piece by John O'Mahony recently attacking the two-nations view as put by Jo Quigley.

Tony:

Ah, that's just track-covering as well. He's two-nations. As soon as I heard about the two-nations theory a couple of months ago, I knew it fitted O'Mahony's position like a

glove. Take my word for it - watching O'Mahony I've learned all about "the two nations theory."

Jackie:

There are lots of "two-nations" people around, that's true. But not just the sort you're thinking of, Tony, the people who say that the Protestants and the Catholics are two nations in Ireland, and that the Northern Ireland state embodies the Protestants' right to self-determination.

What about your own view on the Protestants - your willingness to advocate coercing us, conquering us, or even driving us out? What's that but a variant of 'two nations', but with the Protestants classified as a 'bad' nation?

You define us not as we are, a distinct segment of the Irish people, but as "pro-imperialists" who can be treated as imperialist agents, all the way to whatever degree of violence is necessary. That's a form of 'two-nations'-ism to my mind. It's not clearly and honestly defined, but that's the implication.

The Republicans, especially the 'lefts', hold that view. Tone or Connolly, or even Pearse, would not recognise them as Republicans.

Tony:

There you go again, denigrating my views. More pro-imperialism, more reformist rubbish! The best thing you could do is read Trotsky's 'The Permanent Revolution'. It's all about Ireland - if you know how to read it.

Patrick:

I suggest we take an hour's break for dinner and have another session afterwards

Session three: Ireland, Permanent revolution and Imperialism

Anne-Marie:

The problem with you people is that you reject Permanent Revolution for Ireland. You don't understand the centrality of the National Question for Ireland. You think that the bourgeois democratic revolution is finished. You don't understand that the national question can grow over into the Socialist Revolution. Because of that you look for solutions to the existing national conflict that will get it out of the way and allow the class struggle to develop.

Tony:

Exactly. And therefore you argue for a reformist solution to the national question, and not a revolutionary one. Like De Valera in 1922, you don't want to struggle. You want a settlement, not revolution.

As I said: "The struggle for independence is a precondition for the development of the Irish working class for social revolution". That's Permanent Revolution.

Mick:

These are lovely, familiar and reassuring generalities. What do they mean for the concrete situation? God knows!

You have a strange view of permanent revolution. Your document says that if O'Mahony "did accept that permanent revolution applied to Ireland, then presumably he would connect the fight for reforms to the fight for state power! But since he argues the opposite position - that Ireland is a fully-

developed capitalist state - he can put forward a reformist 'realistic' solution".

So we argue revolutionary politics only in underdeveloped countries, and never in fully-developed capitalist countries?

Jackie:

And do you seriously mean to say that Ireland is not a fully-developed capitalist state - or two states? What is it then? In fact it is an advanced capitalist country, fully capitalist, integrated into West European capitalism as an equal partner, though economically a weak one compared with most E EC states. Ireland is an exporter of capital, and has been since before its independence. Who rules if not the bourgeoisie? There is no agrarian problem - or not one different from that of France, the classical country of the bourgeois revolution.

The problem is a problem of a split Irish bourgeoisie, one section of which (rooted in the Protestant community) wanted different relations with the old British Empire than those favoured by the Catholic bourgeoisie.

Tony:

So there is no National Question in Ireland? Ireland hasn't been convulsed for the last 15 years? And you accuse me of fantasy! You use a mass of words to avoid supporting the Republicans and to deny that a solution to the national question is the central precondition for an Irish socialist working-class revolution.

All that is the result of your denial of the Permanent Revolution for Ireland.

Jackie:

When you say that national liberation is the precondition, that is not Trotsky's permanent revolution, but its logical, political, social and historical opposite - it is the Stalinist and Menshevik stages theory, which is also the central theory of populist Irish Republicans.

Mick:

It's not Gaelic you speak in Oxford, but it's not Marxism or its Trotskyist dialect either! For sure you speak a language Trotsky wouldn't know except in the mouths of the bitter enemies of his politics.

If you are right that the success of the Catholic-nationalist struggle being waged by the Provos is the precondition for working-class action in any part of Ireland, then the situation is hopeless. In reality, the only solution is to break out into Ireland-wide class politics. The national question in all its existing variants is divisive. In its green nationalist variant, which you support, it is divisive and alien to our politics.

Trotsky once defined the permanent revolution as "the reconstruction of the nation under the leadership of the working class". In Ireland you should more accurately talk of negative permanent revolution if - as you do - you see permanent revolution as the completion of the bourgeois-democratic revolution, the solving of the Irish national question to the satisfaction of the Catholic community. Negative permanent revolution, because the national question divides the Irish working class, without whom there

can be no revolution, "permanent revolution" or revolution of any other sort.

Far from Ireland needing the completion of the "bourgeois revolution" - agrarian revolution, the achievement of national unity against semi-feudal, precapitalist particularism - Ireland is more free of pre-capitalist relics than Britain is!

As Engels said, a revolution - even the peculiar Irish variant of the bourgeois-democratic revolution - is good for something after all!

Jackie:

The British bourgeois democratic state still has the forms and the trappings of the old feudal state. Britain is a monarchy, Ireland a republic.

The Stalinists have spent 50 and more years trying to justify formulas such as yours to avoid placing the working class at the centre of the stage with its own programme and banner. They say national liberation first, not only for Ireland, but for Britain now and for pre-Nazi Germany! What you are maintaining has nothing to do with Trotskyist politics.

Tony:

You are a Kidronite! You don't believe Imperialism exists. You reject the struggle for national liberation! Since you don't believe that there is the possibility of developing the present Northern Ireland struggle to a socialist revolution, you are a reformist.

In my document I show at great length that O'Mahony's federalism is a direct response to the interest that the left reformists have shown in the last three or four years in finding a reformist solution for Ireland. O'Mahony rushes to help them.

Mick:

But he argued for autonomy or federalism as long ago as 1969.

Tony:

You still forget about imperialism! Every defeat inflicted on British imperialism is a blow for freedom throughout the world. It weakens the Imperialist camp. It encourages the Nicaraguans, the Salvadoreans, the oppressed Argentinians. If you weaken British imperialism, you will also weaken the forces of reaction in Ireland and weaken the Irish bourgeoisie too, who are only Britain's stooges. If we can beat the British state, we can easily take care of its Irish stooges, north and south of the Border! You will unleash a whole series of struggles throughout the world which will affect Ireland. In that way you will open up the road to socialism in Ireland. The present struggle of the Provos links up with the world struggle against Imperialism and for socialism.

If the Protestants can be persuaded to side against British Imperialism, well and good. If not then they should be coerced, unless you can think of a third alternative.

The armed struggle against imperialism is the thing. It is qualitatively different from any negotiated settlement, even one that agrees a united Ireland, of whatever kind. Any talk of democratic rearrangement that would conciliate the Protestants would undercut the armed struggle, and is thus pro-imperialist.

Mick:

We must have blood! Didn't the great Republican Patrick Pearse himself greet World War 1 with the words that bloodshed is a cleansing and ennobling thing, and that the tired old earth needed to be refreshed with blood?

Jimmy:

Yes, and James Connolly said he was 'a blithering idiot'.

Jackie:

You shouldn't go along with the new fashion to denigrate Pearse. Give or take a bit of foolishness here and there, Pearse was much bigger than those who made plaster-of-Paris statues of him. Our schools still haven't caught up with the pioneer teaching methods he used at the turn of the century.

Tony:

Bloodshed is always part of revolution and anti-imperialism. We shouldn't be afraid of it. You can't make omelettes without breaking eggs. What does the fate of one million Irish people matter in the scale of these gigantic revolutionary perspectives? In the scale of the defeat we can help inflict on the Tory government?

Mick:

That is British nationalism comrade! Upside-down and inside-out British nationalism, but it's got the red, white and blue smeared all over it when you say that defeating the Tory government is more important than anything that happens in Ireland!

Tony:

No it's not! The main enemy is always at home. And in any case you are wrong, comrade! On the other side of the great struggles I'm talking about it would not be a Catholic-dominated Ireland north or south, but a socialist Ireland. We'd have a Red Belfast in a Soviet Ireland! That's what we have to say insistently to the Protestant workers.

Jackie:

Excuse me while I go to the bookshelf and find Trotsky's collected writings for 1935. I'm opening it where Trotsky deals with the plebiscite in the Saarland. The Saar, you remember, was German, but was separated from Germany after the First World War and put under French administration. In 1935 a plebiscite was held to let the Saarlanders decide if they wanted to join the German state. In the event they voted overwhelmingly to do that.

The plebiscite posed a dilemma for the left. The Saar was German, and, should not have been separated from Germany. According to the national principle, it was a clear-cut question: vote yes. But Germany was Nazi Germany: by voting yes, the Saarlanders were voting to submit themselves to fascist dictatorship which would smash the labour movement.

Trotsky thought these were more important considerations than unity of the German nation, and advocated voting "no" to reunification. However, the Stalinists, for a variety of reasons which need not concern us here, chose to take the same approach as Tony.

Tony:

Outrageous!

Jackie:

Bear with me, Tony. To the immediate concrete dilemma facing the German workers of the Saar, the Stalinists answered with the slogan: 'Eine rote Saar in Soviet Deutschland' - a red Saar in Soviet Germany. The German CP was smashed to bits, the German working class was atomised, and murderous fascism was firmly in control. But only traitors, reformists, Trotsky-fascists and running dogs of the imperialists would take account of this and answer the question posed to the Saarland workers in terms of making a choice within the limited options.

So: 'An Beal Feirste Dearg ar Eireann Soviet!' - a red Belfast in Soviet Ireland! (Close observers of my English will know how to take my rusty Gaelic). We need answers to the real problems and to the real situation.

In the Marxist arsenal as distinct from that of the sectarian socialists we have all sorts of limited - reformist, if you like - proposals, demands, democratic and "transitional" proposals to make a bridge between where we are now and socialism. We also try to answer concrete questions, and not take refuge in private fantasies.

Tony, you're abandoning the workers who can't join you in a private world in which the vision of a bloody sectarian holocaust in Northern Ireland is made acceptable by waving the magic wand of "permanent revolution."

Mick:

I might point out that Tony is using the same method as Militant. If you use the general formula 'a socialist Ireland' as the immediate answer to every immediate question, then that cuts both ways. You can fantasise that socialism is built into the logic of the present Catholic struggle. Or you can come to the conclusion that, since it isn't, we should oppose the limited struggle actually going on.

Tony:

No, I'm not like those Pabloites who say that the struggle will automatically develop into socialism. I fight for an alternative revolutionary leadership, which will develop the struggle according to the logic of permanent revolution.

It would be sectarian civil war only in appearance. Again, you are being undialectical. You can't see the wood for the trees - or the revolutionary significance of the struggle. Be dialectical: subordinate the parts to the whole! There would be not a sectarian bloodbath but permanent revolution!

You have the wrong conceptual framework, comrade, and you are terrified and depressed by things which a Marxist who knows we live in the epoch of wars and revolutions takes in his stride. He knows the inner reality is different from what he sees around him.

Don't you Proddies have something in your bible like: 'Yea, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil. For the Lord is my shepherd. he lays me down in green pastures'. Or something like that?

There you are. We have something in common after all - except that I live in the real world, and your head is stuck up

in the clouds. I'm a Marxist - that's what keeps my feet on the ground.

Jackie:

I'm afraid I haven't got much of a head for your sort of "dialectical" thinking. My mind is rather practical and empirical, and plodding reasonableness is the highest I aim for. Perhaps it's got something to do with the Protestant Reformation and the bourgeois culture it produced in England and Scotland and Northern Ireland.

So I can't make any sense of what you have just said. What is imperialism? Export of capital? Colonialism? Or both? But Ireland and England have been tied together since the time England was Norman feudal, with a French-speaking ruling class. The English language we speak today had yet to develop! That was long before capitalism or modern imperialism.

The Protestant colonies in Ireland were put down before the English bourgeois revolution and consolidated in the course of that revolution, in the 1640s and 1688-91. When Ulster was planted, the English colonial empire consisted of a couple of feeble colonies on the eastern shore of America. For centuries, until well into the 20th century, the Anglo-Irish, or anglicised Irish, ruling class was fully integrated as part of the UK ruling class. Even the Irish Free State was a privileged white dominion in the British Empire, or Commonwealth, in the '20s and '30s, while the African countries were Crown Colonies.

Southern Ireland showed its independence by remaining neutral in World War 2. Even so the separation between Britain and the 26 Counties is still less than total: Irish people when they choose to go to England continue to have, effectively, UK citizenship. You cannot explain Anglo-Irish relations, or such complex questions as the Protestant-Catholic relationship, in terms of modern imperialism or capitalism.

It's much more ancient and complex. The two peoples are too entwined, despite the conflicts. Did you know that Mazzini, the great exponent of the national principle in Europe in the mid 19th century, denied that the Irish were a distinct people at all?

Now that's for the Irish to decide, whether they are distinct, and they have decided that they are. The conflicts and problems between the two countries began before capitalism colonial empires, and modern British imperialism, and they have outlasted the British Empire.

Britain retreated from a world-wide Empire with comparatively few upsets. yet you think that Britain would not be able to survive a reorganisation of Ireland. Britain would maintain its close links with Ireland, and probably develop closer links once the Northern problem was solved. Both countries would be in the EEC. Yet you think that reunification and independence for Ireland would shatter the British state.

A curious notion! It hasn't anything to do with the real world, as I'm aware of it. Perhaps I am wearing the wrong ideological spectacles.

You seem to have a 'camel's back' theory: Britain survived the loss of a world empire, but the solution on the basis of a

united Ireland of a small-scale war that drains it of resources will be the last straw!

Maybe I was wrong when I talked about ideological spectacles. You can only hold such a fantastic view of Ireland if you yourself think not of real things and real events but in terms of symbols. It's the symbolic importance of Britain's defeat that will be important. I suspect that not only most Protestants, but also most Catholics and even most Provos, don't see it like that, and would say harsh words against your approach.

Patrick:

The Provos call for a negotiated settlement. They have talked to the British. They call for a declaration of intent to withdraw by the British, and say they will stop the war if they get one. Plainly they are unworthy of you, comrade Tony, and all your "perspectives"!

I found your attitude to the military struggle unexpected from a Trotskyist and yet strangely familiar. Then I recognised it. You are an old-fashioned physical-force republican! I never knew Marxists have that view of violence and armed struggle - the view that it is purifying or all-transforming, or that it transmutes the sort of petty-bourgeois populist politics which the Provisionals have into really revolutionary working-class politics! I thought that was a species of Bakuninism - or, in the modern word, Fanonism.

Jackie:

Connolly rejected this view. I think I can find the reference on my bookshelf.

"Ireland occupies a position among the nations of the earth unique... in the possession of what is known as a physical force party - a party, that is to say, whose members are united upon no one point, and agreed upon no single principle, except the use of physical force as the sole means of settling the dispute between the people of this country and the governing power of Great Britain...

The latter-day high-falutin hillside man exalts into a principle that which the revolutionists of other countries have looked upon as a weapon, and in his gatherings prohibits all discussion of those principles which formed the main strength of his prototypes elsewhere and made the successful use of that weapon possible.

Our people have glided at different periods of the past century from moral force agitation, so called, into physical force rebellion, from constitutionalism into insurrectionism, meeting in each the same failure and the same disaster, and yet seem as far as ever from learning the great truth that neither method is ever likely to be successful until they first insist that a perfect agreement upon the end to be attained should be arrived at as a starting point for all our efforts... Every revolutionary movement in Ireland has drawn the bulk of its adherents from the ranks of disappointed followers of defeated constitutional movements. After having exhausted their constitutional efforts in striving to secure such a modicum of political power as would justify them to their own consciences in taking a place as loyal subjects of the British Empire, they, in despair, turn to thoughts of physical force as a means of attaining their ends.

Their conception of what constitutes freedom was in no sense changed or revolutionised: they still believed in the political form of freedom which had been their ideal in their constitutional days; but no longer hoping for it from the Acts of the British Parliament, they swung over into the ranks of the 'physical force' men as the only means of attaining it".

Forgive me, but I thought that was the Marxist attitude here. For example, Marxists don't make a fetish of Parliament. You don't bow down before it as a fetish, and you aren't scared to use it, like the anarchists (and Republicans!) who make a negative fetish out of it. It's a tool, a weapon. Physical force is a tool, a weapon.

The Republican glorification of physical force on principle is one of the strangest things in politics, yet it is the irreducible dogma of all Republicans. Together with the parallel principle of abstention from Parliament even when elected, it does define the Republicans as a hybrid variety of anarchism. Frederick Engels accurately defined the small terrorist group of the '80s, the Invincibles, as Bakuninists.

I'm amazed that Tony should endorse their attitude and that of their modern counterparts, the Fanonists and so on.

Tony:
What it all comes down to is that you don't want to fight imperialism. You even think the South is free of imperialist domination, and independent!

Jackie:
Imperialism? In the South? I suppose you mean foreign investment? As I argued above, I really don't see what the IRA war has to do with that, or why you think a united Ireland - whether by agreement or on the basis of conquering and subduing the one million Protestants - would change that situation. Since 1958 Southern Ireland has had an industrial revolution - and as a consequence has a massively increased working class and is transformed into a primarily urban country.

The Provos and the INLA denounce foreign investment and want to pull Ireland out of the EEC. Is that your programme against imperialism? Read your history books! From 1932-58 the policy of economic nationalism behind high tariff walls was operated by the Irish bourgeoisie. It led to a growth in employment for a while, but then to absolute stagnation. Irish goods produced behind high protective tariffs could not compete overseas. Nearly a thousand people a week - out of a population just under three million - left the 26 Counties throughout most of the '50s.

Foreign investment changed that. You forget that the Provos, INLA and so on are a pretty small minority in Ireland. Take the EEC, for example, Over 80% of the 26 Counties electorate voted to go into the EEC. The extreme nationalists haven't got a hope in hell of winning the Irish people back to the discarded and discredited policies of economic nationalism and isolationism.

Consider this as a paradox: many more Protestants in Northern Ireland voted against the EEC in the 1975 plebiscite than Catholics in the Southern plebiscite! If that's your definition of nationalism then the Protestant North is once more in the lead!

Personally I have no doubt that a return to economic nationalism in Ireland would be completely reactionary. All the recorded facts show that the vast majority, and especially in the South, think so too.

Session four: Two Nations?

Tony:
All this talk about me having a fetish of armed struggle! But you haven't dealt with my real point: autonomy is a reformist solution, it's a programme for a settlement imposed from above by imperialism.

Mick: The person who would opt for reform or a reformist solution where a thoroughgoing revolution could be triggered by or developed out of a national struggle - he or she would be a reformist. There are not the slightest grounds, in the 12th year of the Northern Ireland war, to think this is a possibility in Northern Ireland.

On the contrary! In any case federalism would not contradict a revolutionary development; it might help it. Even Rayner Lysaght in SO admits that.

A federal Ireland is part of our "transitional" programme. In the first place it can help reassure the Protestants and thus, whether marginally or seriously, help create a basis for class unity for a new Ireland, which would not coerce the Protestants. In the second place, the programme and all its demands are the "property" of the revolutionary party, which uses and swivels the programme, putting forward now this and now that slogan or demand, depending on its analysis of the situation. As Trotsky said, the significance of the programme is the significance of the party. Nothing in our reform programme excludes development and escalation all the way to socialist revolution - unless we should be so stupid as to make a fetish of federalism or autonomy.

You make a fetish of it, Tony - negatively.

Jackie:
You, Tony, plainly have the notion that we should shun reforms because reforms are an alternative to revolution. You say: it is not wrong to argue for reforms, but it is wrong to argue for a reformist solution to the Irish struggle.

Here you say the right words - nothing wrong with reforms - but then you contradict them flatly. Any proposal less than full revolution, any specific demand focused on a specific problem, can be a 'reformist solution'. The question is, how is it used, and by whom?

What do you think of Trotsky's Transitional Programme? Do we fear to use single - realisable, and, taken on their own, reformist - slogans like the sliding scale of wages? Why fear to use autonomy or federalism?

If you are logical, you will object to using any specific demand from the Transitional Programme. You will insist on using the whole programme at all times. I.e. you'll be a passive propagandist. That's what the logic of your position is for Ireland - passive propagandism.

Advancing democratic solutions to the Protestant/Catholic conflict in no sense means setting a predetermined point at which a struggle will stop. Concretely, the limits of the

Northern Ireland struggle are set by the protestant-catholic split in the working class. You fear that a proposal for a democratic settlement will limit revolutionary possibilities because you see the war of the IRA - the "national struggle" - as a great locomotive, a deus ex machina, outside of the class struggle and the development of the working class. As has already been pointed out, your notion of socialism coming out of the present war implies socialism imposed against a big section of the working class by a military elite!

We have a different assessment of the potential of the present Six County Catholic struggle, based on the relationship of forces, the attitudes of the Protestant workers, etc. Nothing that we propose will or could freeze the situation at its present limited possibilities.

A democratic settlement, on the contrary, might create a framework for reconciliation and thus could speed up developments beyond the limits now imposed on them by the Catholic/Protestant communal antagonism and the working-class split which is part of it.

I thought that was an ABC question - how reforms relate to the revolutionary programme and the Transitional Programme.

Tony:
You have it back to front. The national question is central to permanent revolution. Read Trotsky! Revolutionary struggle against imperialism, like the IRA's, is a higher level of struggle than the struggle for reforms. It is a direct challenge to the imperialist state.

Mick:
The classic country of permanent revolution, and strictly speaking the only one, was Russia. The national question played a peripheral part in it - the oppressed nations were liberated by the Russian workers' revolution.

Tony:
You may well talk about nations. As I've told you before, O'Mahony is a "two-nations" man, and his 'autonomy' really amounts to the Protestants keeping a sectarian sub-state of their own. I don't really see how it's different from Protestant self-determination.

Mick:
O'Mahony told me in great confidence, but in the circumstances I suppose I can tell you, Tony. He swears he agrees with the polemic he wrote recently in SO against the "two nations theory". He doesn't call for Protestant self-determination.

Tony:
He is a liar. I can't see any distinction between a community and a nation, or between autonomy and self-determination. You need to simplify reality - not overcomplicate it. There are only two classes.

Patrick:
And there are only two colours, black and white...

Tony:
It's quite plain: O'Mahony thinks the Protestants are a distinct grouping. Therefore he can only be saying they are a

nation. I knew it as soon as I heard of the notorious "two nations theory".

Jackie:
Did you ever read that great, classic, work of Marxist theory published in the Bolshevik Party journal in 1913, 'Marxism and the National Question'?

Tony:
No, who wrote it?

Jackie:
J V Stalin.

Tony:
Now I'm beginning to understand!

Jackie:
According to Trotsky the work was written under the schoolmastership of Bukharin and 'creatively edited' by Lenin. The fact that Stalin the counterrevolutionary dictator rebuilt the walls of the old Tsarist "prison-house of nations", so that the USSR is today the worst oppressor of nations in the world - that doesn't and can't undo the work of Stalin the revolutionary, including this, any more than the Stalinist counter revolution can cancel out the historical significance of the October Revolution.

'Marxism and the National Question' is one of the simplest basic expositions on this issue. I've got a copy of it here on the shelf. I'll get it.

Tony:
Go on...

Jackie:
Ready! Speaking for the Bolshevik Party in 1913, Stalin defines a nation Like this:

"A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture".

The Northern Ireland Protestants have all the characteristics outlined here - bar one. They do not have a distinct territory.

There is a big Catholic minority even in Belfast, in the centre of the Protestant heartland of Antrim and Down, and a Catholic majority in two of the Six Counties and about half the whole Six County land area.

The Protestants and Catholic communities interlace and interpenetrate. The Protestant colony put down in Ireland four centuries ago could have developed into a nation, as the historically younger but similar English colonies in America did, by pushing aside the natives more or less completely or massacring them. It didn't.

Not enough settlers came in; landlords let land (usually the worst land) in disputed English/Scots areas to Catholics; the Catholics made their way from the areas surrounding the Protestant territory into the industrial areas as industry developed in the 19th century.

There is no Protestant nation, fully developed or sorted out. There is a Protestant community with a distinct history, culture, tradition, and psychological identity.

In the last decade or more, the Protestant community has begun to see itself as increasingly distinct from Britain too - or sections of it have.

If you like, it's a nation that might have been - a nation manqué. It's even, if you like, a nation that might yet be. A Protestant nation could be crystallised out by a process of mass population movements in the course of a sectarian civil war, and as a result of a separating - out of its identification with Britain in conflict with Britain.

Jimmy:

I think you are just logic-chopping, Jackie. Many countries have big minorities. Why should the Six Counties be different? The process of the separating-off of a Protestant nation has probably gone a wee bit further than you think.

Jackie:

Well, that's possible. It may be that the 'nation' that the Provos will secure self-determination for is the Protestants!

Tony:

But what defines the identity is their pro-imperialism!

Mick:

Tony, you maintain your picture of the Northern Ireland Protestants only by a wilful act of ignoring the facts and the history.

You define them out of their full historic and social context by a one-dimensional political caricature - "pro-imperialist". Suppose some comrades haven't your gift for wearing ideological blinkers to structure what they see, and face the fact that the Protestants are a distinct community? Suppose they agree with you on the basis of your notion of imperialism and the pro-imperialism of the Protestants? Then they would go over to the "British and Irish Communist Organisation" position of defending the Northern Ireland state as an expression of democratic self-determination by the Protestants.

You are BICO's mirror-image.

Patrick:

Come to think of it, the BICO were once their own mirror image - populist Catholic-nationalist Irish Republicans, albeit Stalin-Mao flavoured!

Tony:

You are just covering for O'Mahony. Self-determination is only for the oppressed, not for oppressors or the allies of oppressors.

Mick:

Self-determination is possible only to people with a distinct territory, where they are the overwhelming majority population. We do not talk of self-determination for the Protestants because they are a community laced in with the Catholic community; and because self-determination for the Protestants lies at the other side of a bloody civil war and repartition.

If you like, autonomy, or federalism, is a compromise, an attempt to find a basis for conciliation and building working-class unity across the communal divide.

The Catholics are the big majority in Ireland. So we talk of self-determination for Ireland as a whole, and as much autonomy for the Protestants as is compatible with that. Federalism is a concretisation of that idea.

Jackie:

These nuances and shades are pretty important, Tony! By definition it is the oppressed who have to fight for self-determination. But oppressors, and especially the local allies of imperialist oppressors - and there are many communities like that dotted around the world - can quickly find themselves the oppressed.

Our attitude derives from a basic programme - we are for what Lenin called consistent democracy. John O'Mahony's article in SO about the communal violence in Sri Lanka talks about that. Incidentally, why are you for federalism in Sri Lanka and not in Ireland?

Tony:

That's all abstract. Lenin only meant personal democratic rights. I'm for democratic rights for the Protestants, yes; and for the Jews in Palestine, after Israel has been smashed and conquered. That's the traditional Trotskyist programme! It used to be all over the pages of the Socialist Labour League press in the '60s, in our campaign against the Pabloite revisionists and Sinhalese chauvinists of Ceylon.

It just shows how ignorant you are if you don't know that! You must be mad if you think there is any comparison with Northern Ireland. I never learned anything about that in the SLL. And I'll be damned if, after 20 years as a Trotskyist, I'll learn about it from a reformist like O'Mahony.

Jimmy:

But don't you think, Tony, that there are at least elements of Catholic chauvinism in, for example, the Provos' present attitude to the Protestant community? Why are the Sinhalese chauvinists, if the Provos are not? Even the founders of the Provos, O'Brady and David O'Connell, say as much in their own way.

Mick:

No, Tony, I'm sure you didn't hear any of this in Gerry Healy's SLL. But Sri Lanka has everything to do with Ireland. The parallels are astonishingly comprehensive and precise, though of course I'm not saying that the two are identical, and all parallels of this sort break down at some point.

We've just seen the bloody consequences of the lack of democracy for a minority there. Some of the Tamils were favoured by the British, according to their policy of resting on local minorities. Some of the Sinhalese reaction against the Tamils was rooted in this history.

Tony:

That's irrelevant. The Tamils are now an oppressed minority.

Mick:

The Irish minority problem presents itself to us now in an artificial form, created by British imperialism and the Orange

Order: it is the problem of a Catholic minority in the artificial Six County state. That must be the thing that immediately concerns us - support for the Catholic minority and their revolt.

But our basic programme must include a solution to the basic structural Irish minority problem. This is the problem of a Protestant, or Anglo-Scots -Irish, minority. We must offer them a democratic framework.

The Northern Ireland Protestants would be an oppressed minority now in a united Ireland that bore any relation to the 26 Counties.

Jackie:
And to say that socialism is the answer is true but irrelevant. Socialism will not immediately dissolve national identities. We will need a democratic programme for situations like Northern Ireland, or Sri Lanka, or Palestine, even after the socialist revolution.

Read Lenin on the question. Some of his most bitter scorn and anger is directed against those who denied the need for such a programme after the socialist revolution. Read his polemics against Bukharin and Pyatakov in 1916.

Anne-Marie:
You've just got the wrong priorities. The Catholics suffer terrible sectarianism from the Protestants, and here you are, worrying about possible sectarianism against the Protestants in the future by the heroic leaders of the oppressed Catholics, the Provisionals!

And you can't identify the Provos with the 26 County state. The Provos make it quite clear that they are a socialist, secular movement
They are genuine radicals, not "fake lefts."!

Jackie:
You say the Provisionals are more genuinely radical than their predecessors? No they are not, actually. Even those who talk socialism in the North have not broken with Church teaching. In the South they are middle class, often openly right wing.

Session 5: The "Advanced Theory of Permanent Revolution": A Provo Socialist Revolution?

Jackie:
Wait a minute. Let me answer the door. One other person is expected for this last session.

(Jackie goes to the door and returns followed by a tall bearded man in a long overcoat looking rather like Holbein's well-known portrait of Henry VIII. Jackie introduces all those seated, and then says:)

This is Donal Rayner. He's from Dublin. He's in People's Democracy. We're in touch from time to time. I mentioned this discussion to him and he said he'd like to come. He has contributed a couple of pieces to the discussion in SO, as you may recall. He knows a lot about modern Ireland, having written a book on the 26 County state after 1922. He agrees with you, Tony, I'm sorry to say.

Donal:
Sorry I couldn't get here earlier. How is the discussion going to proceed?

Jackie:
We've already had four sessions. It makes most sense if we have a look at your views - the stuff you put in SO. We all read your articles with great interest.

Donal:
You mean my open letter to John O'Mahony and the follow-up piece I did? That man always gets everything wrong! I've been telling him for 15 years that he doesn't understand the national question and the permanent revolution in Ireland.

Mick:
Oh, you know John, do you, Donal? I didn't realise you did.

Donal:
Yes, Sean and I go back a long way - '67 or '68, I think. We used to be in the same organisation, the old Irish Workers' Group. In one of my SO pieces, I mention a conversation I had with him six or seven years ago, where he confirmed over a few pints that he is convinced that Northern Ireland's Protestants were originally colons.

Jackie:
Yes: three and four hundred years ago!

Donal:
He gave his entire position away by admitting that, don't you think?

Mick:
Something puzzles me, Donal. You denounce O'Mahony in SO as British. But he isn't, and if you know him you couldn't possibly think he is.

Donal:
It depends what you mean by Irish. O'Mahony doesn't agree with us politically. He is not for Ireland.

Jackie:
Your idea of Ireland!

Donal:
It's nonsense for him to claim to be Irish. There's a consensus on that: the IRSP made the same point in their SO polemic with O'Mahony.

Jackie:
I remember. But that was just yahoo stuff, Donal! You should know better, or at least feel inhibited about it.

Patrick:
It's all yahoo stuff!

Jimmy:
Is this worth pursuing? I can't see the point

Mick:
I don't know if it is worth pursuing, but I have a sneaking feeling that it has a bearing on the whole Protestant-Catholic business. After all, what is an Irish person? You rule out the Protestant community from your idea of Irishness by

defining them as pro-imperialist. And in the same way you reclassify John O'Mahony, someone you know to be Irish, as British because he doesn't agree with your version of Irish nationalism. On one level, of course, this is all laughable nonsense. But it has a terrible logic. Nationality becomes the same thing as political allegiance, and you transpose the attitudes proper to struggle against political trends into a struggle of community against community. That produces chauvinism.

Tony:

If the Protestants stopped being Unionists, then they'd just be Irish, no problem. We have to break them from their pro-imperialist consciousness. If...

Jackie:

All these 'ifs', Tony! As the old saying goes, "'if' was never in a true story". We have to begin from where we are, and that includes the overweening fact that the Protestants have a conception of their own identity different from the identity of the rest of the Irish. Objectively there is no doubt that they are a distinct community - in origin, history, culture, religion, and, for most of the time since the Ulster colony arrived, language (the majority on the island then spoke Gaelic).

Tony:

There is no doubt that politics is decisive here - otherwise you wind up like O'Mahony arguing that Poland has national rights, even if that leads to anti-socialist counter-revolution. Donal is quite right, O'Mahony can't be Irish, wherever he was born, however he talks or looks, and even if he calls himself Irish!

Mick:

Not even if he has an Irish passport?

Jackie:

Don't be stupid, Mick! Who cares about passports? We can't be formalists about these things. Look at Donal Rayner: he's probably got a British passport. Or he used to have, anyway, because he's Welsh!

Donal:

No I'm not, I'm Irish.

Jackie:

You are if you want to be, Donal. And plainly you do want to be. I remember the biographical details you put at the back of your book on the 26 Counties - descent from Fergus O'Connor the Chartist and from Arthur O'Connor the United Irishman and Napoleonic general, wasn't it?

Donal:

Yes, so I'm Irish - even if I was born and grew up in Wales.

Jackie:

Not only Irish, Donal. With that genealogy you are surely a descendant of the last crowned High King of Ireland, Rory O'Connor.

Donal:

So I believe.

Jackie:

Ours is no narrow workerist discussion group! All Irish classes are represented here, including some that died out long ago.

Patrick:

But it isn't a joke. You really think you have the right to give out national identity tags and take them away as if they were nicknames! The spectacle of the Irish nationalist Welshman reclassifying the socialist Irishman as British may be the stuff of farce. But there's no way that approach isn't going to lead to the most vicious and intolerant chauvinism: because of course the political virtues for which you award the Irish national identity-tag - anti-imperialism, Republican separatism, ingrained hostility to Britain - are to be found in one community only, and are detested by the other. Nationality is not for you an objective fact, but a political definition you can award or remove according to your whim. You use it as a political hatchet!

Anne-Marie:

What are you people? Sociologists? Of course we use political definitions! If the Protestants don't accept Irish nationalism, and prefer a link with Britain, then they're British - and they should go and live in Britain! In any case O'Mahony isn't Irish - look at the way he writes about Ireland. Peter Flack nailed him on that in SO.

Calling the leaders of Ireland "backward, Catholic, bourgeois, partitionist bigots", indeed! As comrade Peter said, he has a "vitriolic hatred" for the real Irish.

Jackie:

Yes, disgusting stuff, Anne-Marie. I suspect he is what we used to call here a "godless communist". I'll bet he even thinks romantic Ireland is dead and gone and with O'Leary in the grave!

Donal:

I think you have to accept that the Protestants are for now, at this stage of the revolution, outside the national cause and pitted against it. They will be drawn in as that cause develops and becomes a socialist movement according to the logic of the permanent revolution. There is no other solution - the movement must be spread to the South.

If it does, and if it uses working - class forms of struggle, then that can change the entire situation in the North, and the Protestants can come in from the cold.

And it has spread and used the said methods two times already - after Bloody Sunday, in February 1972, when there were strikes, and during the hunger strikes of 1981.

That's the solution.

Mick:

I'd like to see it your way, Donal, but it doesn't add up. Three objections:

Why do you think even big strikes and working-class activity in the South in support of the Northern Catholics should be able to somehow 'get through' to the Protestant workers?

They would not be seen as working-class action, but as activity by the Catholic workers to help their own in the North.

That's what they would be. Strikes for such a cause would not necessarily have implicit in them any sort of working-class politics. It depends.

And why do you think socialism would eliminate the Protestants' reluctance to be a minority? Even if the fear of Rome Rule were eliminated, it might well be that you would still have to find some federal framework. A national identity different from the Irish majority is a big part of the Protestant community. You yourself call them a "national minority", don't you? The idea that socialism will eliminate all such divisions and supersede the need for a democratic programme is childish.

Again I urge you to read Lenin's polemics against Bukharin and Pyatakov in 1916. There is a short answer to all the 'socialism-is-the answer' merchants - whether it's your 'Provos-will-lead-the-permanentrevolution-in-Ireland' or Militant's up-in-the-air call for 'Socialism now. It is irrelevant. Questions of national and communal relations will exist after the socialist revolution, and probably for a long time. Read Lenin!

And, finally, you contradict yourself utterly. If working-class methods of struggle - strikes etc. - in the South in support of the Catholic community in the North are ipso facto working class in the political sense, then why would not the stupendous working-class action in the 1974 Protestant General Strike in defence (as they saw it) of their community, not also working class politics?

Donal:

Because they are not anti-imperialist! Because they oppose imperialism, if at all, only from the right! Because they had the collusion of the state forces for the May 1974 strike and could not have had that "strike" otherwise - and anyway, the Protestant workers were coerced into that strike!

Jackie:

I think you grossly exaggerate the level of collusion, Donal - and also the importance of coercion at the beginning of the 1974 strike.

Jimmy:

There is always coercion! What do you think pickets are for?

Jackie:

However it began, the strike quickly became a real expression of the drive of the Protestant community against the Council of Ireland and the power-sharing executive. You have a strange belief in the omnipotence of the state against a general strike, Donal!

Mick:

Especially for someone whose international organisation spent much of the '70s throughout Europe advocating the all-purpose instant general strike for all occasions!

Jackie:

To get back to the point I was making: you can't say strikes in the South in support of the Northern Catholics are working-class politics without also implicitly saying the same about the 1974 Protestant General Strike. I don't think either can be said to express working-class politics.

Mick:

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You ascribe a character to strikes in the South straight out of your own political preconceptions. You try, ridiculously, to diminish what happened in '74 and to pretend that it wasn't a genuine act of the Protestant working class. Like Tony, you wear blinding ideological spectacles!

Tony:

Everyone has ideological spectacles!

Donal:

Yours are those of a British reformist, scared of Permanent Revolution and wanting to deny the relevance in Ireland of the said process and strategy!

Mick:

Yes, of course, we all structure reality according to our preoccupations. But you take similar things, Catholic strikes for the Catholic community and Protestant strikes for the felt concerns of the Protestant community. You say that one of them - the feeble ripples of Catholic solidarity in the South - is of one kind, genuine working-class action, and the other, the powerful and victorious general strike in the North, is no sort of working-class action. I think your ideological spectacles are very thick indeed!

I'm not saying, incidentally, that you should not take the political differences into account - only don't equate the Southern strikes with working-class politics on the basis of their allegedly anti-imperialist drive and pretend that the Northern general strike has no working-class character at all because of its aims. Otherwise you miss the point. The most terrible thing about Northern Ireland's tragedy is that the Orange cause was reduced to "the men and women of no property", and it was a working-class weapon which won the Protestant community their greatest victory.

And, Donal, I'd be cautious in flinging about labels like 'anti-imperialist' and 'pro-imperialist' here. It was the Protestants who smashed British strategy, and that strategy was heavily dependent on majority Catholic support and on the SDLP. If the Protestants were to the right of Britain, that only emphasizes that they are not to be adequately defined as Britain's tools and pawns. They have their own interests, for which they are prepared to oppose Britain. Your distinction between good and bad "anti-imperialism" is rather arbitrary.

Incidentally, if strikes in support of one side have a magic healing power for the working class, then why didn't the stupendous general strike - and that's what it was, Donal R, whatever about its objectives - up here evoke some sympathy in the South? Wrong politics? Politics and objectives that repelled the Southern workers? Of course! But it would work the other way round too. Strikes in the South in support of the Catholics in the North would, for the Protestant workers, be strikes with the wrong politics and repellent objectives.

Mick:

Donal, I think your own chosen definition of the Protestants - a national minority - rules out your 'political' distinction between pro-Catholic strikes, which you see as working-class politics and Protestant or pro-Protestant strikes, which you see as not.

If they are a national minority, then the entire body of literature of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky on the subject of distinct peoples, nations, and fragments of nations, tells us

that they have certain rights. Whether you mean it or not, you are saying that the intra-Irish aspects of Northern Ireland come down to the struggle of a national minority with the majority.

Donal:

Overlaid by the artificial Six County state and snarled up by British interference.

Mick:

Yes of course. But what follows as a result of British involvement cannot for us be that those who you say are a national minority have no rights. The tragedy is that the workers on both sides line up strictly according to communities, or, if you like, nationalities. Both sides have rights!

Anne-Marie:

You talk as if imperialism doesn't exist! You say that the oppressed and the oppressor are on an equal plane, but national rights are only for the oppressed, not for oppressors!

Patrick:

That's one of the most common ideas on the Trotskyisant left - and one of the most stupid. You support the oppressed, sure, but you can't support a proposal to replace the present situation where there are half a million oppressed Catholics in the Six Counties with one in which there will be a million oppressed Protestants in a Catholic state!

Donal:

I don't know what you people are going on about on the Provos and federalism. Don't mind what David O'Connell has said: federalism was never intended as 'the hand of friendship' for the national minority. Federalism in the early '70s reassured the Provos' backward element that the religious sectarian features of the 26 County state would not have to go when Ireland was united.

Mick:

Suppose that's true. It's just another way of saying that Ireland is not inhabited by one homogeneous people, and that the old Provo leadership understood that. I find the idea that such an arrangement as federalism could only shield and protect backward and undesirable things pretty childish, Donal; and that's your point, isn't it? All the stranger coming from you because, in your SO piece you accept that the proposal of federalism may have a useful role to play in conciliating the Protestants at some time in the future.

Donal:

But not now!

Jackie:

That's one of the most revealing things about your position, Donal R, but I'll come back to that. Go on, Mick.

Mick:

In any case, none of us support the Provo version of federalism: we say it contained the core idea that could be developed.

Patrick:

Donal, you give a picture of the Southern Provos' reasons for wanting federalism. But what about the Northern Provos'

reasons for wanting rid of it? The reasons are to do with the peculiar situation of the Northern Catholics, with the fact that they are something like a new and distinct Irish minority. The Northerners oppose federalism because they would be a minority within any remotely likely Northern sub-state. (The Provos' nine county Ulster is a romantic fantasy).

Tony:

And why shouldn't they? Why should they consent to be a minority in their own country? Accept Protestant oppression and privilege? That's what's at issue.

Patrick:

We Catholics in Northern Ireland should not accept any discrimination or inequality - not one jot of it. And we won't! But there is no getting away from the fact that we are the minority. Even if you lop off the Catholic areas along the Border - and you surely would in any rational federation...

Mick:

Don't be too sure. De Valera was willing to accept a federation of Six Counties and 26 - and I suppose such an arrangement in the future is not inconceivable.

Patrick:

Maybe. The point is that some of the Northern Catholics would always be the minority in any Northern Ireland entity. That is what is at the root of the Northern Provos' revolt against the old Provo policy.

Anne-Marie:

You're saying here that the Six County Catholics are driving to get into a position to oppress the Protestants! What someone in the SO discussion called 'Catholic irredentism'.

Patrick:

No I'm not. Whatever you think of the Provo politics grafted onto it, the Catholic revolt is a just revolt against oppression. But that doesn't tell us the best objectives for that revolt to aim at.

In my view it should aim at achieving a democratic settlement and a framework for Protestant-Catholic coexistence on this island. No such framework is possible that doesn't take account of the separate Protestant identity. The problem for the Six County Catholic minority is that if they accept that, then they are accepting that they'll always be a minority - not necessarily an oppressed minority, or anything other than a fully equal minority, but still a minority.

You can see why we don't feel at all easy with the idea of any Protestant-majority sub-state. Yet without that no resolution is possible.

Jackie:

Not quite, Pat. Another resolution is possible - by way of sectarian civil war, the massacring and driving out of populations, and the terrorisation of those not driven out. To me that is a very strong recommendation for seeking an agreed solution.

Patrick:

The tragedy is that the long and unequal struggle of the Provos has pushed them into a variant of Irish nationalism that is now organically confined to one community and expresses the narrow sectional interests (or what they think are the interests) of one community. It expresses those interests in such a way as to exclude the broader all-Ireland, conciliating, Republican framework. The demand for a unitary Irish state is completely unrealisable. The attempt by the Northern Ireland minority to realise it can only - at a certain stage, if Britain were to pull out without a widely accepted settlement - lead to sectarian civil war and repartition.

Say what you like about it, Donal, the old Provo leadership are better Republicans than the Northerners!

Donal:

Even if the said Northerners are socialists?

Patrick:

Not socialists - populists!

Anne-Marie: You support the right wing against the left, the petty bourgeois against the socialists!

Patrick:

And you support the communal populists - because of a little garnish of socialist phrases arranged around a core of increasingly sectarian politics!

No, I don't deny that some people in the Provos have sincere socialist intentions. But in any case we don't need the Provos to be socialists; or, anyway, it would be unfair and inappropriate to condemn and dismiss them, a nationalist movement, for not being working-class socialists. As a nationalist movement, they must be judged by how they relate to the central question which gave them their origin and with which they concern themselves - the national question and the intra-Irish conflict.

Here they are narrow, divisive Catholic chauvinists! They leave themselves no other policy than the suicidal attempt to conquer the Protestants. They disguise this political logic with utterly futile demands that Britain should 'disarm' the Protestants before it leaves; that is, they evade facing up to the impossibility of the Six County Catholics coercing the Protestants by fantasising that Britain will do it for them!

You say they are a radical new departure, Donal? On this issue they have the politics of John Redmond and the pre-1914 Home Rule Party.. John Redmond, too, looked to Britain to deal with the Protestants.

Robert:

Yes, but they were always like that, whatever they talked about. Blowing the guts out of our towns and cities in the early '70s - that was no 'hand of friendship' from David O'Connell and his car-bombers!

Tony:

They were fighting imperialism.

Mick:

They were trying to smash the old sectarian state. You might not have chosen their methods, or advocated them, but you had to support their revolt.

Jackie:

Here, though, Mick, the attitude you take differs a bit whether you live in Britain or Ireland. In Britain it may be enough to say that it's the revolt of an oppressed people, or section of a people, against your own state, and you have to support it, whatever you think about its advisability, methods, and objectives. For me, I'm sure it wasn't enough, and those who confined themselves to doing that, keeping reservations and criticism at best for the small print, like your friend O'Mahony for example, have a lot to answer for.

But at least you can see their point of view. Here in Ireland you had to oppose the Provo campaign as something growing out of traditional physical-force-on-principle Republicanism. It wasn't just murderous - and Robert is essentially right on that - it was always hopeless and always counterproductive.

If the unity of the Irish people, and especially of the working class, is the prerequisite for progress, then you don't 'fight the Brits' in such a way as to push the possibility of that unity back for decades and fill the chasm dividing Catholics and Protestants with a river of blood.

Tony:

You see how far you've gone, Jackie? You condemn the war of national liberation against British imperialism.

Jackie:

It's not a matter of condemnation, Tony, but of understanding. The majority here want the British link. Of course there is also the ages-old question of Irish independence and the question of the Six County Catholic minority. But, despite that, to define the situation as one of 'British-occupied Ireland' is crass stupidity.

It's not politically true, and it implies physically conquering the Protestant community. That's what the Provo campaign implies. Do you know, Tony, that lots of people in Northern Ireland whose ancestors have been here for hundreds of years think it means them when they hear talk of 'Brits out' ?

Mick:

Yet the Provos brought down the old Stormont majority - sectarian - Belfast Parliament, and it would not have fallen without them. The Provo campaign has been the locomotive of change. It has been the spur that set the politicians seeking changes and solutions. Before that there was 50 years of stagnation and Catholic oppression.

It may be true - I think for sure it is - that no clear sweeping victory is possible for the Catholics, and that the Provisionals' campaign has pushed back the remotest possibility of Northern Ireland working-class unity for decades. Nevertheless, working-class unity didn't exist before that campaign.

Jimmy:

On a trade-union level it did.

Mick:

United trade unions agreeing not to discuss the fact that Catholics were second-class citizens and suffered job discrimination! The point I'm making is that the Provos' campaign was, maybe, the only way out of the impasse.

That's how it's always been in Irish history - the Irish against the overwhelming might and power of Britain, and the revolutionaries forcing the rulers to make reforms from above. The constitutional nationalists - now, the SDLP - reap the harvest sown by the 'men of violence', the 'mountainy men'.

Jackie:

Yes, but the chapter isn't ended yet, Mick. The Protestant community has been set in motion over the last dozen years, and had an extreme new sharpness of identity carved out for it. That process probably isn't finished yet - and so history hasn't yet said its last word on the Provo campaign.

I'm not entirely sure of it, but a case could be made that the Provo campaign cut right across a line of development which might have seen some form of a united Ireland, as part of Britain and Ireland moving into the EEC.

Earlier someone described the Provos as SDLPers or Fianna Failers with guns. It's also true that the Provos have been pursuing British policy - with methods which have mainly had the effect of mobilising Protestants against any resolution of the problem that the Catholics would find acceptable.

Tony:
British policy!

Jackie:

Yes, Britain was moving towards trying to shed responsibility for Northern Ireland in the '60s - gingerly, slowly, empirically. The civil rights movement and the Protestant backlash, and then the Provos, cut right across that, and you could argue that the result after 12 years is that they have erected new barriers against any such reunification from above. Certainly the chasm dividing Protestants and Catholics - and that's the root problem - has been gouged deeper.

Donal:
Emotional crap! Where's the evidence that Britain would do anything like that? It was international companies that put pressure for changes to the sectarian Northern Ireland state.

Jackie:
Evidence? The Anglo-Irish free trade agreement in 1965, the O'Neill-Lemass meetings around the same time. The stuff about international companies is just a ploy to feed your picture of Britain as the eternal villain. What about the British declaration about Britain agreeing to a united Ireland, if the Northern Ireland majority would?

Tony:
But Britain maintains the present state!

Jackie:
Yes, that's the point, and that's the great crime - maintaining the status quo, instead of radically changing it. However, things might have been changed piecemeal that can't be changed now.

It may be that the Protestant backlash that started to gather strength in the mid '60s would have prevented change

anyway. The point is that the Provos' campaign built up that backlash into one of enormous proportions.

So while it is true that the Provos have spurred on the politicians, and got rid of Stormont, you also have to measure the price of that in deepening the division in the Irish people, in making the root problem more intractable.

Anne-Marie:
So they should have relied on and trusted the government?

Mick:
No, but they should have refrained from doing anything that avoidably made the root problem worse.

Patrick:
That was the fatal effect of the delusion expressed in such of our ideas as the description of the Six Counties as just 'British-occupied Ireland'.

Donal:
This is just idle speculation! Meanwhile the Revolution is alive, well and walking about in Ireland! And you are against it, Mick, with O'Mahony's nonsense in SO.

We should get back to federalism. I think SO uses federalism to deny Permanent Revolution. SO seeks reformist solutions and counterposes them to a thoroughgoing radical and revolutionary solution. You want to stop the process of Permanent Revolution!

So did the Provo right wing. For them federalism was an insurance against the revolution spilling over from the North to the South. However, the said process asserts itself. Federalism has been ended by the Sinn Fein left.

It's either federalism or Permanent Revolution right now: you must choose your perspective.

Tony:
Exactly!

Donal:
Once the Permanent Revolution has fully taken hold, and there is a 32 County mobilisation, then sections, and eventually the bulk, of the Protestant workforce will join it. Perhaps then, the idea of a federal Ireland will be revived as a tactical move to ease the Protestants into Irish unity. However, we can't know: it remains a matter of conjecture.

Mick:
So you do think that federalism may be useful?

Donal:
At a later stage, perhaps.

Mick:
Why then and not now? You should think about it, Donal R. You accept that federalism may help conciliate the Protestants. But it can't be used yet! They can't be conciliated yet? Why?

I leave aside your fine distinction in your SO article between tactics and principles, except to say that consistent

democracy in such matters as national minority (your definition) rights is not just a matter of 'tactics' for Marxists.

But given that you think federalism may be useful at some stage, then why not use it from the very beginning? Why do you exult in the dropping of the 'said demand' by the Provos?

Donal:

Because they have moved a bit towards the Permanent Revolution, and see Ireland as a whole as needing to be revolutionised.

Mick:

But this doesn't make sense! You think that after most of working class Ireland is 'mobilised' (whatever that means) and the majority of Protestant workers have begun to join 'the mobilisation', then it may make sense to propose federalism as a means of conciliating the Northern Protestant community. But you can't offer it before, because that somehow wouldn't be 'revolutionary'!

Or is it that you calculate that the Provo leaders are going in the right direction and that their move from the old federalism is part of that process, and so you accept their position for the moment, while you reserve the right to think that federalism may be some use later.

Donal:

I've already said what I think about the old federalism of the IRA right wing. I say only that the said proposal is a tactic, not any sort of principle. The general trajectory of the Provo left is the decisive thing.

Mick:

The entire political history of the Mandelbrot international tendency to which you belong consists of weaving political events into super-optimistic scenarios, and relating not to the world as it is, but to the prospects read back from that scenario. Your stuff on federalism and the Provos doesn't make sense to me.

Jackie:

It does make sense, Mick. Donal R and his comrades believe that Fidel Castro Adams will lead the Irish socialist revolution. The revolution will be triggered by the war the Provos are waging in the North. That being their scenario, everything else follows.

As I say, I'd prefer a more general formula than 'federalism' - 'as much autonomy as is compatible with the democratic rights of the majority of the Irish people'. But I'm at one with Mick in seeking a democratic solution to the intra-Irish conflict.

Tony:

But what you're doing is giving reformist advice to the government, or to the Labour leaders!

Donal: What else is it? It certainly isn't Permanent Revolution!

Mick:

You could say that about every democratic or transitional demand we make - about everything we call for short of the socialist revolution!

And, after all, the ruling class sometimes listens to our demands and grants them - so you could say they heed our 'advice', especially when we can link it up with threats!

What separates revolutionary socialists from reformists when they advocate the same limited demands? We rely on the masses, we try to organise the working class to fight for the demands. We link our demands with other, more advanced, demands, and try to lead the workers' movement forward, as far as possible, beyond the initial limited demand.

Read the Transitional Programme.

Tony:

There's nothing in the Transitional Programme about autonomy for the Protestants!

Donal:

We have no use for such a demand now. Later, maybe.

Jackie:

The reason you don't have a use for it, Donal, is that you in Peoples' Democracy see yourselves as the fifth wheel of the Provo chariot, to which you are trying to hitch yourselves. You see no independent role for an Irish Trotskyist group. At best you see it as no more than a propaganda auxiliary of the Republicans. And in fact that's what PD has been, since 1971.

You talk about the working class, but all your hopes are centred on the military elitists in the Provisional IRA. That is why you cannot see any use for a democratic programme now.

Donal:

You mean that we're not sectarians like you, standing aside from the actual struggle!

Jackie:

The immediate use for us of a democratic programme in Ireland is to enable workers from both communities to relate to each other and to reassure each other honestly that neither side wants to impose or continue any form of national, communal, or sectarian oppression of the other.

Donal:

That'll bring the workers together, just like that?

Jackie:

No it won't, just like that. But no other basis of working-class political unity is possible - not even the unity of a few hundred from both communities. You can't ignore the "constitutional question" that is tearing Northern Ireland apart and may yet tear all Ireland apart.

Donal:

We don't ignore it! We have a fully adequate solution - a united Ireland which in the course of the unfolding of the Permanent Revolution will also be a socialist Ireland.

Patrick:

You have a programme of forcibly incorporating the Protestants into a Catholic-dominated Ireland. The rest of your hopes and 'perspectives' are just fantasy and window-dressing, though I'm sure you sincerely believe in them.

Robert:

You say, Jackie, that we can't unite workers without a proposal for constitutional readjustment. What about Militant? They have got a bit of support here.

Jackie:

Militant makes abstract propaganda for socialism now instead of dealing with the immediate political issues. It belongs to the same order of sectarian socialism as the Socialist Party of Great Britain, or the old sterile maximalists of the Second International. Militant is a hopeless sect without any prospect of affecting developments. Read Lenin on this sort of question, in 'What Is To Be Done', for example. Constitutional questions are, and for a century have been, at the centre of Irish political life. Socialists cannot fail to have an answer for these questions.

Even if socialism would eliminate such questions, and supersede the now all-absorbing "constitutional" concerns, you would still have to live in the here and now and answer the questions as posed, from a working class point of view.

In fact, socialism does not automatically answer questions of what constitutional arrangements to have between national minorities and the majority, or between long-antagonistic communities. Again I urge you to read Lenin's 1916 polemic against Pyatakov and Bukharin.

The net result of preaching socialism in the sweet by-and-by is to leave the living immediate political questions to be posed for solutions in other than working-class terms, by bourgeois or petty-bourgeois forces.

Donal:

You have a stages theory! You don't know how to get from where we are now to socialism: you lack the road map of Permanent Revolution, and without the said strategic guidelines you are politically lost.

Your anti-imperialism will increasingly come into conflict with your theories and the said contradictions will set up a process akin to overtight shoes and growing feet! You will foresake the strait and narrow path of commitment to anti-imperialism and to the process and strategy of Permanent Revolution, and sink into the swamp of social imperialism.

Robert:

I don't find what you say about preaching socialism very convincing, Jackie.

Of course we preach socialism!

Tony:

Of course we do!

Jackie:

Of course we do! But socialism isn't going to come by preaching alone. Various types of socialism have been preached for hundreds and hundreds of years. Marxist socialism is rooted in the class struggle. Socialism can come about in no other way than by the working class taking power.

Our job is to help the workers develop politically. That means we have to answer all the political questions. If we don't answer questions objectively posed to the workers, then the workers will seek other answers elsewhere. In Northern Ireland the workers will, according to the traditions of their own Catholic and Protestant communities, arrive at murderously antagonistic, mutually exclusive, answers.

It's no use saying "socialism is the answer". Of course it is, in general. But the workers also need immediate, interim or supplementary answers. They need to know what a working-class socialist government would do about specific immediate problems.

We must give answers that help the workers move towards socialism, and help the progressive part of the working class in both communities to avoid having the working class divide murderously along the lines of the communal antagonism.

Donal:

But they are divided! One side is to the right of imperialism, the other is the anti-imperialist vanguard!

Jackie:

Yes, Donal, perhaps they are. The question is, what can we do about it?

You say nothing can be done about it until the Provos win - which is the same thing as saying that nothing can ever be done about it, or at any rate not this side of sectarian civil war and repartition.

We must have our own socialist and working-class answers to all the living political questions. Such answers will generate no miracles, and will not eradicate the events of the last decade and a half. But they are a basis on which to begin to build some workers' unity.

If workers are not given our socialist, democratic, answers, then they will continue to choose, as now, between the answers of the communal politicians. One of those answers is, if you like, anti-imperialist; and a case could be made that both communities are anti-imperialist in their different ways. The point is that neither of them can unite the working class.

Mick:

That's why we need to advocate a democratic solution, a democratic framework for the coexistence without oppression or fear of oppression of Ireland's divided people. It's an essential part of our programme for Ireland - part of our transitional programme for Ireland, if you like.

Militant makes abstract propaganda for socialism now, instead of dealing with the immediate political issues. As was said, it belongs to the same order of sectarian socialism as the Socialist Party of Great Britain, or the old sterile "maximalists" of the Second International. Militant is a hopeless sect without any prospect of affecting developments'.

Jackie:

Northern Ireland's own recent history provides the proof, Robert, that the abstract preaching of an abstract socialism is no use except maybe for building a sect.

It's often forgotten now, especially on the left, but when Northern Ireland 'blew' in 1968-9, leftists were dominant on the Catholic side - or they seemed to be, anyway. Most of the civil rights leaders were socialists of one sort or another. So were the Republicans, the group that evolved into what is now named the 'Workers Party'.

One of the central problems was that most of the socialists tried to avoid the national question, the Border and so on. Many of them said that there could be no question of a united Ireland except as part of a socialist solution. They had no answers to the immediate questions.

The Provos soon gave the traditional Republican answer, and found the most militant Catholics agreeing with them and joining them.

The Protestant workers listened to the answer of the various Protestant ultras - and in the first place to Ian Paisley, who had a nice line in pseudo-radical political patter directed against the old Unionist establishment.

This should not have surprised anyone who read what Lenin wrote against the 'Economists in 1902.

Donal:

Yes, but all this is shadow-play and nonsense. You can't unite the Protestant and Catholic workers at this stage. And if you could it would be wrong to create the said unity.

You are looking for a short cut. This false short-cut has been pursued by, among others:

Paddy Devlin

Conor Cruise O'Brien

The Workers' Party

The British and Irish Communist Organisation

Militant Irish Monthly.

All the above have tried to unite an anti-imperialist section of the working class with a section that opposes imperialism, if at all, from the right. They have all rejected Permanent Revolution.

Mick:

Jim Denham in SO was rather rude about this sort of stuff. You're saying that the people you list have got their right-wing politics from paying too much attention to the Protestant working class? Because they didn't get inoculated in time with 'permanent revolution', which would have convinced them that the majority of the Six Counties working class don't have to be bothered with "at this stage"?

What is permanent revolution? A hallucinogenic drug like LSD? Maybe that's it, Donal - yours are psychedelic politics. You're too 'high' to bother with the real world!

Donal:

Perhaps it's better to be psychedelic and see moving pictures than to be frozen in a paralysing ice-pack of doubt, scepticism, and defeatism!

Mick:

I'm not sure about this anti-imperialism business. What does it mean?

Anne-Marie:

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It's not that you are not sure about it, comrade Mick. You are pro-imperialist! You can't recognise imperialism when you see it down the road there, armed to the teeth and with its guns pointed at the anti-imperialist Catholics.

Mick:

The point is that there are many anti-imperialisms. 'Anti-imperialism' is a negative slogan, with many different possible positive contents - just as many of those in Britain who shout 'Troops Out' in chorus have radically different ideas about what will replace the existing British state power in Northern Ireland.

Your anti-imperialism, Donal, is nameless and classless.

Donal:

No, it's not. It's working class. That's what Permanent Revolution means - the anti-imperialist struggle can be made to develop into a socialist revolution. We counterpose Permanent Revolution to all the other anti-imperialisms, though we form anti-imperialist united fronts when the said strategy and tactic is the right one.

Patrick: The problem in Northern Ireland is that, given the facts, all this talk about permanent revolution is utterly fantastic. A socialist revolution is impossible without the Protestant workers; and much of the 'anti-imperialist' struggle which is supposed to 'develop' into a socialist revolution is directed against the Protestant workers.

Mick:

It's a central part of the ideology - in Karl Marx's sense of 'false consciousness' - of nationalist populism in Ireland that you conflate or collapse into each other the distinct questions of imperialism and anti-imperialism on the one side, and the intra-Irish conflict on the other. Most leftists in Britain, for example, talk and try to act as if only the question of British Imperialism exists in the Northern Ireland situation.

The fact is that the intra-Irish conflict is massively the bigger question, and one could argue that imperialism exists, if at all, as a legacy, a fossil without autonomous life of a once-real imperialism. The idea that the British-Protestant connection, the adhesion of the Northern Ireland Protestants to the British nation, is 'British imperialism in Ireland', is plain stupid! Yet that is the idea and the rationalisation out of which so many of you spin an attitude of inflexible hostility to the Protestants.

Donal:

No. Imperialism is central because Permanent Revolution is central. Without Imperialism, the Permanent Revolution strategy and process would not apply. The armed struggle would not make sense, and the armed struggle is the dynamo, as I think I said in SO.

But of course Permanent Revolution applies! The intra-Irish conflict is secondary. After Permanent Revolution has done most of its work, then the intra-Irish conflict will come up on the agenda and can be solved, possibly by federalism - if that's the right tactic for the leaders of the Irish national majority.

Jackie:

You'll support them whatever tactic they choose?

Donal:
Yes, of course I will!

Patrick:
He's supported them on everything they've decided so far, hasn't he? He's no reformist!

Donal:
I'm a revolutionary anti-imperialist and I support the said strategy and process!

Mick:
I suggest that we separate out the two questions here: imperialism and anti-imperialism on one side, and permanent revolution on the other.

Donal:
it's the same question.

Mick:
Perhaps, but then let's agree to look at its component parts separately. If you like, we can put the pieces back together as a whole to create a dynamic model. Or rather you can - if you can!

Jimmy:
Of course he can!

Mick:
Let's go back to one of the great reference points in the history of Marxism - the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920.
There they adopted a set of theses on the national question drafted by Lenin and amended by the Congress to take account of the experience of some delegates in the Mexican revolution and of India's struggle for independence. This is one of the most profound and important documents of revolutionary Marxism.

At that time the world was dominated by colonial-imperialist blocks. Domination by way of economic strength alone was exceptional.

A communist programme against imperialism had two aspects to it: against colonialism, the struggle for democracy, national independence; against the world economy of imperialism, the socialist revolution, for which the advanced countries were fully ripe.

The idea that the colonies could get their independence under capitalism - still less develop as some of them have done, phenomenally, in the last few decades, was seen as very unlikely. But now we live in a different world. The colonies have become independent.

Tony:
Nonsense. The ex-colonies aren't free, and they aren't really independent. You read too much imperialist propaganda, comrade

Mick!
They aren't economically independent, and therefore they aren't really independent. They'll only be independent when they get socialism. That's what the Permanent Revolution means.

Mick:
No! The idea that the working-class programme against imperialism included 'economic independence' for the unfree peoples was rejected by the Comintern as both impossible and economically retrograde and reactionary.

Faced with the liberation of the colonies from the capitalist-imperialist powers, Trotskyists have tended to dogmatise in a half-conscious desire to deny what has actually happened. They have switched the criteria of communist politics on these matters, substituting notions of economic independence for political independence, with the motive of downgrading the political independence actually achieved. Rather than the working-class seizure and reorganisation of the world economy, they have called for national/ economic liberation.

There is no such economic liberation by way of national or anti-colonial struggle! Its only real expression is petty-bourgeois and bourgeois demands for economic autarky, of the sort De Valera and Lemass tried to achieve in the 26 Counties between 1932 and 1958.

So Tony's redefinition of independence to mean 'economic' independence aligns him, and other similar dogmatists, with the nationalists and populists in many Third World states, whose programme remains nationalist and, either implicitly or explicitly, a drive for autarky. Socialism comes to be advocated not as an internationalist programme, but as the means to the end of development 'in one country'.

Instead of the gaining of political independence leading to the development of proletarian class politics in the ex-colonies, as it would if there were healthy socialist parties there, the old political goals of national liberation remain central, only with the content incoherently shifted from political independence to economic independence, and with no hope of realisation.

The main function of these nationalist politics is to prevent or slow down the emergence of independent proletarian politics in these countries. For it is no part of our goal to fight for "economic independence".

Tony:
That implies that the less developed countries cannot achieve economic freedom until the workers in the metropolitan countries make the socialist revolution. That's Menshevism on a world scale!

Mick:
Perhaps. But the Bolsheviks never contradicted the Mensheviks when they said that Russia was not ripe for socialism.
They wholeheartedly agreed. No Bolshevik openly disputed this until Stalin came out with 'Socialist in One Country' late in 1924, after Lenin was safely dead.
The Bolsheviks said not that Russia was ripe for socialism, but that it was ripe for a working-class seizure of power, and that its backwardness, which made socialism impossible, could be overcome only by the extension of the revolution internationally, to encompass the more advanced countries. The idea of breaking from the world economy was rejected by the Bolsheviks. The idea of economic independence was regarded as a reactionary idea because the prerequisite for socialism was the most advanced stage of economic

development reached by capitalism on a world scale. That, Tony, was the basis of Bolshevik internationalism - the international character of the economic prerequisites for socialism.

Read Trotsky's criticism of 'Socialism in One Country' - note how Trotsky time and again described the Stalinist drive for economic independence - autarky - as reactionary. That reactionary feature has been replicated by other Stalinists since, including, most notably, the Chinese.

Jackie:

And, as a matter of fact, Tony, the Stalinists described the Trotskyists as 'Mensheviks on an international scale'. They too based themselves on 'texts' and ropey analogies.

Tony:

How else than by cutting themselves off can the underdeveloped countries escape from the tentacles of imperialism? You don't want them to escape!

Mick:

The point is that objectively the chances of them escaping are very limited. Much that has happened in the Third World since the Second World War has been shaped by the fact that the workers' revolution in the advanced countries has not yet come about. In any case, read the document of the Communist International if you dispute my account of what they said.

Donal:

Yes, but what's the point? We've learned since then from General Giap and from Ernest Mandel, and from...

Mick:

The point, Donal, is that most of what passes on the left for a positive alternative to imperialism has little to do with the Communist International's programme. Frequently it is the opposite of that programme! You get reactionary nonsense. In fact you get the collapse of socialism into nationalist populism.

Jackie:

You can see how it happens by observing Tony. The agency that transforms Tony into a nationalist-populist is... dogmatism. Lenin and Trotsky never expected the colonies to be liberated politically before the socialist revolution. They have been liberated, politically, in varying ways and with varying degrees of real political independence.

So what about the 'theories', the dogmas? One of two things can be done. Go back to the root ideas of Marxism that were used by Lenin, Bukharin and Trotsky to analyse the world around them, and how it had changed since Marx - go back to those ideas and make your own analysis of the world. Or - pit the old theories and dogmas against the facts.

That's what the dogmatists do. They handle the facts either by denying them or by redefining them. One of the biggest Trotskyist currents, the Lambert group, in France and elsewhere, denies the facts, arguing, for example, that the 'forces of production' have not expanded since the day the Fourth International was founded in September 1938!

They say that the expansion that has taken place has been, not of forces of production, but of forces of destruction -

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nuclear bombs and so on. There is enough truth in that to hold you up for three seconds until you sort it out, but it's held them up, rather, propped them up, for three decades!

The dogma-monger's second way of dealing with the facts is to redefine them. That is what Tony does. He redefines independence to mean economic independence, not political independence! The purpose is to be able to go on denying the progress that has been made, and to hold on to the old theories, fossilised as dogma.

The cost is enormous. Wearing dogmatised 'Marxist' ideas like scales over his eyes, Tony blunders into the politics of petty bourgeois nationalist populists. There is a merging of programmes.

Donal:

To judge by you yourselves, the alternative is to collapse the dynamic revolutionary socialism of Trotsky and Lenin, which not only fights the class struggle but also takes responsibility for national liberation work and even organises the said national liberation struggle, and replace it with hopeless sectarian workerism! Worse than that, you replace it with the arrogant politics of the socialists of the metropolitan countries. Socialists in the metropolitan countries don't have that right.

Mick:

That's just a trick argument, like the similar one used by those in Britain who say we have no right to form opinions on Ireland, but only the right to agree with Sinn Fein! They justify it on the principle of 'solidarity with the Irish' - but they arrive at their alignment with Sinn Fein by means of selecting from among the Irish and rejecting the Irish, and the Irish nationalists, with whom they do not agree, like the SDLP and the Workers' Party.

Jackie:

They work the trick on themselves. The same is true about their moralistic pseudo-political 'anti-imperialism'.

Anne-Marie:

I don't understand what's petty bourgeois about struggling for economic independence, Jackie.

Jackie:

Well: look at the Irish experience we discussed earlier, economic nationalism in 1932-58. The point is that international socialism bases itself on a world programme, and world perspectives. That means, on the world economy: socialism is not possible in a single country.

Now this is a basic question for Marxists - what is our attitude to what capitalism has created already. For example, what is our attitude to monopolies? Well, the petty bourgeois answer is to try to roll the film of history backwards. Are there oppressive monopolies? Then abolish them, outlaw them - go back to the capitalism of a pre-monopoly period.

In contrast, the Marxists have argued for seizing the monopolies, and the economy, and the state (or, rather, smashing the state and replacing it with our own state), and developing beyond the highest point of capitalism.

Now do you see the point? Economic nationalism means trying to go backwards instead of going forwards on the basis of the world economy created by capitalism.

Donal:

Well, many, many countries, workers' states and others, have pursued economic nationalist policies. You condemn them for trying to develop, for not letting themselves be exploited! Do you condemn Egypt for nationalising the Suez Canal? The great majority of Third World states have nationalised their basic natural resources. Do you condemn them? These measures may not be 'economic independence', but they do give economic substance to the forms of political independence.

Jackie:

No, I don't condemn them! It is perfectly understandable in the world in which they exist that they should do that. And if it's brought some benefits, allowed industrialisation, good.

But at what a cost! The point is that the communist programme was so much better than what has happened in so many countries after independence. Locked into their own particularisms, with their own often barbarous political systems, military dictatorships, party-states of various descriptions, verminous cults of god-like leaders, whether Kim Il Sung or Mobutu...

Donal:

Arrogant metropolitan-centred sectarian ultimatist!

Jackie:

These are the results of the failure to realise the communist programme to put the world economy under working-class control and develop it harmoniously.

Mick:

This is a very old question. Read the Communist Manifesto, where Marx and Engels put the communist programme of 'accepting' and superseding the capitalist industrial system rather than harking back to the previous - and humanly better system. The task was to seize what capitalism had created. The same approach was advocated by Lenin in his 'Imperialism'.

Jackie:

The central point about 'anti-imperialism' is that it is ideologically classless, and therefore has a tendency to get filled with non-working-class content. The 'natural' content of anti-imperialism for large parts of the world, you might say, is petty bourgeois populism with a lacing of Stalinist/Maoist ideas of national self-sufficiency and autarky.

Like all negative positions it leaves unanswered key questions, like what we want to replace imperialism by - and these are the decisive questions from a class point of view. More than that, though, because of course many different forces and classes can be 'anti-imperialist'.

The Boers who rule South Africa were irreconcilable opponents of what they called 'British imperialism'. Many of them were interned during World War 2 for opposing the British war effort. Some of them were genuine anti-imperialists, though a million miles away from us politically.

Indeed, 'anti-imperialism' is the dominant ideology of the Third World held by petty bourgeois, bourgeois, and by

would be regional imperialists like the Argentine junta or the white South African Nationalists.

Tony:

Outrageous! Argentina is an oppressed country, not a "sub-imperialism".

Jackie:

Of course, Tony! As I was saying, the content of 'anti-imperialism' is usually anti-colonialism, in a world where there are few colonies left; or else, the implied content is anti-international-market. It is ideologically a mishmash in which the question of what is working class anti-imperialism and how it is distinguished from all other 'anti imperialisms' is cardinal. That's why the Communist International's 1920 document is of the greatest importance today.

In practice undefined 'anti-imperialism' results in a mishmash, whose 'left' lowest common denominator is a populism which advocates or implies a reactionary programme of economic autarky, and a heavy stress on nations as oppressed (even when they are politically independent, and sometimes themselves minor oppressors), and therefore on the classes of that nation having a common national interest against what the Iranian mullahs called 'The Great Satan', or whatever.

Inevitably, it is not too far along this road to the idea of good and bad peoples, and one of the by-products of this poisoned anti imperialism has been the growth of anti-semitism on the left in recent years. The Israeli Jews are a bad people, and therefore they must be overrun.

Tony:

You're a Zionist!

Mick:

Better that than to be the holder of implicit anti-semitic positions! An anti semitism which dares not speak its name, but is just as venomous as it ever was in its Christian, Stalinist or racist versions.

Donal:

There may be some truth, in general, in what you say about national-populism, but for Ireland it's just a way for you to ward off the Permanent Revolution. But you can't! The said process keeps on happening, and it is clearing a way for itself. Your observation about what you call populist anti-imperialism...

Mick:

Nameless, classless anti imperialism!

Donal:

Your observation stops you seeing the Permanent Revolution even when it rises up in front of you as big as the side of a battleship, as it is doing in Ireland today!

Jackie:

A spectre is haunting Ireland, the spectre of... nameless, classless anti-imperialism. A real spectre that doesn't come to grips with Irish realities at all!

Donal:

You have no analysis of the material forces in the struggle, and therefore you don't understand the process that is going on. You have to be a real Marxist to do that. None of you are. You understand nothing of what's going on in Ireland now.

Mick:

Yes, Donal: Marxism allows you to make a scenario out of the events going on in Ireland now - extrapolating forward to an imaginary time in the future.

You don't look at things as they are and as they are most likely to develop; you look, so to speak, backwards in time from the imaginary future, and you evaluate the things in the world you inhabit from the viewpoint of that imaginary future.

The compulsory optimism which is de rigeur with your sort of "trotskyist", and the self-blinding dogmatism, grinds out of you and your co-thinkers that native intelligence that everyone with an IQ higher than a dog would bring to discussing Ireland. Someone said, 'the past is a foreign country'. Your scenario-mongering renders the present a foreign country to you!

You are politically not people living in Ireland: you live in a world of your own!

You seem to hold the teleological view that there is a conscious purpose in history and that you have read its schedule of coming events. You firmly believe that there is some magic force at, unseen, to arrange and control the seeming horrors around us so that there will somehow be a happy ending.

You sit in your imaginary teleological throne in the sky, thinking you know the future. Donal, you don't even know, can't register, can't take in, can't respond to, the present!

That's the significance of 'Permanent Revolution' for you - a teleological world drama worked out in advance. You think it is worked out by some godlike spirit of history. In fact it is worked out by yourselves - more fallible and with no control over events.

Jackie:

With less control of events than you might have if you would face reality and stop fantasising!

The proof of what I've said is that you need such quasi-religious scenarios, which are to Marxism what religion is to science. What did Marx write about religion? The heart of a heartless world, the sigh of the oppressed in this vale of woe - the opium of the people.. A fantasy to escape the harsh realities of the real world.

And what did Marx object to about that? Marx said that he did not wish to rip off the flowers from the chain so that the slaves would wear the chain without consolations - but so that they would see things clearly and break their chains. Your religious 'Marxism', Donal, is just a variant of consoling cant!

Donal:

That's just a rehash of the hoariest old academic attacks on Marxism; that it's all religion, the dialectic is the Christian Trinity in disguise, and so on. You describe Marxism as

religion! All Marxists relate to the present in terms of a conception of what will be made out of it - the working-class transformation...

Jackie:

Not Marxism, Donal - the wretched combination of chopped-up dogmas, scholastic theorising and de-facto accommodation to all sorts of alien, anti-working class forces in the world, from Khomeiny to Castro. The point is that you weave the world around you into a weird and utterly fantastic scenario about the future, and then read that back, extrapolate backwards from it, so that you see the world around you through a thick haze of fantasy. There is no comparison with what real Marxism does

Robert:

Did you ever see a movie called 'Never On A Sunday', Donal? It had that woman who's now the Greek government's Minister of Culture in it, the one who's making all the fuss about the return of the Elgin Marbles to Greece - Melina Mercouri?

Donal:

Yes, now that you mention it. But couldn't we stick to the subject? This is a serious discussion. Who cares about old movies?

Robert:

I am sticking to the subject. Bear with me a moment, Donal. The movie is about a strange woman, a sort of 'life force', 'Mother Earth' character called, I think, Ilia. She is a prostitute in the Athenian port of Piraeus who takes up with a visiting American.

Ilia loves the ancient Greek drama, and regularly goes to see it performed. But Ilia doesn't see the world as other people do, as the fascinated American finds out.

Out on the stage, Medea may have just slaughtered her own children to get revenge on their father Jason, in an unbearably tragic series of events. But what do you think Ilia makes of that? She sits there laughing and giggling. When the Yank asks why she is laughing at the horrors in the amphitheatre, she tells him derisively that it never happened, it's not real, they're not really dead. In fact "they've all gone to the sea shore".

Now do you see the point, Donal? Do you see yourself in it? You look at the horrors in Northern Ireland, the certainty of sectarian civil war if the British were just to pull out, the steady trickle of sectarian assassinations, the incidents of anti-Protestant Catholic sectarianism along the Border in Catholic country - you look at all that, and what do you see? Not sectarian slaughter and looming catastrophe - you see the permanent revolution!

It's not really happening, what I've described. They've all gone to the sea shore! We'll all go to the sea shore if the balloon goes up in Northern Ireland. Or maybe it's to Fiddlers Green we'll go.

Jackie:

You're a 'Never On A Sunday' Trotskyist, Donal!

Donal:

All these silly analogies! Don't you know that Marxism deals in the concrete, not in abstract fantasies and speculations? I have no time for this sort of would-be smart-arsed nonsense. Deal with the concrete and precise questions I have put before you.

Jackie:

I suggest we take a break at this point.

Discussion with Donal R: Part 2

Donal:

Let's take the question of Protestant/Catholic unity. That's where you really show yourselves up. You accuse me of tail-ending the Republicans.

Patrick: The neo-Republicans!

Donal:

Whatever. Yet you are the ones who are hag-ridden with right-wing Republican myths about the unity of the Irish people. Your talk about working-class unity is part of that

Mick: Why right wing?

Donal:

Well, that's the stuff the old Republican leaders tried to base themselves on, the ones who wanted federalism so that they could continue to have their Catholic, backward, southern statelet - to protect them from the spectre of Permanent Revolution.

Those people live on myths about 1798 and so on, when Protestants and Catholics were united. But it's just not true. John O'Mahony makes the same error in his stuff in SO about the Protestants once being in the Republican vanguard. No, they were always what they are now - colons! Though the Presbyterian left led the Irish National Revolution for a couple of months in '98, most of its members did so looking over their shoulders. Did you know that the famous battle of Ballinahinch was lost because Henry Monroe, the hero of a well known Republican song, was afraid to use Catholic troops?

They knew they were colons even then. And they know it now. Yet you people want unity with a pro-imperialist section of the working class, a section that opposes imperialism if at all from the right.

Jimmy:

So you think the United Irishmen was a hopeless enterprise? Wolfe Tone's programme of substituting the common name of Irishman for that of Protestant, Dissenter and Catholic - that was all hopeless, was it? At last you are consistent.

Donal:

Myths never did anybody any good. They have always felt themselves to be colons. They have always been terrified of a repetition of the Catholic rising of 1641 or of the Catholic Parliament of 1689. That's the truth, and it's the truth about the said rebellion of 1798. Fear of displacement was the material interest at the back of their fear of being absorbed into a "priest-ridden Catholic state".

Mick:

So what do you think are the lessons of 1690 and 1641 for the Catholics today? Is it still the same 'counter-attack' - with the same objectives? We touched on this before you arrived because it seems to some of us that the logic of what the Provos are now saying amounts to the slogan 'Back to the Jacobite Parliament of 1689'. To us the Provos seem to be trying to take Irish politics back to before Wolfe Tone's attempt to supersede the old divisions and replace them with the common name of Irish. In your own strange way. Donal, you seem to be agreeing with us.

Donal:

No I'm not. There is now no displaced Catholic peasantry wanting to return to their lands. I don't want to drive the Protestants out. All the contradictions will be resolved in the unfolding of the Permanent Revolution.

Mick:

And what do you think are the lessons of 1689 90 and 1641 for the Protestants? They, of course, as they say and daub on walls around here, still 'Remember 1690'. And they remember 1641 too.

Jimmy:

And they remember the "Republic's" Mother and Child Act of 1951!

Mick:

Don't you think they need to be told in the most unequivocal way by the majority Irish community, of which the Six Counties Catholics are part, that it is not and never will be "1641" or "1690" again? Yet you say that any proposal now to reassure them, with federalism for example, is positively harmful.

Donal:

It's against the Permanent Revolution perspective, I've told you already. You rely on reform proposals to solve the contradictions. We rely on the unfolding of Permanent Revolution and on the power of the said process to mobilise the Irish people, and at the tail end the Protestants.

The Provos' military campaign is the great locomotive here, not stupid and reformist proposals like yours to unite the Irish people, backward and progressive sections alike. As I said, that's what screwed up the Workers' Party, Conor Cruise O'Brien, the British and Irish Communist Organisation etc - accommodating to the backward national minority and to its privileged working class. But you agree with federalism!

Donal:

As a possible tactic at the end of the process, not as a principle.

Mick:

Not as a right of the minority, but as something the tacticians of the majority - the self-appointed tacticians, as it happens, but let that pass - may find useful to manipulate the minority with?

Donal:

Exactly!

Jackie:

I've got some sympathy with what you said about 1798, Donal, oddly enough. You are right that myths are mainly harmful, or at any rate they should have no part in the politics or historiography of Marxists. And historiography in Ireland is still a long way from having emerged from the realm of myth.

Robert:

Yes. Let's not make myths about '98. For example, the great Wexford Catholic rising included sectarian outrages committed against Protestants, of whom there were sizeable numbers in parts of Wexford.

Jackie:

But I think, Donal, that you are too dismissive of the Protestant radicals. They were Jacobin Republicans, fighting for Catholic/Protestant equality. They could have roused the people of Ireland, and the religious questions could have been sunk in a common war against the landlords, and made to stay "sunk" by the installation of a revolutionary-democratic constitutional arrangement afterwards.

Patrick:

The truth is that '98 was not one movement, but a number of different and separate movements - a Catholic jacquerie in Wexford, a revolutionary war waged by French troops and local people in the West, and a movement mainly of Presbyterian plebeians in the North. Ireland was still a complex of regions, as Wolfe Tone, for example, understood very well. He had no illusions that a single nation was ready-forged. The job of the United Irishmen was to forge it.

But your explanation, Donal, in terms of the ab ovo nature of the Protestants as colonists, is a very strange one. I don't know much about the battle of Ballinahinch, but these were the Republican revolutionaries, those who - unlike, for example, most of the Catholic peasants who rose in the South East - consciously held to the programme of the United Irishmen.

But you seem to argue that it was all hopeless. It was preordained that those whom you dismiss as colonists could not have been the leaven in a great nation-creating movement. Republicanism only became real Republicanism and developed real permanent revolution prospects, so to speak, when it crossed over from one Irish community to the other and equipped itself to understand that it had to confront the old Republican vanguard, the 'colons', as an imperious force telling them roughly to come into a Catholic nation and its unitary state, or get out of Ireland.

Donal:

You are the ones who talk of a Catholic nation, not me.

Jackie:

Yes, Donal, you do, and I'll prove it in a minute.

Patrick:

But let me continue. By explaining the failure of 1798 in terms of 'the colons' you let the Irish middle class radicals off the hook, which is pretty much what you do today with your use of 'permanent revolution' to dress up what the Provos do.

1798 failed, centrally, because the United Irish organisation fell apart, and because it was unable to bring any sort of integration and coherence to the disparate parts of the rebellion.

Jimmy:

They tried, but the British oligarchy was strong enough to smash them.

Patrick:

Yes, but why was that? Fear of the peasants was not just a sectarian colonist reflex. Donal. It was a deep class reflex on the part of large sections of the middle class radicals. Only a thorough-going agrarian revolution, the victory of the jacquerie and its unity with the radical bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie of the towns, could have fused the disparate people of Ireland into a coherent unified Irish nation such as Tone talked of when he proposed to substitute the name Irish for the religious denominations which reflected ethnic and national origins.

It was not just that the British terror was so ruthless and effective, and there is no denying it was. It didn't stop the various risings from happening, though maybe it stopped others. And it wasn't just that many in the middle class felt themselves divided by race and creed from the Catholic peasantry, though they did, and were inhibited by it.

It was also the whole nature of the middle class as revolutionaries. We have seen the same phenomenon all through subsequent Irish history, down to 1916, when the Home Rule bourgeoisie screamed for the British to shoot more of the captured insurgent leaders and, in the first place, James Connolly.

Mick:

I'm not sure you aren't being a-historical. What are you saying? That the United Irishmen weren't the Bolshevik Party? Not a tightly-knit group of professional revolutionaries?

Patrick:

Obviously there is a danger of being a-historical and anachronistic. Nobody can detract from the honour and glory of the United Irishmen in founding modern secular Irish politics. I think I'm defending their heritage against the Provo neo-Republicans and their Catholic nationalism, and against the romantic kitsch Trotskyist muddleheads.

Tony:

Oi!

Patrick:

But still, the United Irishmen were a movement of a given class locked in their own time. Different editions of Republicanism over two centuries have been made by different classes. Looking back, you can see what a gap there was in the United Irish movement, and I think you should lay it at the door of the middle-class radicals, of whom the United Irishmen were the vanguard.

Donal:

If I agree with this, it just reinforces what I've said: the colony, and it wasn't just the Ulster colony, produced most of the middle class. They looked over their shoulders at the Catholics. That, at least, was part of it.

Jackie:

Part of it, maybe. But you explain it in national and racial terms (in the sense that James Connolly and others used the word "race")- not in class terms. Which is what you do in modern politics!

Donal:

No, we are all Irish. I say that the Protestants of Northern Ireland are a national minority.

Jackie:

You say more than that, whether you know it or not. Follow through the logic of what you say about 1798. Draw a line connecting what you say about now and what you say about 1798 - and you are saying quite plainly that there was always a fundamental flaw. Even at the best juncture in Irish history for nation-creating, it was that flaw which made the nation-creating revolution impossible.

YOU are saying that the Irish Republican programme for a 32 County all- Ireland Republic was always a myth and a fantasy.

Donal:

I know what my words mean.

Mick:

Like in Alice in Wonderland the words mean exactly what I say they mean!

Jackie:

If it was always a myth, then that surely has some bearing on what is going on today The 32 County Irish Republic never existed even as a serious possibility: - it was just a delusion. That may be a reasonable view of history, though I've told you why I think it is not the entire picture. But if you are right, then your hopes for the future are utterly Fantastic and your comments about now are the vilest Catholic-chauvinist drivel dressed up in fine phrases about permanent revolution and socialism!

Donal:

Better that than subscribe to rightwing and 'classless' Republican mythology, with its corollary that right now we must choose to work for working class unity instead of Permanent Revolution.

Jackie:

Tone was a 'right wing Republican'! But let me finish the point. You say that for all time past and even now the 32 County Republic is a myth. The possibility of Irish unity has been a delusion. You believe it was a delusion even when it was objectively possible, in the 1790s, to fuse the Irish plebeian masses together - feudal relations on most of Ireland's land, a movement into which the Protestant farmers would surely have been drawn.

But, miraculously, you believe that Irish unity will cease to be a delusion in the near future.

Why? How? What an agrarian revolution in '98 could not have done, the magic of "armed struggle", of physical-force-on-principle (though that isn't your way of putting it) will surely do - and soon .

There is no reason to believe any of this. The quasi-rational version of it - that the Protestants can be bludgeoned by the far from magical Provo war - is less up in the clouds, I suppose. But it also is fantastic. It can't and won't happen. And it shouldn't.

What your view of the past says about now is that the Northern Ireland Protestant community is a quite distinct people who have never been close to the Irish majority. They have never even paralleled them, not even as a potential ally to make a bourgeois-democratic revolution. The idea that some process of "permanent revolution" will magically change this is witch doctor stuff!

You destroy any justification for the war you support other than the coercing of the Protestants into a united Ireland - which you describe as the work of forwarding the permanent revolution.

Your picture is one of two distinct peoples, one of which you consign to the role of a bad people, a bad nation or a bad national minority.. And to this you give the name "permanent revolution" and say it holds out the prospect of a revolutionary unity of the Irish working class!

Donal:

This way of arguing is almost Healyite.! You extrapolate wildly from what I say and then attribute the extrapolation to me, saying, 'There, that's your real opinion'. Apart from being Healyite, it isn't serious. I know my own opinion better than you do!

Jackie:

I don't say this is your real, hidden, secret opinion. I say this is the logic of what you say. It is what it amounts to if you think it through logically. You confine yourself to hints and half-thoughts. That's what's unserious.

The logic of what you say isn't your property - it exists whether you recognise it or not. As the saying goes: who says A, must say B. And if you don't say B having said A, then I have a right to say it is nevertheless what follows on logically from what you do say.

Donal:

It's your general approach to Irish history which is unserious. I refuted O'Mahony's historiography in SO and no one replied. I showed that O'Mahony's account of how the Protestant colony came to Antrim and Down was Unionist propaganda. He didn't reply. I argue that working class Orangeism arose because of the defeat of trade unionism in the North and the pauperisation of the Orange working class. Nobody replied !

Mick:

Most of these points were taken up in SO, Donal. However, I have a problem. Undoubtedly these are very important questions. But to have a right to express an opinion on these, so to speak, technical questions of history, you have to do a very great deal of work, probably original research. That isn't an option for most of us. We have to rely on the published sources.

To take sides on these questions of historical detail for political reasons, because of the political implications of one

or another idea, would be shameful, unserious and un-Marxist. It would be the Stalinist 'useful lie' applied to distant history.

But how do you use these questions of history, Donal? You use them to pettifog and procrastinate and nibble at the edges of the gigantic contemporary fact of a distinct 'Protestant' identity. You use abstruse, and, it seems to me, rather esoteric historical details to deny the self-evident facts of today, or to avoid facing them head-on.

Jackie:

I too think these historical questions are very important. Like

Mick:

I haven't got time to do the work necessary to take them up as they deserve to be taken up, or the money to do original research. I have to rely on the work of others. But to speak candidly, Donal R, I don't trust your accounts of any of these questions.

I remember reading articles of yours at the beginning of the 1970s (in the Dublin magazine, Workers' Republic, I think, which argued that the Ulster Volunteer Force of 1912-14 was just an army of scabs - 100,000 or more of them. It was gibberish!

Patrick:

That does sound a bit more like wartime propaganda than serious social history, Donal.

Donal:

Those were serious articles. I did a lot of research for them. Besides, those opinions were pretty much in line with what Lenin wrote at the time. Refute them, don't abuse them!

You don't use the Marxist method the method of historical materialism. That's why you go wrong in the present. You can only understand the present in terms of the past .

You can't take a snap-shot of the present and say, "There, that's it". That's not adequate. You need to construct a historical motion picture, so to speak, in which the situation now is only the latest still life...

Jackie:

And you need to construct a motion picture of the future too, so that you know what the proper meaning of the events around you is, eh, Donal R?

Donal:

Exactly.

Jackie:

Yes, exactly, in general. You do need a historical motion picture. But someone who refuses to face the facts rationally now and says that understanding things 300 years ago is more important, that the colon origin of the Protestants has any bearing on our attitude to them now, is a pettifogger and a muddier who uses historical, or perhaps pseudo-historical, pedantry to obscure present-day reality. That's not Marxism.

Patrick:

No matter how the Protestants got to be in Antrim and Down and the rest of Ireland, there is no gainsaying that they are there now. They do have the right to be there and should

from the point of view of democracy have a high degree of control over how they live and govern themselves there.

Even if they established themselves initially in Antrim and Down and other parts of the Six Counties by roasting and eating the entire previous Catholic-Gaelic population in the area, the moral taint of those actions would not in any degree detract from their right to be there now, or their right to stay there without having to submit to oppression of any kind.

Tony:

They are the oppressors, not the oppressed.

Donal:

Don't exaggerate, Tony! I don't say that the colon origin of the Protestants affects their right to be in Ireland now. I say don't glorify the Protestants, don't pretend that they were not always (all of them, including the 1798 Republicans) an official colony of the British Crown. They are colons, and that is no small matter.

Patrick:

You are unjust to Donal, I think, Mick, and Jackie is too. He does try to face the facts about the Protestants - far more than most of those on the same political wavelength do. The problem is that he finds a moralistic way to discount and devalue the facts. That's why he insists so Tagging them as 'colons' serves you, Donal, as a moral justification for denying what you call a national minority the democratic rights that Marxists generally champion for such groups. It is used to justify your rampant Catholic nationalism - sorry, your belief in Permanent Revolution!

Donal:

I'm not a Catholic nationalist, Sir! I'm a Trotskyist and a Republican! I believe in the process and strategy of permanent revolution!

Mick:

'Process' I think I understand, but whose strategy is it? It's not the Provos' "strategy", for sure, and for a tiny group like People's Democracy it is a fantasy: it can not be a strategy. You use 'strategy' here in the sense that Hegel talked of the 'cunning of history' - teleologically. That's religion, Donal, expressed in dead "Marxist" jargon.

Donal:

You should learn from your own history, Mick. The group around Socialist Organiser now use their denial of permanent revolution to justify proposing the federal reform, but the said reformism had a predecessor way back in 1969. Your rejection of permanent revolution led you to propose the repartition of Ireland.

Mick:

You said that in Socialist Organiser, and it's one of the most self-revealing things in your articles. In the first place it isn't true, and in the second place it was the untruth used by the leadership of IS (now the SWP) in mid-1969 to cover their tracks when they ostentatiously dropped the slogan 'British Troops Out!' They had, quite inappropriately, made that slogan the centre of their campaigning on Ireland during the first half of 1969, but as soon as the troops went on to the streets they started arguing that the Catholics could arm behind the line of

troops and 'when they are armed they can tell the troops to go'.

We were part of IS at the time. We'd opposed their nationalist focus before August 1969, and we opposed their shamefaced propaganda for the troops after August. Their response was an unscrupulous campaign against our alleged proposal to repartition Ireland. The issue, they insisted, was not their support for the British state in Ireland, but our proposal to repartition it.

We never made any such proposal! We proposed action to smash the Six Counties state, as the means to a united Ireland in which the Protestant heartland areas would have autonomy. You can argue about the details of what we proposed then - but you have to tell lies or redefine the meaning of words to say that we advocated the repartition of Ireland.

You pick up and use the slander circulated in 1969 and since by the IS leaders against people who were then your political co-thinkers.! That is blind factional malice, Donal, and there is quite a lot of it in your Socialist Organiser pieces.

What the IS leaders were trying to do in 1969 with their slander is understandable enough. It even worked for a while. They had us pretty well isolated at the September 1969 IS conference. But at the next biannual conference, six months later, in Easter 1970, after we had been campaigning, they only won by the skin of their teeth. Two months later the IS National Committee accepted a motion from John O'Mahony (Sean Matgamna) committing the organisation to agitate for British withdrawal from Ireland.

Donal:
Nonsense. I remember O'Mahony's friends and co-thinkers in Dublin arguing for repartition in 1970 and 1971.

Mick:
You mean the group that evolved into the little Lambertist sect, the League for a Workers' Republic? Maybe they did. But we didn't. O'Mahony didn't. Check the documents.

Donal:
I will. But at the risk of repeating myself, I insist that the central core of your errors - prepared by your refusal to recognise the Permanent Revolution now striding ahead in Ireland - is that you believe in uniting a backward pro-imperialist section of the working class with the workers who are the anti-imperialist vanguard. From that everything else flows.
You are unenthusiastic about the armed struggle, and some of you, like O'Mahony, believe it should be ended. But that armed struggle is the detonator which will ignite the South - which in turn, once mobilised, will win over enough of the Protestants to secure the victory of the said process and strategy.
The proof that I'm right is that no other way forward has been found, and if I were wrong about Permanent Revolution another way forward would have been found or would at least be visible.

Mick:
Visible from your teleological throne up there in the sky?

Jackie:

You are repeating yourself, Donal. So is Mick. I guess we all are by now. In any case we've run out of time, so we'll have to leave it there.

I suppose it could have been a more fruitful exchange, with perhaps more of a meeting of minds at the end. But still there haven't been many discussions like it that I know of. Perhaps we should organise another one with more people and perhaps a broader spectrum of views represented.

I said at the beginning that we probably have more in common than you'd think, and I haven't changed my mind even during our long and sometimes heated discussion. It seems to me that one reason why so large a part of the British left shares the attitudes and prejudices of Tony and Anne-Marie is because the situation here is so complex and seemingly so intractable and hopeless.

The two communities in the Six Counties bearpit are in a terrible impasse - and it seems to me that it can only be broken from outside, from Britain or the 26 Counties or both. This impasse pushes people into what - if you'll allow me to abuse the chair, Tony - seem to me to be fantasies. The fantasies allow you to avoid facing up to the problem, but at the cost of cutting you off from any possibility of relating as a revolutionary Marxist to the real world.

That's my objection to Donal's scenario politics. Fantasy politics - no matter how energetically expressed - is passive politics. You don't change the world, you manipulate images of it in your head.

James Connolly had a better idea when said of the scenario-mongers and vapid optimists: "the only true prophets are those who carve out the future they announce".
To carve out the future, Donal, you must have the nerve to tell yourself the truth about the present. But you wrap uncomfortable facts up in consoling scenarios.

Things stand a bit differently with the British left - which is amazingly ignorant of Irish realities. Serious socialists - which is without a doubt what Tony and his co-thinkers are - indulge in fantasies, but because they are not very familiar with the facts and the realities of Northern Ireland. The British Left should acquaint itself with the facts. That's why I think the discussion was worthwhile.

APPENDIX

A debate from Socialist Organiser, 1983

"A way to workers' unity?" by John O'Mahony.
(Socialist Organiser 113)

In Socialist Organiser no.109 we carried an interview with a Belfast NHS shop steward, Micky Duffy. Duffy, a 'Militant' supporter, argued that the workers' unity in the NHS pay struggle opened the way to political class unity in Northern Ireland, which could be achieved by setting up a Northern Ireland Labour Party. In the letters page (SO 112) the Nottingham SO group argued that this interview was an 'unacceptable propaganda piece for the national chauvinist politics of the Militant'. In this article John O'Mahony looked at Militant's politics and how they should be answered.

From a working class point of view, the basic problem about the Six County state is that in that state framework, working class unity developed on a trade union level has always shattered at any political test. So long as the 'constitutional question' remains at the heart of political life there, it always will shatter on the rooted communal antagonism between Catholics and Protestants, Nationalists and Unionists.

There was no chance that the NHS dispute could open the way to [political] unity in the sectarian Six County entity. Even spectacular examples of Protestant/ Catholic working class unity have proved to be mere episodes.

For example, in the well known 'outdoor relief' fight in 1932, unity in working-class resistance to cuts in social security payments was possible because both Catholics and Protestants were hit impartially. Barricades went up in the Protestant Shankhill Road and in the Catholic Falls Road. Activists went from the Falls to man Shankhill barricades, and from the Shankhill to defend the Falls against the police. (Some on both sides were influenced by the Irish Stalinists). Within weeks of this spectacular unity, no less spectacular sectarian rioting had been fomented. There are other examples both before and after Partition.

The experience of the various incarnations of the Northern Ireland Labour Party runs in parallel to this. Today a very tiny Unionist rump, the NILP has at various times grown to a significant size.

It attempted to confine itself to bread and butter working class issues, that is, to generalised trade unionism, bargaining in the working class interest on the level of provincial and United Kingdom society. It evaded, hedged and compromised on the issues that divide Northern Ireland's workers.

John De Courcy Ireland, an unsuccessful candidate in the last 26 County elections, wrote recently of his experience in the NILP: in the 1940s.

Their speakers on the Falls Road, he recalled, campaigned under the nationalist Tricolour. In the 'mixed' centre of Belfast they campaigned under the Red Flag; and party leader Harry Midgley campaigned on the Shankhill under the Union Jack.

Such a balancing act could not get far. Sectarian suspicions soon disrupted the party and scattered its forces.

To reject Militant's view of a Labour Party as the cure-all is not to say that socialists should not work in a Labour Party if it existed. Serious work was done for example, in the late '60s in the Derry Labour Party, which became central to the civil rights struggle.

Even after it split, Eamonn McCann could get 9,000 votes on a revolutionary socialist platform as the Derry Young Socialists candidate in the mid-1970 election.

Yet McCann's experience, too, underlines the basic point that simply trying to generalise from trade unionism within the Six County framework is no solution. The Derry Labour Party left wing tended to ignore the national question, and was by-passed by the eruption of the Republican movement. Their forces scattered, too: some went to the Officials and then to the IRSP, one or two to Militant.

Many well-intentioned tricks have been tried to unite Northern Ireland workers. In 1907 Jim Larkin had united Protestant and Catholic workers on a trade union level. When it came to the marching and rioting season on July 12, he tried to preserve the unity by organising his own united Orange/Catholic working class parade around the walls of Derry.

The Protestant workers, said Larkin, would march in honour of King William, who secured their liberty in the 'Glorious Revolution'. The Catholics would march to honour the Pope, who at that time had taken the Papal State into the international alliance against France of which William was part!

They had a successful, and unique, parade round Derry. Within weeks sectarian rioting had shattered the working class unity...

In 1969, again, Cyril Toman a member of the socialist People's Democracy (different from the present, Mandelite, PD) tried preaching socialism to Protestant workers by erecting the Union Jack above his platform. In the years since, Protestant sectarianism has hardened, and Toman was one of Sinn Fein's 12 candidates in the recent Six Counties election.

The inescapable conclusion is that general political unity cannot be developed on the basis of trade union ('economic') unity; and that unity in trade union action is not the harbinger of a stable class unity.

But many on the left, it seems to me, go on from this basic fact to a general dismissal of any concern for working class unity. The national question, they seem to say, supersedes everything else in Northern Ireland.

The trade-union class struggle is of little importance. The Protestant working class - that is, the big majority of the working class - is no concern of ours. The struggle for socialism will develop out of the revolt of the oppressed Catholics, even though that revolt fails to mobilise, and indeed antagonises, the Protestant workers.

We concern ourselves only with the 'anti-imperialist' military campaign of organisations representing perhaps half the Catholic third of the Six County population. Only when that campaign is victorious will questions like working class unity be important.

This, I believe, is the mirror image of the Militant caricature of socialist and Marxist politics.

What in fact is wrong with Militant's approach to Ireland?

It relates only selectively and arbitrarily to the issues, processes, and struggles in Ireland. It pretends that struggles like the NHS pay battle, involving workers from both communities, already amount to, or by way of being generalised into a new Northern Ireland Labour Party, can be made into, working class political unity.

It goes from this to general socialist propaganda about nationalising the entire economy, which is essentially what they understand the socialist revolution to be: there is no space here to criticise their bureaucratic, statist, and somewhat 1890s-Fabian conception of socialism.

In between sub-political industrial issues, and the political maximum, the socialist revolution, there is a great void. The void is what's wrong with their politics, not that they

advocate and want to build working class inter-communal unity at any level possible, and not that they make propaganda for socialism.

A working class political party that can really unite the working class in Ireland, specifically in Northern Ireland, will have to be one that can honestly answer all the problems which the key sections of the working class face - and in the first place the 'constitutional question'.

Militant's answer is the same as its answer to every living struggle in Britain or anywhere else - propaganda for 'socialism, the only road', combined with a routinist and politically accommodationist approach to the basic struggles of the working class and the labour movement.

From this general approach has flowed its record over the last 13 years. Initially it opposed the deployment of British troops on the streets after August 1969, and sympathised with the Catholics. It quickly veered (by 1970 or '71) to an attitude of condemning the 'sectionalism' and then the 'terrorism' of the Catholics. It was like its attitude to the struggles of blacks, women, gays and others in Britain itself: the Catholic revolt in Northern Ireland was a complication it wished would go away.

Ever since they have not supported the just revolt of the Catholics. Within the labour movement they are among the most vicious opponents of any attempt to get a calm discussion of the Republicans, their struggle and their objectives. Militant peddles its own cure-alls and nostrums, the famous 'trade union defence force', for example.

A good idea - for a different society. The workforce is heavily stratified as a result of sectarian job preference. This affects the unions, where unity has been possible only on minimal trade union questions and by avoiding politics. The unions reflect the society they exist in. The Protestant UDA [Ulster Defence Association] is the nearest thing to a trade union militia that Northern Ireland will see this side of a revolutionary change of working consciousness. Essentially, Militant lacks the democratic programme which has to be part of filling the void between trade union minimalism and the socialist revolution. It relates to the political world around it by pretending that the communal divide can be ignored, and that the national question can be pushed aside.

This is a recipe for building a sect in Northern Ireland: it has as little chance of uniting the Six County working class as the previous Labour Party minimalists had.

No political formation that does not have in its programme a democratic solution to the Irish national question and to the communal antagonisms in Northern Ireland will even begin to play a positive role in Irish politics.

The best democratic programme, I believe, is that of a federal united Ireland with as much autonomy for the Protestant community as is compatible with the democratic rights of the majority of the Irish people. An all-Ireland revolutionary movement must be built which integrates this with the direct work of educating and organising the labour movement to fight for workers' power, and which links up with the workers' movement internationally, especially in

Britain and in Europe, on the programme of the United Socialist States of Europe

From this viewpoint the polar opposite to Militant is the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP). Instead of pretending that the national question will fade away if socialists concentrate on working class unity, they pretend that the problem of working class unity will fade away if socialists concentrate on the national question. In effect, they pretend that the Protestant working class does not exist - and talk and act accordingly. We get the obscenity of radical - if somewhat eclectic - socialists who function as Catholic sectarians.

It is very easy for British Marxists who reject Militant's approach with contempt to lapse into an attitude not too different from the IRSP's. We sympathise with the Catholic revolt. We recognise, like the Republicans, that Partition helped intensify and now perpetuates the communal divide. We know that the overall responsibility is Britain's. We defend the right of the Republican movement to opt for armed struggle. We find ourselves, living in Britain, obliged to combat the pressures around us and to champion and defend the Republicans.

That explains, but does not justify, the fact that in the last decade a simpleminded petty bourgeois nationalist version of Irish history has become dominant on the left - some of it ideas that James Connolly himself was polemicising against three quarters of a century ago.

We have a duty to support the Republican movement against the British state. That does not mean a duty to side ideologically with the Republicans against Irish anti-Republican or sectarian socialists, or to consider the latter as beyond legitimate discussion. Such a conclusion would amount to denying to British, and even Irish, socialists, the right to any independent judgement on the issues.

"No autonomy for pro-imperialists" by Tony Richardson (Socialist Organiser 115)

I am writing to take up and disagree with John O'Mahony's article on Ireland in SO 113.

The article is supposed to be dealing with Militant's politics but in reality, presents O'Mahony's own views on Ireland. In this I think he shares an erroneous view with the Editorial in issue 112, which talks about the solution in Ireland being "some form of federal, united Ireland (since when was this SO policy?) with as much autonomy for the Protestant minority as is compatible with the rights of the Irish people as a whole."

First of all, quite obviously, the only solution is a socialist, united Ireland.

But as O'Mahony correctly says, on the road to that are other demands: I don't think any form of autonomy for the Protestants should be one of those demands. Of course they should have freedom of religion etc. But insofar as they are a 'community' they identify themselves through their pro-imperialism.

As long as this distinct, pro-imperialist base, organised as such, exists, with full or limited autonomy, then it will be

impossible for the Irish people to begin to solve their problems.

The fact is that the Republican movement is anti-imperialist, as is most of the Catholic population. Comrade O'Mahony tries to minimise their strength, but this is not the really important point.

Northern Ireland is dominated economically and militarily by imperialism. The starting point for us must be the struggle to end that.

Of course, within that struggle we attempt to give it a class content by fighting for the Permanent Revolution. In this we oppose the solely nationalist illusions of the Provisionals and their conscious [deliberate] antagonising of the Protestant working class.

This means connecting the anti-imperialist struggle with the need for the working class to take power through a socialist programme.

This means that within united class struggles, like that in the NHS, we raise the connection of anti-capitalism with anti-imperialism.

Trade union struggles are not "sub-political"; they are spontaneous, but contain within them the possibilities for developing the consciousness of the more reactionary elements in the working class.

But the starting point of this is to break down the pro-imperialism of the Protestant workers. Britain is an imperialist country, specifically the country oppressing Ireland. It is the duty of socialists in Britain to prove their anti-imperialism. The stress on "democratic" solutions, in an imperialist "democracy", the dissolving of defence of the Republican movement in a mass of words defending the Protestant community, I think only softens the principled approach to the liberation struggle. Comrade O'Mahony may say that the Provisionals are for a federal solution. But the PLO also want a state in the West Bank. We do not tail-end these movements. The only solution is a united Ireland which we fight to be socialist, as we fight for the smashing of the state of Israel.