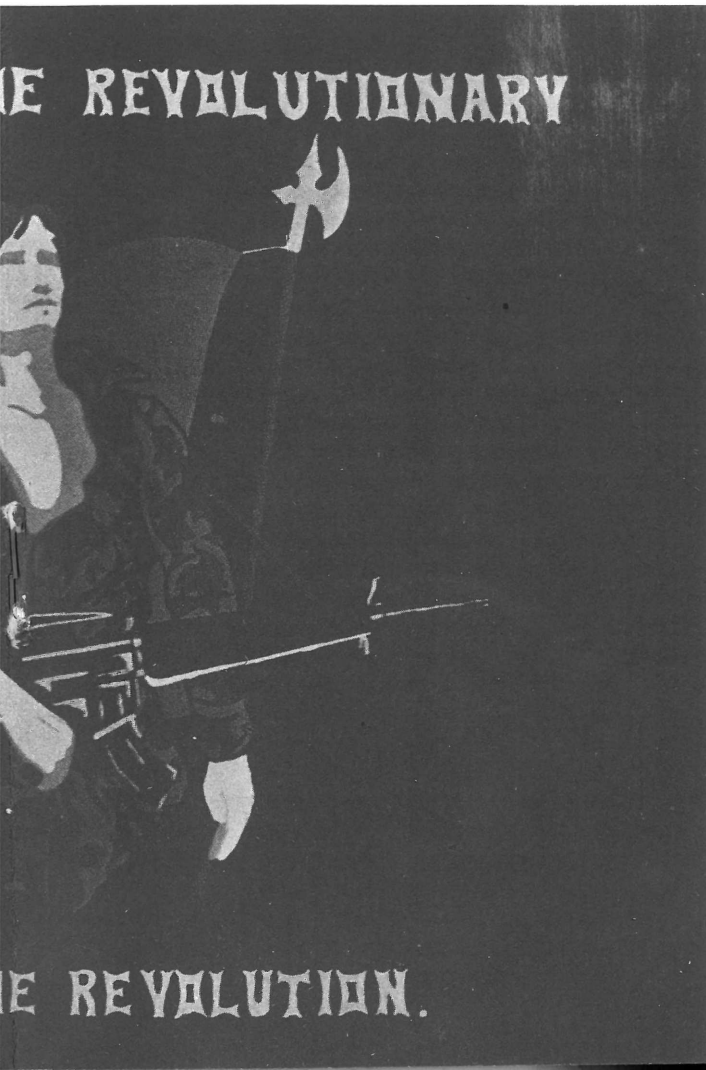




Demonstration supporting women prisoners in Armagh prison.



Gerry Adams



In brief we have something of a political dilemma. Socialism cannot be constructed within the framework of partition which militates against even the construction of a serious socialist organisation. And national liberation can only be achieved by an organisation which is socialist. Partition has been successful in pushing the national movement, the labour movement, the cultural movement, etc. into relatively airtight, separate compartments and in a way in which they are often antagonistic towards each other. Our task then is to build a movement which is separatist (from Britain), socialist, secular, non-sectarian and culturally Irish.

*In retrospect, how do you evaluate the results of the hunger strikes of Irish republican prisoners? What is the relation to the armed and mass struggle generally?*

Republican POWs in Belfast prison forced the British government to recognise them as political prisoners after a prolonged hunger strike in 1972. In an attempt to disguise the political nature of the newly won political prisoner status, the British described this as «Special Category Status». However the unique conditions of imprisonment which ensued left no doubt that the British government had, in fact, conceded political status to the POWs.

These conditions included: recognition by the British prison authorities of the OCs (Officer Commanding) of the republican prisoners or their representatives, free association, no prison work, no prison uniform, as well as other minor concessions on visiting rights, etc.

In a major policy review put into practice circa 1976, the British government evolved the three-pronged strategy of «Ulsterisation, Criminalisation and Normalisation.» Very briefly, this meant pushing locally recruited British forces, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), into the front line of the British government's counterrevolutionary effort with a corresponding diminution in the role of the regular British army. Nationally and internationally they also set about trying to portray the national liberation struggle as no more than a «criminal conspiracy» in just the same way as in other colonies they have tried to disguise their imperialist endeavours by proclaiming that they were engaged in «police actions against communist bandits». The «criminal» tag was also intended to undermine the republican struggle nationally and to facilitate the Dublin government's cross-border collaboration. Central to a successful outcome to the attempted criminalisation policy was the removal of the political status from the POWs in Long Kesh and Magilligan prison camps and in Armagh women's prison. To achieve this the British government simply declared that anyone charged with actions in pursuance of the liberation struggle after March 1, 1976, would not be granted the status of a political prisoner. Internal resistance to this in the prisons began with the sentencing of Kieran Nugent in September '76; when his gaolers attempted to force him to wear prison uniform, he declared that they «would have to nail it» to his back.

From September '76 until October '81, republican prisoners were forced to live naked in their cells, without beds, in the midst of their own excreta and urine, without reading or writing materials or any other recreation or mental stimulation. After four years of these horrendous conditions and after all other attempts to gain proper prison conditions had failed, the hunger strike was undertaken by republican prisoners in Long Kesh prison camp and Armagh women's prison in October