

1980. They had five basic demands: (1) No prison uniform; (2) No prison work; (3) Free association; (4) Full remission on sentences; (5) Adequate visits, food parcels and recreational/education facilities.

The British government promised to concede these demands and the hunger strike ended after 53 days. When the British reneged on their promises, a second hunger strike led by Bobby Sands began on March 1, 1981. By August 20, 1981, ten republicans had died on the hunger strike and no meaningful concession had been offered by the British government. By October of that year the combination of concessions and the intervention by the families of the hunger strikers at the critical part in their sons' hunger strike brought an end to this protest. The British conceded on all the demands except the major one of free association.

But importantly the massive support demonstrated for the hunger strikers destroyed the thrust of Britain's criminalisation policy both nationally and internationally. That policy, which was an integral part of Britain's attempt to politically isolate the Republican Movement from the Irish people, was buried by the 100,000 people who attended the funeral of Bobby Sands in May 1981.

In the face of broad mass support for the hunger strikers, the political response of the British government was one of deceit. In attempt to pose as reasonable people but in reality to stall for time in order to sap the will of the hunger strikers and undermine support for their cause, the British government encouraged and facilitated interventions by the European Commission for Human Rights, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, and various political and religious individuals including a papal envoy. In the course of these interventions the British alluded to concessions without producing the substance. Militarily the response was equally typical of imperialism in crisis-naked force. The British army and the RUC killed at least eight civilians during this period of heightened protest, including three children under 15 and a young married mother. Hundreds of others were injured, many seriously and permanently, while nationalist people were subjected to a massive upsurge in arrests, house searches and mini-curfews.

Concerning the relation to armed struggle: During the hunger strike in 1980, the level of IRA activity was deliberately restricted. This, they explained, was in order to prevent any diversion of public attention from the issues of the hunger strike.

However, fearing that the British would very consciously cause a protracted hunger strike in 1981, in order to maintain a low level of armed revolutionary activity to accomodate their scheme for normalisation, the IRA employed revolutionary force throughout the second hunger strike.

By September '81 the British government had acknowledged thirty-seven fatalities and over 150 casualties among its forces over that nine month period as a result of IRA actions. The largest proportion of these (29 deaths) were from the indigenous British forces of the RUC and UDR, reflecting their role in the forefront of Britain's «Ulsterisation» of the war. Millions of pounds worth of damage, for which the British government is liable, was caused in attacks on commercial property, while there were also two attacks on British military establishments in Britain itself.

British security was also penetrated at the Sullom Voe oil terminal in the Shetland Islands where the IRA planted a bomb

on the day of an official visit by the English Queen.

The IRA seems to have had little need to explain its action throughout this period. Against the background of young patriots dying on hunger strike on almost a weekly basis, of children being murdered on our streets by the British army and intense general oppression, such an explanation would have been superfluous. That is not to say, however, that the IRA has not had to patiently explain its actions throughout the past fifteen years of armed struggle. But in circumstances which prevailed during the hunger strike, the toleration of any people in regard to the employment of revolutionary force is naturally much higher.

How did Sinn Fein's policy of contesting elections develop?

Republican participation in the elections in 1981 was coincidental rather than planned and in nature was more of an electoral intervention than part of an electoral strategy. It was coincidental in that in the occupied zone the opportunity arose out of the death of the sitting independent nationalist MP for the Westminster constituency of Fermanagh/South Tyrone at a time when Bobby Sand's hunger strike was already well advanced, and in the Free State as a result of a snap general election called by Charles Haughey, the then premier, at a time when four hunger strikers had already died. Republicans seized these occasions as further opportunities of publicising the prisoners' cause.

In the event, the Irish electorate, where given the opportunity rallied to the hunger strikers. In Fermanagh/South Tyrone, Bobby Sands, then 41 days on hunger strike, gained 30,492 votes on April 10, 1981, and was elected as MP to the Westminster parliament in what was then the clearest rebuttal of the British government's attempt to criminalise the struggle and politically isolate republicans from the people.

In the August by-election which resulted from Bobby's death, Owen Carron, his election agent, was then elected to the same seat on an increased majority of 31,273 votes. Carron's intervention was instanced by the on-going H-Block campaign and the legislation passed by the British Parliament after Sands' death which prevented prisoners from becoming parliamentary candidates.

In the Free State general elections in June '81, the electoral intervention of H-Block prisoner candidates caused the ousting of the incumbent government and the election of two H-Block prisoners to the Free State parliament, Leinster House. Between them the prisoner candidates gained some 40,000 votes. All of those candidatures were on the basis of the H-Block campaign and not as members of the Republic Movement.

From those electoral interventions and in conjunction with our ongoing review of policy and analysis of the struggle, Sinn Fein's electoral strategy evolved. It is perhaps necessary at this point to explain the Sinn Fein attitude to the various elected assemblies in Britain and Ireland. Republicans refuse to recognise the legitimacy of the London or Dublin government authority. That refusal is based on the refusal by those governments to accept the democratic wishes of the Irish people as expressed in the last all-Ireland election in 1918, when Sinn Fein won 78 out of 105 seats, and on the armed enforcement of the partition of our own country by the British government in direct contradiction of those wishes. The Sinn Fein constitution forbids any member to take his/her seat in any of the partitionist assemblies in London, Dublin or Belfast. Sinn Fein candidates, therefore, contest such elections on an abstentionist basis.