

The IRA and its armed struggle

A Bloody Long War

Joe King

1992

Gerry Adams is no longer an MP. The politicians and media pundits are over the moon with joy. In their eyes the republicans have been denied the international 'credibility' of having an elected MP and denied their 'mandate for violence' at home.

In the immediate aftermath we were subjected to a barrage of questions and comments about how this will effect the respective strengths of the 'hawks' and 'doves' in the IRA. Will there be an escalation of the armed struggle? Will they hit back with ferocity? Will they decide that the armed struggle is an impediment to their political progress? Will there be a ceasefire?

Much of what was said was unadulterated rubbish. Gerry Adams and Sinn Féin held their vote in West Belfast. The SDLP did not eat into it. Adams 16,826 was only 36 down on the 1987 result and was 447 up on the original 1983 poll. The SDLP did not eat into it. What lost him the seat were the 3,000 loyalists who heeded the UDA's call vote SDLP in order to deny the seat to Adams. The Shankill's walls were covered with "A vote for Cobain is a vote for Sinn Féin" referring to the fact that if loyalists continued to vote for the Unionist, Sinn Féin would hold the seat. This was certainly not a pro-SDLP vote, it was explicitly an anti-Sinn Féin one. Supporters of the UDA/UFF hate the SDLP, it's just that they hate Sinn Féin a lot more.

Across the six counties, as a whole, Sinn Féin's vote did drop... but only from 11% to 10%. They aren't going anywhere, but they are not about to disappear either. However it is true that a tentative debate has been going on inside the IRA and Sinn Féin over the last two or three years about the relative values of the armed struggle and parliamentary politics.

In February Gerry Adams told the 'Irish Times' 'Two or three years ago, I would have seen it necessary to personally state publicly that yes, there was the right of the IRA to engage in armed struggle, and perhaps even at times that armed struggle was a necessary ingredient in the struggle. I don't feel the need to do that now. In fact, I think that my role now, and I've seen this increasingly over the last 18 months, is one of increasingly and persistently saying there's a need to end all acts of violence.' This is interesting, not so much for what is being said, but for the fact that this shows a slightly more open attitude towards politics. It used to be that anyone questioning the value of the military campaign was shown the door pretty quickly.

However it is not this debate that the establishment politicians want to take part in. Some of them almost foam at the mouth when someone mentions republicans. They have nothing but hatred for the Provos. North and South, all the main parties have done their best to repress

republicanism. In the North it is shoot-to-kill assassinations, beatings in RUC stations, censorship. In the South it's extradition and more censorship. To be thought a sympathiser of Sinn Féin is to invite Special Branch attention and maybe a beating in a Garda station.

According to Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Labour, Official Unionist, DUP and all the rest this is justified by the need to oppose violence. What a neck! The people who supported the Gulf War (and those who allowed the use of Shannon airport to US bombers) are telling us about the need to oppose violence! What was the slaughter of retreating Iraqi soldiers and civilians on the road from Kuwait to Basra if it was not an act of violence, of terrorism? The death toll in that terrible few hours when the Americans gleefully labelled it a "turkey shoot" was far more than all the deaths ever caused by the IRA... and far more than the IRA is ever likely to cause.

The hypocrisy is evident. However the question remains: should we call on the IRA to stop their campaign? To put the question in such a way implies that the IRA are the main problem, if only they would lay down their arms everything would be o.k. We have to remember that the IRA didn't start the 'troubles'. After the dismal failure of their 1956-62 border campaign the guns were dumped. A new force appeared, the Civil Rights Movement. Most of them believed that peaceful reform within the six county state was possible.

When they took to the streets loyalist gangs (including politicians, policemen and the notorious B Specials) attacked them. Streets were burned out, a pogrom began. Since the founding of the six county state every time the Catholic working class rose from their knees (or more frightening for the bosses, every time Catholic and Protestant workers united) sectarianism was whipped up and a state-led pogrom was unleashed. The 'liberal' 1960's were no exception.

The British Army were sent back in. At first they claimed to be a 'disinterested' force standing between angry Catholics and the Paisleyites and policemen who wanted to invade Catholic areas and inflict a reign of terror. Within a year it was clear to all that their real purpose was to protect the Northern state and this would be done by keeping down the Catholics. The Falls Road was placed under a three day curfew in 1970 and three people shot dead for venturing out of their homes. The IRA began to reappear.

The next year saw internment without trial and the year after that the murder of 14 Civil Rights marchers by British troops on Bloody Sunday. The IRA grew in size and escalated its recently commenced campaign. It was clear to many young Catholics that the struggle for change had become a struggle against the state itself and the British Army that was protecting it.

Far from being the problem, the IRA is a product of it. If the IRA declared a ceasefire the problem would remain. If they completely vanished the problem would still be glaringly obvious. And as long as that problem is there there will be a response. Until imperialism is defeated and sectarianism uprooted there will be resistance.

The question to be asked is what sort of resistance do we need? The armed struggle of the IRA has no chance of achieving victory. A small minority (the IRA) based within a minority (Northern Catholics) cannot defeat the state. They are unable to break out of the confines of the Northern Catholic ghettos. Southern Irish workers are not influenced by claims that British imperialism is the main enemy, North and South. Southern capitalism is no longer tied to the apron strings of London. Workers in the 26 counties find themselves struggling against Irish and multinational bosses.

IRA bombings and shootings are a thorn in the side of the ruling class, an unpleasant pain but nothing likely to prove fatal. Neither side can win a military victory. There is no way that a small guerrilla army can defeat the combined might of the RUC, UDR and British Army. Equally, there

is no way that the state forces can wipe out militant republicanism. As long as partition, with its resultant sectarianism and repression, has existed there have been those who will take up arms against it.

While this continues there will be civilian casualties and increased communalism and sectarian tension. Anarchists oppose the republican armed struggle, it is not the way to mobilise thousands upon thousands of working class people against imperialism. It is not the way towards an anti-sectarian working class unity.

The armed struggle is not something that republicans took up because they have a fascination with violence or some innate love of armalite rifles, despite what some media commentators would have us believe. IRA volunteers are brave men and women who want to hit back at the forces that have been sticking the boot into their community. They risk jailing, torture and death. If bravery was enough the British Army would have been defeated years ago. Clearly bravery is not enough.

To criticise the republicans' methods is not sufficient, the methods flow from their politics. Nationalism sees the main struggle as one between the 'Irish people' and British imperialism. The class struggle within Ireland takes a secondary place until the border is smashed. The mass of ordinary people are kept passive. While a few hundred courageous volunteers take up arms, the role of everyone else doesn't add up to much more than joining the occasional march or casting a vote for Sinn Féin. The few fight and the rest stay at home and watch it on TV.

Republicans see the working class only as victims of the system and not as people with the potential power to overthrow it. The bravery of the few becomes a substitute for mass action. The IRA campaign becomes central.

We do not like the romanticisation of violence. We do not enjoy seeing fathers bury their sons. We do not like part of our country being a war zone. But it is not for these reasons that we oppose the armed struggle. We are not pacifists. At times it is necessary to use violence to defend gains won in struggle. However we reject the idea that a small grouping, with guns and bombs, can set us all free.

Only masses of people involved in struggle can fundamentally change society. We have to want to be free. Nobody can force freedom down our throats. Armed struggle is a substitute (and a poor substitute at that) for mass action. When was the ruling class most worried by events in the last two decades? It was the big Civil Rights marches and the no-go areas of Free Derry and Free Belfast that set their teeth chattering. It was the huge protests after the Bloody Sunday murders that saw the British Embassy burnt in Dublin and Jack Lynch's government declaring a national day of mourning after workers had made it clear there was going to be a total closedown of industry.

It was this sort of militant mass action that forced concessions from the British government. The B Specials were disbanded, Unionist powers in local government were limited. In 1972, after the Bloody Sunday protests, the Stormont government was abolished. Of course many of these concessions were clawed back when the mass movement was eclipsed by the emergence of the IRA campaign and its promise that 1973 (and '74 and '75!) would be the "year of victory". The best example was the replacement of the B Specials by the UDR. But the lesson remains, it was mass action that won the concessions.

So if the Workers Solidarity Movement are so opposed to the armed struggle why don't we join the call for a ceasefire. We won't line up with the right wing politicians and their 'Peace Train' supporters who seek to apportion all the blame to the IRA for the 'troubles'. The IRA are

a response to a problem. The primary problem is partition, sectarianism and the occupation by the British Army. We refuse to join in the scapegoating of republicans.

Equally, we refuse to mute our criticism of republicanism and its armed struggle. We are opposed to their politics as well as their methods. We stand for anarchism, for an independent working class position. We want to break working class people from the gombeen nationalism of Fianna Fáil, from the reactionary hatemongering of loyalism, from the sub-reformism of Labour and Democratic Left, ...and from the communalism of Sinn Féin.

While opposing the presence of the British Army and the continuing partition of the country, the working class must also fight the Southern state. We have to oppose imperialism and, at the same time, oppose the clerical nationalist laws in the South which ban divorce and abortion. We have to oppose Orange bigotry while at the same time campaigning for the complete separation of Church and State.

We do not fight for a united capitalist Ireland, neither as a 'step in the right direction' or as an end in itself. Joining the six to the twenty six counties offers nothing to working class people in either state. We have no interest in re-dividing poverty on a more 'equitable' basis. The only Ireland worth fighting for is a Workers Republic where every working class person stands to gain. The way towards such a new Ireland is the way of class struggle and mass action, taking control of our own struggles and doing it in our own class interests. This is the road to freedom.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Joe King
The IRA and its armed struggle
A Bloody Long War
1992

<http://struggle.ws/ws92/north35.html>
From Workers Solidarity No35, 1992

theanarchistlibrary.org