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A new loyalist party?

Labour pains for the UDA and UVF?

Alan MacSimóin

1995

DAVID ERVINE of the UVF linked Progressive Unionist Party has been saying it. So has founder member of the modern UVF, Gusty Spence. Gary McMichael of the UDA's Ulster Democratic Party hints at the need for it. What they are all talking about is a new working class loyalist political party.

There is much talk of how the ordinary working class Protestant has gained nothing from the old loyalism, of poor housing and the lack of respect shown to them by the "fur coat brigade". And it is undeniable that many working class Protestants suffer conditions every bit as bad as those suffered by their Catholic counterparts.

Anarchists welcome this beginning, this questioning of the old certainties that saw working class Protestants conned into thinking they were in the same camp as the landed gentry and Orange employers. But it is only a beginning, while we can forgive we can not forget that just months ago the UVF and the UDA were killing Catholics at random. As the graffiti put it, 'ACWD – any Catholic will do'.

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But we do hope that there is a real questioning of what they were doing, and why. This discussion reaches far beyond the loyalist paramilitaries. Among Protestants, most of whom gave absolutely no support to the death squads, there is interest in the idea of a new party.

A measure of 'soft left' politics is possible within the confines of loyalism. A good example is the Northern Ireland Labour Party. They won support from both Catholic and Protestant on issues like better housing, support for the welfare state and free education. In the 1960s their vote was climbing in Belfast. In 1958 they took four Stormont seats, and held them at the next election in 1962.

In September 1966 the NILP and the Northern Committee of the ICTU made a joint statement which called for 'one man, one vote' and an end to discrimination against Catholics. This was quite significant as it came from two mainly Protestant bodies.

However the NILP played no part in the ensuing Civil Rights campaign. [In disgust, most of its left wing members decamped to Peoples Democracy and the Derry branch went independent]. While they had united people around basic 'bread and butter' issues and had condemned repressive laws after the IRA had ended their 1956-62 border campaign, they had always been essentially pro-partition.

When a struggle broke out that went on to challenge the very existence of the Northern state, the NILP threw off its social democratic clothing and stood exposed as no more than a poor persons' unionist party. They had an MP, David Bleakley, serve as Minister in the cabinet that introduced internment without trial. They refused to even condemn the Bloody Sunday massacre when 13 unarmed civil rights marchers in Derry were shot down by the British army.

Having jettisoned its mild reformism, it ran out of reasons for existing in opposition to the big unionist parties. In 1974 the handful of remaining members shut up shop. The most

noticeable residue from that time was the number of former members who surfaced in the UVF, UDA and Ulster Workers Council.

Other experiments came and went within months. In 1974 the UVF launched the Volunteer Political Party as a party "for the working class people". It contested East Belfast in the Westminster election and polled 2,600 votes. Failing to win the seat saw the VPP disbanded and the UVF back to sectarian murder.

A few UVF men did leave over this but, for many, it was just another way to "preserve the union" and keep the Catholics down. If the tactic didn't work, then return to indiscriminate murder. Throughout the time of the VPP the editor of the UVF paper, 'Combat', was an open supporter of the British National Front.

And who remembers the UDA's Ulster Community Action Group. Their legacy is probably the number of community centres that became UDA drinking clubs. Though, it has to be said that few UDA members did break with their organisation after being involved in the less exciting but more immediate struggles of their communities for better facilities.

For reasons explained elsewhere in this paper, a left wing loyalism is not possible. And no amount of well-wishers can make it so. But there is an opening, a space for introducing new ideas. Anarchists have to use this opportunity to make the case, not for a choice between Orange or Green bosses, but for a new Ireland. The choice we promote is a Workers Republic which sees workers in control of their own lives, an economy directed towards satisfying the needs of all, and real freedom for everyone which shall know no limit save that the freedom of others is not denied.