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When the Falls and the Shankill fought together

Interview

William Burrows

1994

THIS YEAR is the 60th anniversary of the Outdoor Relief strike in Belfast, which saw unemployed Catholics and Protestants fighting alongside each other. In 1982 one of the few survivors from the strike, William Burrows, talked to Outta Control, a local anarchist paper in Belfast. Twelve years later we are pleased to help uncover a small bit of anti-sectarian working class history by reprinting William's recollections. He talked firstly of a march up the Newtownards Road, and secondly described the rally of 40,000 at Queens Square.

“I remember the march up the Newtownards Road. It was organised by the Revolutionary Workers Group. The agitation was against the 10% cut in welfare benefits the government imposed. The bru was 17/- but they brought it down to 15/-. It was the same year as the Invergordon mutiny in Scotland when the sailors struck against a reduction in their wage.

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“There were about 1,500 of us on the march, with a red flag, and we were to have a meeting at Templemore Avenue. Bob Stewart from Scotland was to speak but there was a mob of about 40 to greet us. They went under the name of the Ulster Protestant League and were out to get him as he was well known. They had lambeg drums, deacon poles (with a spear at the end), and a union jack.

“John Crumlin, a notorious bigot from the shipyards (during the early '20s he stirred up sectarian hatred against the Catholics, which drove many of them out) carried the Union jack. He was one of the ‘three Cs’ – Carson, Crumlin and Connor, who ten years earlier had been responsible for stirring up sectarian hatred in the shipyards and chasing Catholics out. Crumlin, in particular, made the most maledictory speeches then.

“There were about fifty police there. But they weren't there to protect us. It was a sham defence. They let the mob through and then joined in. There was a lot of fighting and it ended with nine arrests. Jack White had his neck cut by one of the deacon poles, not too seriously. He was fined £10 and bound over to keep the peace. So was Harold Davidson, a student from Malone. But the rest, who had no connections, got about three months each.

“We had an improvised band to lead us. We borrowed three drums from St Malachy's pipe band in the Markets. But they were destroyed that night. I remember Tommy Hill being there. He was a tram driver, and was known as Red Tommy because he always wore a red tie. He wasn't in the RWG, but was an independent from the Shankill Road. He spoke at all the meetings.

“October, fifty years ago, was a wonderful event in the workers’ struggle for better conditions. On that occasion there was a fight against the Poor Law Guardians of Belfast, who were controlled by the Unionist Party. The Guardians had imposed extremely harsh conditions on unemployed workers.

“Whenever the benefit of an unemployed person ran out due to not having enough stamps, they had to do task work three days a week. They got paid 16/- a week, not in cash but in the form of a chit. This was given to the grocer who gave you groceries for that amount.

“The workers, of course, took exception to this form of payment and thousands of Outdoor Relief workers took to the street to protest against it. Some of these protests ended up in clashes with the police and in a series of riots, with a large number of people being arrested. The worst riot occurred on the Falls Road where two protesters were shot dead. They were Samuel Baxter and John Keenan.

“The Outdoor Relief workers replied with a massive protest to Queens Square, organised by the Revolutionary Workers Groups. There were about 40,000 workers in Queens Square that night on 11th October 1932. They came from all parts of Belfast, and from Derry and Coleraine. Four hundred workers set out to walk from Dublin to Belfast, but as they reached the border the RUC stopped them and turned most of them back. But some did manage to reach Belfast and took part in the march.

“The main speakers that night were Tommy Greehan, Davey Scarborough, Jimmy Koter, Betty Sinclair, Sean

Murray and Arthur Griffin. Thomas Mann came over from England to speak at the funerals of the two Falls men. He was arrested and deported to Clogher Valley, before returning to his home. Other well known speakers I remember of that time were Bob Stewart from Dundee, Willie Gallacher and Charlotte Despard.

“Two weeks after that march I lost my job. I was a farm labourer employed by David McAnse. He was the father of Anne Dickinson, who until recently was a Unionist politician in East Belfast.

“There were RWGs in different parts of the city. In East Belfast were Bob Ellison, Bob Stewart, Eddie and Sadie Menzies, Jimmy Woods, James Connolly (no relation!), Davey Greenlaw, Jimmy McKenzie, Joe Lather, Jimmy Spence, Jimmy Kernoghan, John Lavery, Billy Bishop, Billy Tomlinson and his brother Joe, Billy Somerset Snr., and Lofty Johnson.

“The Falls Road group members were Johnny McWilliams, Jimmy Quinn, Tom Picken, Johnny Campell and Jimmy Hughes. Jimmy McKurk was a very militant worker in the ODR strike from the Falls but wasn't in the group.

“Group members from the Shankill were Norman Taggart and his brother Bob, Bob McVicker and his brother Sam, Billy Johnson, John Sinclair, Aggie Young and Martha Burch. From the Donegal Road were John, Mary and Nora Griffin. Billy Boyd came from York Street. Other members of the groups included Maurice Watters, Jack White and Ben Murray”.