

When British army chiefs refused to obey orders

Ulster Workers Council (UWC) strike of May 1974

Workers Solidarity Movement

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The Ulster Workers Council (UWC) strike of May 1974 was just one of the incidents that showed, far from being “impartial”, the RUC and the British army did their best to prop up loyalism.

This strike was a response to the Sunningdale agreement signed in the Autumn of 1973. This allowed for a “power-sharing” government made up of the Unionists, Alliance and SDLP parties. The agreement also bought into existence, in the spring 1974, the so-called “Council of Ireland”. This was somewhat like the existing Anglo-Irish Secretariat, i.e. a talkshop mainly concerned with cross-border security co-operation.

However loyalists reacted angrily to what they saw as Southern Irish “taigs” being given a right to meddle in the affairs of “Ulster”. They launched a strike which aimed to shut down the six counties and bring the power-sharing government to it’s knees. They succeeded.

The strike was entirely controlled by the UWC. This council was set up in 1973 by loyalist politicians and paramilitaries. The presence of UDA paramilitaries was to prove vital. Andy Tyrie, a UDA leader, described the strike as a triumph of “intimidation without violence”.

INTIMIDATION AND COLLUSION

In Belfast a total of 862 UDA roadblocks were erected under the watchful eye of the RUC and British army. They did nothing to hinder the para-militaries from shutting the city down and many soldiers and cops chatted and joked with the UDA men on the barricades. Shops and small businesses were systematically visited and ordered to close. Most did.

The RUC’s F division at Castlereagh received 709 reports of intimidation. Only two of these were “detected” through their fantastic policing ability! On May 19th the Northern Ireland Secretary, Merlyn Rees, declared a state of emergency giving him power to use troops to maintain essential supplies. They never were.

MUTINY?

It is now clear that the Labour government and the power-sharing executive faced a virtual mutiny as senior army officers refused to co-operate. One of the major successes of the UWC was their shutting down of virtually all of Northern Ireland’s power generating capacity. Army engineers might have been able to maintain at least some of this power. But no attempt was made to do so.

Three months after the strike a senior British officer boasted in the ultra-right “Monday Club” magazine:

“For the first time, the army had decided that it was right and that it knew best and the politicians had better tow the line”

According to another general quoted 10 years later (Irish Times 15th May 1984):

“If you’d a decisive man who had arrested the strikers on the first day it would have created chaos and bought the province to the point of no return.”

These sort of veiled threats make it clear that the army top brass backed the strike and wanted the power-sharing government to fall.

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1994

Retrieved on 18th November 2021 from struggle.ws
Published in *Workers Solidarity* No. 43 – Autumn 1994.

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