

NORTHERN IRELAND: THE BATTLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

Betty Sinclair

(Betty Sinclair, who is Secretary of the Belfast Trades Council and Chairman of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, here gives the background to the present struggle. The second part of this article to be published in December describes the events of Saturday October 5, in Londonderry.—Ed. LM)

WHEN Charles Dickens wrote his famous tale, *The Tale of Two Cities*, he made a most dramatic finish. Sydney Carton the spy of the piece, on finding that the people whom he had to spy on, and work against, for an infamous master, were ordinary honest people, he chose, 'the better path.' And he said, 'It is a far, far better thing I do today . . .' when he decided to face the French guillotine. One had always, after knowing his history from the story, a sneaking respect for the man because he had, not repented, but recognised the truth of the case for 'the other people.'

In the echelons of the ruling Unionist Party of Northern Ireland there appears to be no Sydney Carton. Those who have ruled here, since 1920, through successive Governments and through due 'democratic process' have arrived at the stage where they intend to rule against everybody—including Britain—whatever the odds. That the ultra-Unionist forces within the Government have not declared UDI is because they could not last for one month if the huge subventions, by way of money grants, did not arrive and therefore help, financially to maintain their support.

The British Government, especially since the last war and because of strong representations by the trade union and labour movement, have been forced to allow an effort to take place to end the scandalous leeway that existed between the standard of social services in Britain and Northern Ireland—although parity was promised in the Government of Ireland Act, 1920. It was the agitation of that movement that provided the courage for the Unionist ruling party to go forward and ask for a better deal for the people here. But now they claim the victory all their own and warn all that—if the link is broken with Britain we shall lose all the benefits that come from 'the connection.'

What have been the benefits? We do not talk now of any 'Irish question.' We do not raise the matter of the right of *all* the Irish

people to determine the future of the *whole* of the country without any outside interference. We talk of the benefits to the Northern Ireland people—as an integral part of the United Kingdom. The many Acts passed by the British Governments after the last war and which dealt with social services were warmly welcomed by all sensible people here. But, resistance did come. It came from successive Unionist Governments in Northern Ireland who had become even more Tory than the Tories in Britain. And, in their blindness, they thought that they would not, and need not, increase the standards of life in Northern Ireland for their political opponents—in any field—because their followers in the Unionist Party would be willing to do without themselves in order to deprive the political opponents of Unionism of the ordinary everyday facilities of life in the field of social services. But they made a mistake. The ordinary worker who followed the fortunes of the Unionist Party wanted to be ‘British,’ they wanted the same social services as the British worker. And so the Unionists had to give way. They did it with a bad grace.

And they did it in such a way that all the social service Acts that were passed in Britain and which applied to Northern Ireland were administered more harshly than they were in Britain. They attempted, at one stage, to cease the payment of family allowances after the birth of a third child in a family. This was obviously—so obviously—slanted against the Catholic people that there was a general outcry against the proposal here and in Britain that the ultra-Unionist clique had to draw in their horns. Just now the Association of Local Education Committees are attempting to prevent children of large families—after the fourth child—getting free school meals as in Britain because of this policy of discrimination—fear of their own overlordship and—dare one say—their hatred of Britain and all that her people stands for in the way of liberalism.

Whilst the Unionist ruling Party wants to maintain ‘the connection’ their attitude is that whatever there may be in that connection or laws passed that would upset Unionist Party rule, they will have nothing to do with. They, actually, as history unfolds itself, are becoming the anti-British force in Northern Ireland—and—by that yardstick—in the whole of Ireland.

It is not always easy for those who have not visited, lived or worked in any part of Ireland—including Northern Ireland—to know the mind and temperament of our people. It is not always given to them to know that, throughout our long history, the Irish people have always absorbed their invaders and would-be con-

querors. It is not easy for them to know that it was only possible, after the rebellion in Drogheda in 1641 and the consequent massacre of the Irish natives of that town that, until then, there had been no great hatred or animosity. But since then there have been difficulties which led up to the division of the country in 1920. Not to suit the needs of the British or Irish people—but to suit the needs of the British Conservative Party and its economic and landed imperial interests.

The 1920 Government of Ireland Act, was based on equal rights. It gave the people Proportional Representation in Local Government and national government. This latter was done to ensure that what had been called the Protestant Ascendancy class would be able to have representation. In the 26-counties of Ireland PR was maintained in all spheres until an attempt was made to end it in 1959. This attempt was rebuffed by the people. (At the moment a further attempt is being made to this end and the whole of the trade union and labour movement are opposing it.) In Northern Ireland, however, PR was abolished already in 1922—two years after the State was set up. This guaranteed that the nationalist opposition in many areas were not able to obtain adequate representation commensurate with the population. For the Stormont Government elections, PR was abolished in 1929 and constituencies were re-formed in order to ensure that, as far as possible, no alternative Government could ever be returned in Northern Ireland.

This action affected not only the Nationalist opposition, it also affected the rising Labour movement which had already four seats in the Northern Ireland Parliament and were looking forward to more as the struggle developed. The constituencies in the countryside were cut up—one Member of Parliament for Derry City, a Unionist has his voters from as far as eight miles *outside the city*. And he represents the city of Londonderry! In Belfast, where Labour and Nationalist representation was strong, the seats were cut up so as to make it nearly impossible for a Labour candidate to be elected. A few seats, won by Nationalists, were not pervious to such tactics because of the overwhelming number of such voters. Even that was thought to help the ruling Unionist Party as they always wanted, always wished, to have politics here polarised into Nationalist and Unionist, Catholic and Protestant fronts—they could always play the Orange card against the Green card.

But peoples and movements grow up. Many battles were fought during the 1920's and 1930's but it was not until really after the

last war that the people—the vast majority—began to realise that there could be, or might be, a better way and the trade union and labour movement began to make much progress. There began to be formed a unity of, especially, the working class which worried the ruling Unionist Party. They were not prepared to—would not countenance—from whatever quarter it came, any challenge to their rule. And so we found that the people who had fought together against fascist Germany, Catholic and Protestant, and of all political persuasions, had to be divided again to ensure Unionist rule.

So concerned were the forces of Unionism in Northern Ireland that they actually went to the polls before Britain in 1945—and used the old slogans in order to keep their dominance. They were afraid to wait until the first post-war British election would take place because they feared the result on the growing understanding of all the decent and serious people here. The White settlers of Rhodesia have nothing to teach the Unionist Party in Northern Ireland—in fact they may have learnt much from them. And, let me make clear, they are not much better at being ‘Britishers than are the Smiths of Rhodesia.’ The ‘Mother country’ for them amounts to subsidies of over £100 million per year and no interference in what they are doing in Northern Ireland in the name of the British people.

The Northern Ireland people, like the people of any other part of the world, have a desire to live in the place where they were born. But, just imagine, if the people who oppose the ruling party ever became the absolute majority, were able to go to school, have employment and become members of the total community, what would become of the 60 (Protestant) and 40 (Catholic) proportions that were worked out in 1920? And so it has happened ever since that, whilst the Governments have not carried out a policy of genocide, they have tried to order matters in the field of employment, housing, etc., to ensure that this possibility would never occur. To obtain a house, secured through the local authorities, one’s religion has to be taken into account. In the vast majority of nearly 60 local authorities, there is no points system for housing and either the Mayor or the local councillors—the predominant Unionist majority—decide who gets a house. (Since the end of the first world war, 1919, Derry Corporation with a population of nearly 60,000, have built little over 500 houses.)

In the field of employment, it was usual, until recent years, that the applicant would be asked his or her religion. This was ‘refined’ and one’s religion was not asked: one was asked what school one

had attended. It was always easy to distinguish the names of so-called Protestant—actually local authority—and Catholic voluntary schools. In many industrial establishments Catholic workers were refused employment—in others, a nominal number would be employed. It was expected that, when the big monopolies set their eyes on Northern Ireland that this might be changed somewhat. But, rumour has it, that, when these firms came in with the aid of Government money, etc., they were required either to keep to the 60-40 per cent proportion, or, as it has been in many cases, were able to find only Protestant workers in the particular areas where the industries were set up. Otherwise, of course, if the Catholic workers wanted employment they would have to shift home. And that meant the run-down of ancient cities with a preponderance of Catholic people.

No one denies that industrial development has taken place in Northern Ireland. No one would dispute that conditions are much better than they have been in the history of the State. But, equally, no one will gainsay that all the changes that have taken place have been so worked out as to ensure that Unionist rule will continue for ever and for ever.

But we live in 1968. There is a growing and intelligent middle and working class. They wish no longer to live in the Unionist Party cultural and social wilderness.

LABOUR MONTHLY FORTY YEARS AGO

U.S.A. Democracy

West Virginia has other resources besides its police. There is the Sedition Act. Under its provisions: 'It shall be unlawful for any person to speak, print, publish, or communicate, by language, sign, picture or otherwise, any teachings, doctrines or counsels in sympathy or favour of ideals, institutions, or forms of government hostile, inimical or antagonistic to those now or hereafter existing under the constitution or laws of this State of the United States . . .'

The next section of the law makes it illegal for any person to display, or to 'have in his possession' any red or black flag. Violators of this law go to the penitentiary for not less than one and not more than five years.

There are still persons in the United States who believe that orderly and legal methods can be depended upon for making the necessary transition from capitalism to socialism.

(From 'Democracy,' by Scott Nearing, *Labour Monthly*, November 1928.)