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Bernadette Devlin McAliskey



on the
Irish
Freedom
Struggle

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Bernadette Devlin McAliskey has been a leader of the Northern Ireland freedom struggle since 1968, when she was a student at Queen's University in Belfast. In 1969 she was elected to the British Parliament from Mid-Ulster and was, at twenty-one, the youngest member of that body. She served in parliament until 1974.

Much of her recent activity has focused around the plight of nationalist prisoners in British jails in Northern Ireland. During the 1981 hunger strike, McAliskey was a member of the national executive committee of the National H-Block-Armagh Committee, a broad coalition formed to rally support for the prisoners.

In January 1981, Bernadette Devlin McAliskey and her husband Michael McAliskey were severely wounded by three pro-British assassins who shot them in their home.

The following speech by McAliskey was delivered in New York on October 22, 1982, to members of District Council 37 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. At the meeting, she was presented with a copy of a resolution supporting the struggle of the people of Northern Ireland that was passed at the 1982 AFSCME national convention.

I'd like to thank your union for the principled and courageous resolution in our defense. I thank you not only on my own behalf, but on behalf of the political prisoners and the people of Ireland.

Ireland, a small island with a total population of less than five million, is partitioned into two states. In the British-ruled north, where I live, there are a million and a half people.

We in Ireland have been struggling for independence from Britain since before capitalism itself developed. But our present struggle dates back to the turn of the century,

when a movement developed among small nations across Europe fighting for independence. Historically, it marked the beginning of the great anti-imperialist movements.

The British government promised the Irish many things to get us to fight in World War I, a war in which the kings and masters of Europe played games with the lives of the working class and the poor.

Many of us have forgotten that World War I, like most wars, was totally unnecessary and was not fought in the interests of the people who died in the trenches.

The people of Ireland were promised independence if they sent their young men to die in Flanders on behalf of an English king. Some of our people went. But a national movement arose that refused to fight for either king or kaiser. They said that if they were to fight and die, it would be for the freedom of their own country.

Sinn Fein, which means "ourselves alone," had been formed at the turn of the century to press for home rule for Ireland. By 1916 it had built up a military capability in order to fight for freedom.

The Irish rebellion took place on Easter of 1916. Like every other combat between ourselves and the English, it was an ill-balanced affair. Facing the British army were several hundred dedicated young men and women. They came from Cummann na mBan, the Irish women's army; from the Irish Republican Brotherhood; and from James Connolly's Irish Citizen Army.

The Irish Citizen Army, incidentally, afforded equal status to its men and women. Constance Markevievicz, a great leader of the Irish rebellion, was one of the chiefs of staff of the Irish Citizen Army.

The rebellion never really had a chance of success. The rebels seized the General Post Office in Dublin and declared the sovereign right of the Irish people to independence.

This rising was put down in a matter of days and its leaders — the greatest of whom was the Irish socialist James Connolly — were executed.

The execution of Connolly is a measure of Britain's attitude toward our people, then and even now. James Con-

nolly had been severely wounded in the fighting and was on his deathbed.

The British moved forward the date of his execution fearing he might die before they got their chance to shoot him. When they brought Connolly out to be executed, he was so weak he could not even sit up. So he was strapped into a chair and shot.

James Connolly, the father of the Irish Socialist Republican Party, also had played an important role in union struggles here in the United States.

Connolly was one of the few people at that time who understood that winning Ireland's freedom required combining the fight for its national independence and the fight for the rights of its developing working class. He raised the slogan that the cause of Ireland is the cause of labor and the cause of labor is the cause of Ireland.

Over the years, the separation of these two historic struggles has led to our inability to win our freedom.

Although the 1916 rising failed and was brutally suppressed, its suppression had a completely different effect than the British government expected. In this regard it was similar to the results of the brutal manner in which the British allowed Bobby Sands and his comrades to starve to death in prison.

The deaths of the few of 1916 inspired the many. And by 1918 the movement for home rule and independence became a mass national movement in Ireland.

In 1918 there was a general election throughout all thirty-two counties of Ireland. At that time everyone in Ireland elected representatives to sit in the British parliament because we were directly ruled from London.

Sinn Fein ran in those elections on a very simple platform. It promised that if the people of Ireland — peacefully, democratically, and through the ballot box — supported the organization's policies, the elected Sinn Fein representatives would form a rebel Irish parliament in Dublin rather than go to Britain. And using the mandate given them by the Irish people, they would negotiate the terms of the home rule that the British had promised but not granted.

In the 1918 elections Sinn Fein got 85.13 percent of all the votes cast in Ireland. More than 85 percent of the population peacefully, democratically, and by the ballot box, voted for Ireland's independence. This is important to keep in mind when we hear of the violence that came later.

How did the British government respond to Sinn Fein's victory? Britain declared immediate war on the rebel parliament and the Irish people. Gunboats sailed up the River Liffey to the capital city of Dublin and blew up the building in which the parliament was meeting.

Every member of that parliament that Britain could get her hands on was arrested and sent to jail in England.

A war of independence began in 1918. On December 6, 1921, a treaty to end hostilities was signed in London by the prime minister of England and Michael Collins on behalf of the Irish Republican Army.

Under its provisions a "Free State" within the British Commonwealth was to be established in twenty-six of Ireland's counties. And although the loyalist population — those who wanted to remain under British rule — was less than 13 percent of the total and was concentrated in only three counties in northeastern Ireland, six counties in the north would remain an integral part of Britain's empire.

We hope that someday this treaty will become a major issue before the United Nations because it was signed under duress. Michael Collins and his army leaders were called to London for negotiations. Once there, they were threatened with the annihilation of the Irish people and coerced into signing the treaty.

The treaty's concessions to the British caused a civil war in Ireland, which lasted until 1923.

I live in that part of Ireland that Britain retained. The people I represent — and although this is not a religious struggle, historically we are the Catholic population — make up nearly 40 percent of the northern population.

Our forefathers — together with the overwhelming majority of the Irish people — voted themselves out of the British empire in 1918. At no time since then, from my great-grandparents down to my grand-parents to my parents

to myself and my children, have we ever conceded the legality of the existence of the state we are forced to live under through violence and threats of greater violence.

We were given exactly the same choice as the people of Palestine: if you don't like it, move out and become homeless. But our people stayed where they were and became the second-class citizens of Northern Ireland.

We were denied equality before the law, equality in the election system, equality in employment, and equality in housing.

It was not until 1947 — when a Labour Party government in Britain introduced socialized medicine, socialized housing, and socialized education — that the Catholics of Northern Ireland had *any* chance of improving their situation.

It is interesting to note that the rebels who formed the leadership of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s in Northern Ireland were from the first and second generations of Catholics to whom education on the highest level was opened on a mass basis. This shows that there is nothing more dangerous than an oppressed people who acquire the first weapons of education and organization.

The rise of the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland in 1968 was directly inspired by events in the United States. Our inspiration to take to the streets in peaceful mass marches to demand equality came directly from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the civil rights marches in America that we saw on television.

In 1968 I was nineteen years old. I was not a revolutionary or a socialist then. I was not even a militant. I was a young Catholic student who simply wanted equality before the law and equality within the system.

What made me a revolutionary and an international socialist was practical experience. I saw what happens to people who ask for little. They get less! I saw that when people refuse to lie down and be walked over, they get kicked down. And when they have been kicked down but get up again, they are put in prison. When they find a way under the law to organize legally, the authorities change the law.

When people claim they cannot support our struggle in Northern Ireland because it is violent, they must remember that it is that way because of those who own and control society, not because we have chosen to make it violent.

Thirteen years ago, in 1968, we took to the streets peacefully to demand that every person over the age of eighteen have the right to vote in every election in the country.

We demanded that every family have an equal right under law to a roof over their heads.

We demanded an end to discrimination in employment on the basis of politics, race, and religion.

These were hardly the most revolutionary demands to raise in Western Europe in 1968!

In response to these simple democratic demands, the British jailed thousands of our people without trial. At 4 a.m. on August 9, 1971, the British army swept through Northern Ireland, breaking down our doors and taking away the male members of our families to be interned in British concentration camps, where some were held for years without trial.

The system of internment without trial remained in force until the British had sufficiently changed the legal system — standing the principles of law and justice on their heads — so they could use what they call due process to jail people rather than imprisoning them without trial.

In 1969 we staged a peaceful march from Belfast to Derry, a city that was Northern Ireland's prize exhibit of discrimination against Catholics. We modeled that march on the civil rights march in Alabama from Selma to Montgomery.

Along the way we were attacked by loyalist thugs who were the uniformed and paid law enforcement officers of the state. Eighty-five marchers required hospitalization. And those kids, including me, got up, gathered our injured, and marched on.

But that was the last time we turned the other cheek. We reckoned that we only had two cheeks, and we had turned them both. Never again would our people walk and be

beaten to the ground and simply say "that's OK, I'll keep on walking."

In August 1969 in the Bogside area of Derry we fought back against the police attacks for three days and three nights. We fought with stones and petrol bombs, which we had also seen on television, against police guns and tear gas.

In that same month a loyalist mob systematically burned down the Bombay Street area of Belfast in a pogrom against Catholic people. There too the forces of "law and order" led the attack. In that situation a very few people with a very few guns came out to defend the neighborhood and opened fire on the advancing loyalist force.

That was where the present phase of armed struggle began. It was not organized by diehard terrorists. In general you find the diehard terrorists in positions of government in America or Western Europe.

These were young people acting to protect their community. The present IRA was born out of that fear of pogroms, and out of fear that it could happen again the people continue to support the IRA.

As a socialist, I recognize that even fighting another 800 years the IRA will never be able to militarily defeat the might of the British army, no matter how dedicated the IRA is, no matter how determined, no matter how many guns trickle in from here and there. They cannot militarily win freedom for the Irish people.

I believe that because the history of my own and every other country proves that freedom cannot be won by the few and handed over to the many.

If you look at your own trade union experiences, you see that the might, strength, and solidarity of the trade unions was won through the blood, sweat, and tears of the masses of working people. That's the only way anything is won.

People are only free when they take freedom for themselves. They must be armed with the ability to educate, to agitate, and to organize themselves to understand that their oppression is not something that just hits them individually. They must understand that what oppresses me is also what

oppresses him and what oppresses you.

Oppression, discrimination, and injustice occur worldwide. And ultimately to fight them we must fight them on a worldwide basis. That is why the Irish problem is also your problem, why the South African problem is also your problem.

That is also why many of us come to look to you in America. We don't look to Ronald Reagan. We try to take our case to those who form the backbone of American society — the people who make America work, its working people.

And the people with the most strength are those American workers who are organized through the trade unions. There is no power on this earth greater than the democratic majority of the people organized through their own organizations.

We are fighting to change an irrational system that has barbaric priorities. Margaret Thatcher's government, which allowed our hunger strikers to die, is now locked in a battle against people very much like you — the health service and public employee unions in Britain. Many of these people work a fifty-hour week to take home \$100.

For a year these workers have been fighting for a 12 percent wage increase, while the government refuses to give them more than 4 percent. Virtually everyone in the country supports 12 percent for the health-care workers. They are supported by the railway workers, the miners, the patients who have come out of the hospitals to march with the health-care workers.

But the British government said: "You're not getting the money. We don't have any money!"

And in the middle of that dispute, somebody placed a wee tiny Argentine flag on a wee tiny island somewhere in the South Atlantic. All of a sudden money was no object! Every bathtub that could float was being refitted for war. Bands set to relearn to play "Rule Britannia."

There was plenty of money to back up the imperialist power of the few, but no money to pay decent wages to decent people doing a decent day's work!

Mrs. Thatcher claims she was fighting for freedom. But

she spells freedom O-I-L and M-I-N-E-R-A-L-S. That's what she was fighting for. That and to prove she remains in firm control of what is left of the British empire.

There's no money for health-care workers. But the British government gave \$156 million of the taxpayers' money, working people's money, to John De Lorean to build a car in West Belfast that flapped its wings, a car that almost no one can afford. This was not a loan but a nonreturnable grant.

And in defense of this kind of system, these barbaric priorities, the British have filled their prisons with our young men and women. Ten of the finest young men that our country or any country ever produced died slowly in defense of human dignity in last year's hunger strike.

Human dignity was all they were asking for. They wanted the right to wear their own clothes and the right not to be called common criminals.

They did not ask for better conditions than anyone else in prison. All they wanted was that the British government acknowledge that they were in prison because they believed they were fighting for the rights of their country, that their actions were not motivated by their own self-interest.

Can you imagine seventy-four days on a hunger strike? Can you imagine how many seconds there are in seventy-four days, and how many times you make the same commitment that you're not going to give up?

At least ten of our young children have been killed by plastic bullets fired by British troops.

To defend "peace," "justice," and "law and order," the British authorities have taken away the right to trial by jury in Northern Ireland. They have shifted the onus of proof from the prosecution to the defense.

They have taken away the defendant's right to know the identity of and to cross-examine the accuser. Only last week they took away the right of defendants to be presented with the evidence against them!

You can now be arraigned and sent for trial without knowing anything more than that you are charged with murder, or conspiracy, or weapons possession. You then wait in

prison for at least two years before they get around to trying you.

If in defense of "law" the principles of law must be abandoned, if in defense of "democracy" the rights of citizens must be taken away, and if in defense of "peace" you must fill the prisons and kill small children, then are you really defending anything but injustice and oppression?

Britain has a problem. Britain's problem is that we will not meekly submit to continued British rule over our country.

We do not accept the argument that you should forget past injustices and start afresh from where we are now. We maintain that where we are now is the direct historical consequence of the injustices of yesterday. If there is to be peace in the world, those historical injustices must be redressed.

We too have a problem — how to end British rule in our country and how to start building in Ireland a society fit for human beings to live in.

We don't just want to stick one land mass onto another and get a new flag and a new anthem. James Connolly taught us that if that's all we did, nothing would change for the ordinary man and woman in the street.

We want to build a different kind of society, one in which every child has an equal chance to be all that he or she can or may want to be.

We want to build a society where people do not go hungry because it is more profitable to close down factories than to produce what people need.

We want to build a society where people have a decent roof over their heads. Ridiculous as it may seem, while we have the worst housing conditions in all of Western Europe, we also have the highest percentage of unemployed construction workers.

We want to build a reasonable society, but to do that we have to change the system. In Northern Ireland they tell us that the building workers cannot build the houses we need because it is not profitable for the contractors, the big con-

struction companies, to build housing.

I say, fair enough! If the contractors don't want to build the houses people need because it's not profitable enough, we can get them jobs as construction workers. We'll nationalize the building industry and build the houses ourselves. Isn't that reasonable?

When we say we need money for education and for hospitals, but the bankers won't give it to us because they make more money financing the war in the Falklands, or investing in South Africa, or building nuclear weapons to blow everyone to blazes, we say that's a totally irresponsible way to act. It's irresponsible and socially dangerous.

I happen to think that if you use your money, made off my work, to build nuclear weapons, that is socially irresponsible and your money should be taken away from you.

The kind of society I want to build is eminently reasonable and sensible. That's precisely why the British and American governments are terrified of our struggle. They fear our example.

It's bad enough when people in Africa begin to talk like that. But at least Africa is far away from America. And in the Third World, America can still wield power because it has more money than anyone else and can, in Henry Kissinger's words, use hunger as a political commodity.

But we are right in the middle of Western Europe and our example could spread into areas where the people are strong and unionized.

Moreover, when I or someone else comes to this country to speak to you, and you begin to examine what's happening in Ireland and are moved to do something about it, then you also start seeing your own society slightly differently.

When you see injustice in Ireland and try to redress it, you begin to look just a bit differently on Nicaragua and Cuba and all the places in Latin America that you are told are trying to sneak up here and paint you all red in the middle of the night while you're not looking.

You begin to wonder if that's not all nonsense. You begin

to question all the rubbish that is spewed out on television, in the press, and in election literature. You begin to see that it has no validity.

And you might actually begin changing the policies of America.

We in Ireland will fight on with or without international support. We will fight on with whatever means are at our disposal to empty our jails and rid our streets of the British soldiers, to save our children from their bullets.

We will fight on until we win. It may not be in my personal lifetime because I don't know how long I will be permitted to live, but in the lifetime of my generation there will be a united Ireland.

But that alone is not good enough. I want a united socialist workers' republic of Ireland because no one will look to the interests of the working people of Ireland but the workers themselves. Unless working people run society themselves, we will all have fought and died for little more than a change of flag and a change of anthem.

There is a better day coming in Ireland, and in America as well. Whether we move together as a common movement, or whether we move first and you move later, a new movement will arise in the United States too. This country is a melting pot of ethnic groups that arrived here fleeing poverty and oppression. Many have links to their struggling people at home.

Someday in this country a broad American movement will come together that is not just Irish-Americans for freedom in Ireland, or Black Americans for freedom in Africa, or Chicanos or Puerto Ricans in defense of their homelands.

There's going to be an American movement for peace, freedom, and justice at home and throughout the world. And do you know what will happen then? There'll be no Ronald Reagans winning elections.

Resolution on the North of Ireland

*Adopted by the Twenty-fifth International
Convention of the American Federation
of State, County and Municipal
Employees, June 25, 1982*

Whereas: There is a centuries-old struggle still raging today in the North of Ireland to secure a free and united Ireland of thirty-two counties and an end to British colonial rule and military occupation;

Whereas: Since 1971 there has been a suspension of civil liberties in the North of Ireland resulting in the detention and interrogation of thousands of Irish men and women who are subject to arbitrary arrest without charge, trial by non-jury "Diplock" courts, and convictions based on confessions extracted through torture;

Whereas: There are now hundreds of Irish men and women in the prisons of Long Kesh and Armagh in the North of Ireland, as well as Britain and the United States, incarcerated for their involvement in the fight for Irish self-determination;

Whereas: Since 1976, the British government has arbitrarily rescinded the "special category" status Irish political prisoners were entitled to, resulting in the 1981 hunger strike by prisoners in Armagh and the H-Blocks of Long Kesh, which led to the deaths of Bobby Sands and nine of his colleagues;

Whereas: There has been overwhelming support for the cause of the hunger strikers through worldwide demonstrations, rallies, and the April 1981 election of Bobby Sands to the British Parliament;

Whereas: The British army has recently intensified its violence against the citizens in the North through the use of plastic bullets; these lethal weapons, four inches wide and

one-quarter inch in diameter, have killed eight innocent Irish children this year, their heads blown open by plastic bullets; *Whereas:* The British army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) have vowed to continue to use these plastic bullets, despite the May 13 vote of the European Parliament to ban them;

Whereas: The people of Ireland will continue to suffer economic exploitation, violent repression, and institutionalized sectarianism so long as British rule continues;

Whereas: Our unions uphold the principles of freedom, civil liberties, and human rights for all peoples;

Therefore be it resolved: That AFSCME International go on record against the brutal torture and violations of civil liberties of the Irish people perpetrated by the British government; that we condemn British military presence and occupation of the North of Ireland and that we support the demands of Irish prisoners for political status.