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IRIS

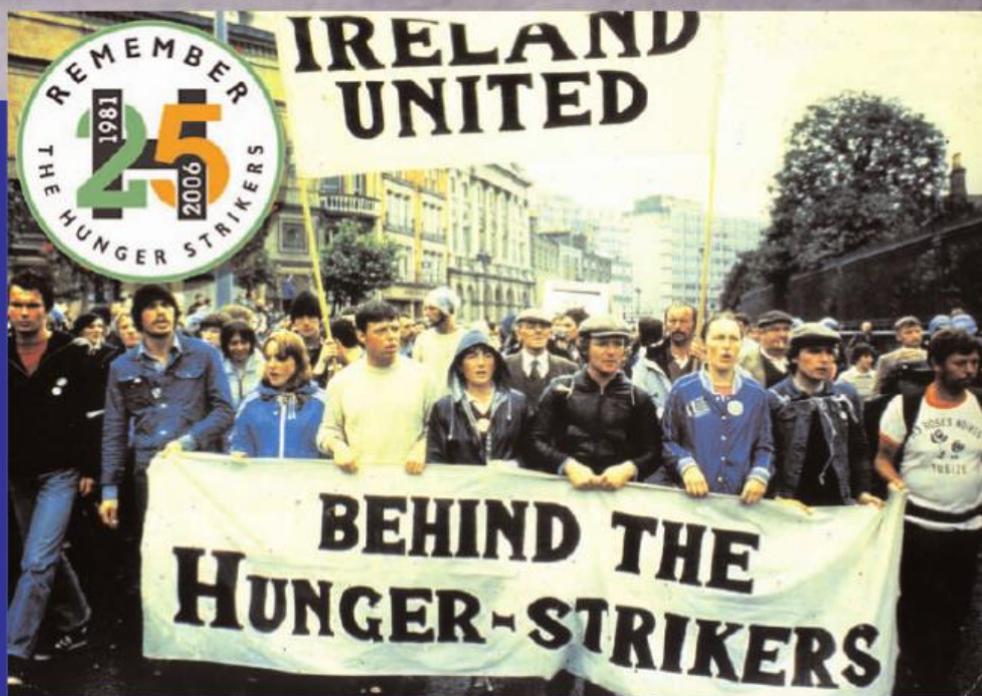
the republican magazine

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2006

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EDITION



1981 H-BLOCKS HUNGER STRIKE



IRIS

the republican magazine

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Fáilte

Welcome to *Iris*, the republican magazine.

For some time now in republican circles there has been a recognition of the need for a regular publication to facilitate extended discussion and explanation both of Sinn Féin policy and the republican view of wider contemporary events.

Using the extra space that a magazine provides, *Iris* aims to complement the weekly news coverage and comment of *An Phoblacht* and to provide a more in-depth analysis than is possible in a weekly newspaper.

Iris is a title with a distinguished history and was originally the name of a republican weekly commentary which appeared from 1973 to 1980. The Irish word for journal, *Iris* also spelt the initials of the Irish Republican Information Service which brought out the original publication.

Iris was subsequently the title used for what sought to be a quarterly publication launched in April 1981 by Sinn Féin's Foreign Affairs Bureau. Aimed mainly at a foreign readership, considerable difficulties were faced in getting the magazine published on a regular basis. The second issue came out in November 1981, delayed by the momentous events of the Hunger Strike of that year.

Iris was re-organised under a new editorial

board in 1982 and the magazine was developed on a wider basis to include historical, analytical and discussion features, cultural articles and political notes. A high quality and well produced magazine, *Iris* was published at regular intervals up to 1993. The magazine proved extremely popular among republican supporters throughout Ireland and abroad and was a highly important educational tool for republican activists as the struggle developed and evolved throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The last edition was published in 1993.

Relaunched now by Republican Publications, *Iris* will be published on a quarterly basis. We aim to bring you the best of what the original *Iris* did well - thought provoking articles and analysis around topical political issues coupled with features of historical and cultural interest. Above all *Iris* aims to promote the concept of ongoing education and strategic thinking among republican activists and supporters.

In this historic anniversary year, we thought it fitting to mark the return of *Iris* with a special edition dedicated to the memory of the sacrifice of the Hunger Strikers of 1981. We hope readers find the contributions both informative and inspiring.

SEÁN MacBRÁDAIGH,
Editor



BY GERRY ADAMS

Remember their sacrifice — Continue the struggle

A chairde,

I want to welcome back *Iris* after an absence of 13 years. The return of this popular republican publication is a positive development and a sign of the central importance of discussion, debate and education to the ongoing development of the republican struggle.

Appropriately in this commemorative year, the first edition of the re-launched *Iris* concentrates on the 25th anniversary of the 1981 hunger strikes. The heroism and selflessness of Bobby Sands, Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreech, Patsy O'Hara, Joe McDonnell, Martin Hurson, Kieran Doherty, Kevin Lynch, Thomas McElwee and Michael Devine brought our struggle to the attention of the world and inspired freedom-loving people everywhere.

The hunger strikes ultimately also had a huge influence on the course, direction and nature of the struggle itself.

For eight long months in 1981 the world witnessed extraordinary scenes as ten incredibly courageous young Irish republicans died slow, agonising deaths on hunger strike in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh.

The conditions that led to the hunger strike were created when the British Government, supported by an Irish Government, tried to criminalise Irish republicans. Their logic was simple: with hundreds of political prisoners, how could the Irish republican struggle be depicted as the criminal conspiracy portrayed by British propagandists?

The British Government decided that the prisons were to be a 'breaker's yard' for the republican struggle. It didn't want a settlement. It wanted victory. But the republican prisoners – young women in Armagh Jail and young men clad only in blankets in the H-Blocks – would not be criminalised. In extraordinary circumstances they took on the entire might of the British state.

The brutal reality of British rule in the Six

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The Hunger Strikers cut through the wall of political censorship which existed in those days and people were forced to take sides in what was an epic struggle for justice

”

A chairde,

Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh filleadh *Iris*, i ndiaidh 12 bliain as láthair. Tá filleadh na hirise seo ina fhorbairt dearfach a léiríonn an tábhacht a bhaineann le díospóireacht, cumarsáid agus oideachas i bhforbairt na streachailte poblachtánaí.

Tá sé fóirsteanach go bpléann an céad leagan athseolta le comóradh 25 bliain den stailc ocras. Chuir crógacht agus cásmhaireacht Bobby Sands, Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreech, Patsy O'Hara, Joe McDonnell, Martin Hurson, Kieran Doherty, Kevin Lynch, Thomas McElwee agus Mickey Devine, chuir siad streachailt s'againne ar leibhéal domhanda, spreag siad daoine gach áit, daoine ar ghrá leo saoirse.

Bhí tionchar ollmhór ag an stailc ocras ar threo agus nadúr na streachailte féin.

Ar feadh ocht mí fada bhreathnaigh an domhan ar radharcanna dochreidte nuair a fuair deichniar poblachtánach óg cróga bás mall cráite ar stailc ocras sna H-Blocanna ag Ceis Fhada.

Le tacaíocht rialtas na hÉireann, ba é rialtas na Breataine a chruthaigh na coinníollacha arbh údár iad ar an stailc ocras. Iarracht cóirpigh a dhéanamh de phoblachtanaigh na hÉireann a bhí ann. Bhí loighic simplí acu - leis na céadta cimití polaitiúla, cad é mara thiocfadh le lucht bolscirachta na Breataine an streachailt phoblachtanach a léiriú mar chomhcheilg chóirpeach.

Shocraigh rialtas na Breataine go meadh na príosúin ina 'breakers yard' don streachailt phoblachtanach. Ní raibh sé ag iarraidh socrú, bhí sé ag iarraidh bua. Ach ní raibh na cimití poblachtanacha sásta - mná óga in Ard Mhacha agus fir óga sna H-Blocanna gan orthu ach pluideanna - go gcaithfá leo mar chóirpigh. Sna cúinsí neamhghnácha seo, thug siad dushlán do chumhacht an stáit Bhreathnaigh.

Nochtaíodh brúidiúlacht riail na Breataine



Counties was starkly exposed in 1981. Nationalists across Ireland reacted in sadness to the deaths of each of the hunger strikers.

As the political establishment in Dublin sat in shameful silence, people in the North faced down British Army and RUC riot squads, while in the South thousands of people stopped work; young people walked out of schools; many businesses closed; tens of thousands took to the streets. Dublin city centre came to a standstill.

The hunger strikers cut through the wall of political censorship that existed in those days and people were forced to take sides in what was an epic struggle for justice.

After the hunger strike ended and ten men were dead, the British Government moved to bring about the prisoners' five demands. The prisoners won but at a terrible price. The British Government's strategy in Ireland lay in tatters.

Over the course of the past year, republicans throughout Ireland and beyond have taken part in events to commemorate the hunger strikers who died in Long Kesh 25 years ago. As they did so, they also remembered the sacrifices of Michael Gaughan in 1974 and Frank Stagg in 1976.

The return of *Iris* coincides with a potentially new phase in the peace process. This follows the talks at Saint Andrews in Scotland.

Republicans are engaged in the necessary task of strategising and discussing how we advance our struggle at this time. In recent

• Young people carry images of the ten H-Block martyrs and of Michael Gaughan and Frank Stagg, at a huge rally to mark the 25th anniversary of the 1981 Hunger Strike, Belfast 2006

“

**Bhris na Stailceoirí
Ocras trí bhalla na
cinsireachta a bhí ann
san am agus bhí ar
dhaoine seasamh ar
thaobh amháin nó ar
thaobh eile sa
streachailt ar son na
córa**

”

sna Sé Chontae in 1981. B'ábhar bróin é do náisiúntóirí nuair a fuair na stailceoirí ocrais báis, ina dhuine agus ina dhuine.

Agus bunáocht pholaitiúil de chuid Bhaile Átha Cliath ina dtost náireach, thug muintir na Sé Chontae aghaidh ar scauceanna círéibe de chuid Arm na Breataine agus CRU. Ó dheas stad na mílte duine de bheith obair, shiúil daoine óga amach as scoil, dhruid gnónna agus mhairseáil daoine ar na sráideanna in mílte. Tháinig stad iomlán ar lár Bhaile Átha Cliath

Sháraigh na stailceoirí ocrais beag den chin-seoireacht a bhí ann sna laetha sin agus bhí ar dhaoine cinneadh a dhéanamh faoin taobh ar a raibh siad sa streachailt eipice ar son córa

I ndiaidh don stailc ocrais, agus deichniúr fear marbh, shocraigh rialtas na Breataine go dtabharfaí a gcúig n-éileamh do na cimirí. Bhuaigh na cimirí ach dhíol siad go daor as. Bhí straitéis rialtas na Breataine in Éirinn ina smidiríní.

Le bliain anuas ghlac poblachtánaigh in Éirinn agus thar sáile páirt in ocaíid leis na stailceoirí ocrais a fuair bás sa Cheis Fhada 25 bliain ó shin a chuimhniú. Agus iad ag déanamh seo, chuimhnigh siad íobairtí Michael Gaughan in 1974 agus Frank Stagg in 1976.

Comhthiteann filleadh *Iris* le tréimhse nua fhéideartha eile i bpróiseas na síochána. Tagann seo i ndiaidh cainteanna Chill Aindrea in Albain.

Tá poblachtánaigh i mbun díospóireachta tábhachtaí ar straitéis agus cad is féidir linn a bhaint amach ag an am seo. Tharla go leor for-



years there have been many positive but challenging developments. Republicans have been at the heart of all this and we have met the challenges in a decisive and unified way.

So too with this phase.

There are elements of the British and Irish Governments' agreement at Saint Andrews that many republicans and nationalists would have difficulties with. The text needs to be scrutinised carefully and needs to be looked at in the context of the peace process and our overall aims.

The most important outcome of the Saint Andrews talks is that DUP leader Ian Paisley said yes, even if it was a qualified yes and even if he has wobbled since then. The fact is that Ian Paisley's conditional yes at Saint Andrews is a positive shift for, and from, rejectionist unionism. That is good for the rest of the people of this island.

Republicans have to be magnanimous but we also have to be vigilant that the two governments do nothing that would undermine the Good Friday Agreement or its political institutions.

The big political lesson of the hunger strike was that republicans could not get the Irish

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The fight for political status in 1981 was a fight for the future of the republican struggle itself. Republicans today must strive to ensure that the momentous sacrifice of the Hunger Strikers is remembered and built upon

”

bairtí dearfacha a chur dushláin romhainn le blianta beag anuas. Bhí poblachtánaigh i lár seo ar fad agus thugamar faoi na dushláin go deimhneach agus aontaithe le chéile.

Is amhlaidh leis an tréimhse seo.

Tá gnéithe den aontú a rinne rialtais na hÉireann agus na Beataine ag Cill Aindreas a bheidh ina fhadhb do phoblachtánaigh agus náisiúnaithe. Beidh scrúdú cúramach de dhíth ar an téacs i gcomhthéacs próiseas na síochána agus cuspoirí s'againn san iomlán.

Ba é an rud is tábhachtaí a tháinig amach as cainteanna Chill Aindreas ná go raibh ceannaire an DUP, Ian Paisley, dearfach, fiú más é gur éirigh sé éiginnte ó shin. Is é fírinne an scéil go raibh an glacadh cionnóllach ag Cill Aindreas ina bhogadh dearfach idir ó agus d'aontachas an diúltaithe. Sin rud maith don chuid eile de na daoine ar an oileán.

Caithfidh poblachtánaigh lámh an chairdis a ofráil ach caithimid bheith ar an airdeall nach ndéanfaidh ceachtar den dá rialtas aon rud a dhéanfaidh dochar do Chomhaontú Aoine an Chéasta ná na hinstiúití pholaitiúla.

Ba é an ceacht mór polaitiúil ó thréimhse na stailceanna ocrais ná nach féidir brath ar rialtas na hÉirean tabhairt faoi dhushlán rialtas na



• Clad in blankets in memory of the sacrifices made during the prison struggle in Armagh and the H-Blocks of Long Kesh. Casement Park, August 2006; (left) In tribute to a fallen hero — Volunteers of Oglaiġ na hÉireann fire a volley of shots over the coffin of Bobby Sands MP

Government to stand up to the British Government. In the period opening up, we need to ensure that the Irish Government stands by the Good Friday Agreement and asserts its role as a co-equal partner with the British.

We need to ensure that the two governments don't take short-term decisions that could cause problems down the road.

So these are challenging but exciting times. As in the past, *Iris* will record developments and provide a forum to discuss these matters.

The fight for political status in 1981 was a fight for the future of the republican struggle itself. Republicans today must strive to ensure that the momentous sacrifice of the hunger strikers is remembered and built upon.

We must, in our own way and in our own time, continue the struggle for which they ultimately died: a united, independent Ireland with justice and equality for all our people.

“

Todhchaí na streachailte a bhí i gceist i 1981 sa troid ar son stadas polaitiúil. Ba chóir do phoblachtánaigh an lae inniú cuimhniú ar an íobairt sin agus muid ag dul ar aghaidh

”

Breataine. San am atá le teacht caithfimid cinnte a dhéanamh go seasfaidh rialtas na hÉireann an fód ar son Comhaontú Aoine an Chéasta agus go n-éileoidh sé a áit mar pháirtneir comhionann le rialtas na Breataine.

Caithfimid a chinntiú nach ndéanfaidh an dá rialtas cinntí gearthréimhse a dtiocfadh leo bheith ina n-údár fadhbanna ar ball.

Seo tréimhse dhushlánach ach tá sí spreagúil. Mar a rinneadh san am a chuaigh thart, déanfaidh *Iris* taifead ar fhorbairtí, soláthróidh sí fóram pléite ar an ábhar seo.

Bhí an troid ar son stadas polaitiúil ina throid ar son todhchaí na streachailte poblachtánaí. Caithfidh poblachtánaigh cinnte a dhéanamh go gcuimhneofar agus go gcuirfear le híobairt ollmhór na stailceoirí ocrais.

Caithfimid inár ndóigh féin agus inár n-am féin, leanúint leis an streachailt a bhfuair siad bás ar a son - Éire aontaithe, Éire neamhspleách agus Éire an chomhionannais.

FAR AWAY FROM MAYO

BY SEÁN MacBRÁDAIGH

At 15 years of age Michael Gaughan, like many other Irish people of his age, emigrated from his County Mayo home to England where he worked as a building labourer. During his years in England he witnessed the Civil Rights Movement in the Six Counties beaten off the streets and the Orange state thrown into crisis by the uprising of the nationalist population. He visited the Six Counties itself, involved himself in Irish republican politics in Britain and then joined the ranks of Óglaigh na hÉireann to strike a blow for the liberation of his country.

Gaughan was one of the earliest IRA Volunteers to be imprisoned in England in this phase of the struggle, being sentenced to seven years at the Old Bailey in London, in December 1971, for his part in a bank raid. He spent the first two years of his prison sentence in Wormwood Scrubs in London and then was moved to the Isle of Wight's top security prison at Albany. Among the other Irish political prisoners there at the time were fellow Mayo man Frank Stagg (sentenced with other IRA Volunteers in Coventry the previous November to ten years imprisonment on the vacuous charge of conspiracy to cause explosions) and Paul Holmes.

As Irish political prisoners they all refused to be criminalised and would not carry out prison work. They started their collective protest in January 1974 and were soon transferred to Albany's infamous punishment wing. The conditions were appalling; the cells were close to a rubbish dump and often invaded by rats. The British Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, later admitted there were rats there and ferrets to catch them. November 1973



• Michael Gaughan

had also seen the trial in Winchester of the Belfast Ten - Dolours and Marian Price, Hugh Feeney, Gerard Kelly and six others - who had been arrested following bomb explosions in London the previous March. Having received life sentences, the Price sisters, Feeney and Kelly immediately began a hunger strike for repatriation to prisons in Ireland. They were brutally force-fed for a total of 206 days.

Michael Gaughan and Frank Stagg joined this hunger strike on 31 March 1974, first of all in solidarity with the hunger strikers and also for the right to wear their own clothes and not to do prison work.

FORCE-FED

On 22 April, 23 days into their hunger

strike, Gaughan and Stagg were forced for the first time. They immediately escalated their demand to one for repatriation and were moved to Parkhurst Prison, also on the Isle of Wight. "The mental agony of waiting to be force-fed is getting to the stage where it now outweighs the physical discomfort of having to go through it", one of the hunger strikers wrote to a relative. But the physical discomfort of force-feeding was considerable. Describing the procedure Gerry Kelly wrote: "Force-feeding is a process which is not so hard to describe in its physical aspects, but difficult to convey in its psychological effects. Six or eight warders would enter the cell, pull the bed to the centre of the floor, surround me and then jump on me, pinning my



Stagg were only allowed to see them through a glass screen, supervised by prison warders. In fact, Michael Gaughan's last visit with his mother, three days before his death, took place in such circumstances. Because the prisoners were being force-fed, Michael Gaughan's death on 3 June, 1974 came as a shock. He died from pneumonia, the force-feeding tube having pierced his lung. He was 24 years of age. The death of Michael Gaughan caused a major controversy in British medical circles and the use of force-feeding was later abandoned by the British. More immediately, the four Belfast hunger strikers were promised repatriation and ended their hunger strike on 7 June. Frank Stagg, having received a similar undertaking, ended his fast ten days later. But Stagg was later to die on hunger strike after having been forced on a number of successive hunger strikes when concessions were given by the administration and later withdrawn again when he gained strength.

From the Isle of Wight to Ballina, Michael Gaughan's funeral brought thousands of people onto the streets. On Friday, 7 June and Saturday 8 June, thousands lined the streets of Kilburn in London and marched behind his coffin, which was flanked by an IRA guard of honour. On Saturday his remains were met by thousands more in Dublin and, flanked by IRA Volunteers again, were brought to the Franciscan Church on Merchants' Quay. On Sunday morning the cortege began the long journey to Ballina, stopping in almost every town and village en route, as the people turned out to pay their last respects.

In Ballina, there was a Requiem Mass at the Cathedral. As the coffin was borne outside, a volley of shots was fired over it, before it was taken to Leigue Cemetery, to be buried with full honours in the republican plot. Michael Gaughan was the first of 12 Irish republicans to die while on hunger strike in this phase of the struggle for freedom. In his last message to his republican comrades he said: "I die proudly for my country and in the hope that my death will be sufficient to obtain the demands of my comrades. Let there be no bitterness on my behalf but a determination to achieve the new Ireland for which I gladly die. My loyalty and confidence is to the IRA and let those of you who are left carry on the work and finish the fight."

legs and arms and grasping me by the hair. When they had control of my body they pulled me along the bed and up to the high metal bed end. At this point my head was forced backwards over the bar by pulling my hair until the neck was stretched straight, I was thus held in a position in which I could make no movement.

"If the doctor in charge was not present during that time (he often removed himself from the scene, perhaps to avoid responsibility) he would then enter with his equipment. He and the warders would then proceed to try to open my mouth. As time went by methods changed little, but at first it was clumsy and crude, pulling my upper and lower lips apart in opposite directions; pressing down on my chin or pushing my nose upwards (this normally led to nosebleeds); pushing and grinding knuckles into my jaw muscles.

"If this didn't work large forceps were sometimes run violently along my gums to get me to open my teeth. They later discovered a more subtle method by using a thin, hard plastic ryles tube which was pushed up my nasal passage. When it hits off the back of your throat it makes you want to vomit; once you dry-retch, your teeth part voluntarily; a wooden or metal clamp was violently thrust between my teeth. When I overcame the urge to vomit and managed to keep my teeth closed, they discovered that by moving the ryles tube back and forth, rubbing it against the sensitive inner tissue at the back of the nose, they could cause a searing pain. I can only describe this

• Michael Gaughan's remains pass through Dublin city

pain as like a hot knitting needle being pushed in between my nose and eye.

"Inevitably they succeeded in opening my mouth on most days. They would then thrust in a wooden clamp, which contained a hole in the centre through which a rubber tube was fed into the throat. This part I always found the most frightening and it did not diminish through repetition. It is painful and if the tube goes down the wrong passage it can be fatal."

DEATH

Visitors to Michael Gaughan and Frank



FRANK STAGG

BY SHANE MacTHOMÁIS

On 12 February 1976 Frank Stagg died on hunger strike in Wakefield Prison, England.

Stagg, from Hollymount, County Mayo, came from a long line of Irish republicans. His father had fought in both the Tan War and the Civil War on the republican side. By the 1970s, Frank, who like so many from the West of Ireland had emigrated to England, worked as a bus conductor in North London. He joined Sinn Féin in Luton in 1972 and shortly afterwards joined the IRA.

In April 1973, he was arrested in Coventry and charged under the 19th Century Conspiracy Laws, which were used to convict all members of an IRA unit of the same crime, regardless of degree of involvement – so that a driver could be charged with a shooting or an unarmed man with possession of a gun carried by another man.

Stagg and six others were convicted of conspiracy to commit arson. He was given a ten-year sentence.

He was taken first to Albany Prison on the Isle of Wight, where, demanding that he was a political prisoner, he refused prison work and was frequently punished with solitary confinement. In March 1974, having been moved to Parkhurst Prison, he and fellow Mayo man Michael Gaughan joined a hunger strike begun by the Price sisters in Brixton and their comrades Hugh Feeney and Gerry Kelly, demanding repatriation to Ireland.

All were force fed by the authorities, despite the fact that such inhumane methods were being condemned by Amnesty International and the Court of Human



Rights. The Price sisters, Kelly, and Feeney succeeded in achieving repatriation to the Six Counties but Stagg and Gaughan were refused.

Stagg suffered force feeding for 70 days, a barbarous procedure that took the life of Michael Gaughan. Following Michael Gaughan's death, negotiations were begun and the hunger strike was called off. But the talks were a trick to halt the strike and prevent further highly publicised deaths.

Instead of meeting the demands, the authorities moved Frank to a solitary confinement punishment cell, where he remained under 23-hour lockdown. He was allowed no furniture, radio, newspapers or cigarettes,



• Hugh Feeney, Gerry Kelly, Dolours Price, Marian Price; (right) Frank Stagg (circled) as a schoolboy in Mayo





and was prevented from sleeping by a bright light burning in his cell day and night.

DEATH

In Wakefield Prison, on 14 December 1975, Frank Stagg began his fourth and final hunger strike, with the demand again for repatriation. Frank battled against starvation for 62 days before he died on 12 February 1976. He last request was "to be buried next to my republican colleagues and my comrade, Michael Gaughan".

Michael Gaughan had been buried in Ballina, County Mayo, with republican honours, which had embarrassed the then Fine Gael/Labour Government under Liam Cosgrave. Now they faced the prospect of another high-profile funeral of another Irishman who had died in an English prison while they had sat back and done nothing.

The plane carrying the coffin was diverted from Dublin, where Stagg's widow and friends were waiting, to Shannon, and the body was hijacked by 26-County security forces. It was taken by helicopter to the cemetery at Ballina and buried in a hastily arranged plot and covered over in concrete. A 24-hour guard was put in place to prevent the family from exhuming the coffin. A Requiem Mass was allowed to the family, but they boycotted it in protest at not being allowed to have the funeral that Frank wanted.

The following Sunday, the Republican Movement held its own ceremony at the Republican Plot, despite a massive police presence. A volley was fired and following an oration by Joe Cahill, a solemn pledge was made that Frank's body would be moved to lie beside his comrades in accordance with his wishes.

Some six months later, when the guard had been removed, since the expense could not have been justifi-

• (clockwise from above) Frank Stagg's mother at Shannon Airport; Frank Stagg; Seán Stagg, overcome with grief, is manhandled by Gardaí at Shannon Airport as the remains of his brother are snatched once again to be airlifted away by a military helicopter; Taken fast in Belfast in support of Frank Stagg; Sinn Féin demonstration in support of Frank Stagg, Grafton Street, Dublin



fied indefinitely, a party of IRA Volunteers tunneled into the concrete under cover of darkness and buried him as he wished, next to Michael Gaughan.



It changed the struggle forever

In my political lifetime I have been witness to some heroic, distressing and traumatic events since as a 14-year-old I took to the streets, with others, to defend the people of the Short Strand, in East Belfast, in the summer of 1969. All of these events have left behind their mark. Each carries particular circumstances, particular memories, some more deep-rooted in my consciousness than others.

Conflicts, especially of an armed nature, challenge those directly involved at the core of their being. Conventional armies of occupation, like the crown forces, have infinite resources to draw from. Their personnel are trained for the task at hand. Republicans, who confront them in pursuit of freedom, rely almost exclusively on their innate skills and intuition. By and large republicans are self-taught, trained and driven by idealism.

There have been many instances over the decades of struggle for independence of individual bravery by IRA volunteers and members of Sinn Féin. Each of us can recall examples of such outstanding courage which was personally inspiring. In my case, I am in the privileged position of being a close witness to one of the greatest acts of selflessness and dedication in the long struggle for Irish independence- the Hunger Strike of 1981, when ten young men died. This sacrifice has no comparison in the annals of Irish history.

Prior to the second hunger strike, starting in March 1981, I visited women prisoners in Armagh jail including Mairéad Farrell and Mary Doyle, who were both on the first hunger strike. The third



hunger striker in the prison was Mairéad Nugent. Women prisoners wore their own clothes but, like the men in the H-Blocks, they were deprived of political status. The first woman to protest for political status was Brenda Murray from Belfast's Short Strand. The protest started on 1 December, 1976, a few months after Kieran Nugent started the blanket protest in the H-Blocks. Thirty women were on protest at the time of the Armagh hunger strike.

While they were on hunger strike, I visited Bobby Sands, Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreech, Martin Hurson, Joe McDonnell and Tom McElwee. Most of the visits took place in the prison hospital, although I visited Joe McDonnell and Martin Hurson separately in the general visiting area of the H-Blocks.

The Hunger Strike started on 1 March and ended on 3 October. I started visiting the lads a few weeks after the hunger strike started; my visits ended sometime in July.

• Bearing the names of the Hunger Strikers on symbolic blankets, Belfast August 2006

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I can still see Martin sitting across the table from me in the visiting cubicle. When I met him for the first time, he shook my hand vigorously, as if I was a long lost friend returning after years of separation

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Joe McDonnell in a guffaw of laughter brushed aside my queries about his health, his weight, his blood pressure etc. He was more concerned about how my love life was going than he was about his circumstances

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• Republican POWs in the Cages of Long Kesh in the early 1970s. Bobby Sands can be made out at the very back in hat, playing the guitar



My privileged position put me in the company of a group of remarkable individuals: the lads on hunger strike and their families. In my memory, many times over the last twenty-five years, I have revisited those five months in 1981. They were horrendous months for the lads and for their families. They were horrendous months for me.

I sat by the beds of young men whose life ebbed from them as they spoke. I shared that same small space inside a small cell with their families. We watched them slowly fade away from this life. It was hard to believe it at the time and the passing of 25 years does not make it any easier to come to terms with.

Inside my head I carry a story - what I saw and experienced. It is both heroic and tragic.

I visited Bobby more often than any of the other hunger strikers. I visited Martin Hurson and Joe McDonnell less often than the rest. I carry images of those visits around in my mind.

I can still see Martin sitting across the table from me in the visiting cubicle. When I met him for the first time, he shook my hand vigorously, as if I was a long lost friend returning after years of separation. He had the broadest smile and his lips were covered in a white substance. He had forgotten to wipe away the residue of toothpaste from his mouth

as he rushed out of the wing to get his visit. Ex-prisoners will be familiar enough with that experience.

Joe McDonnell in a guffaw of laughter brushed aside my queries about his health, his weight, his blood pressure etc. He was more concerned about how my love life was going than he was about his circumstances. Joe was 19 days on hunger strike at that stage.

I shared a hut with Joe when we were both interned in Cage 3 in 1973. Like me he was a teenager. Unlike me, he was very vocal, a practical joker. He was always in the middle of craic with his pals. A night's sleep was a luxury if Joe and his mates got going after lights-out at 11.30pm.

In the hut next to us was Kieran Doherty. He was a striking figure, tall, long-legged, striding around the yard of the Cage. He was quiet and friendly. Our paths crossed again in the autumn of 1976. We were on landing three in Crumlin Road jail. We walked the yard together. I got to know Kieran better. You knew from his gentle but firm manner that he was a man to rely on in a tight situation. He was hard to rile but had a temper when goaded too far. My last memory of Kieran is him waving to me from the Threes as I left for my final court appearance in 1977. I was released. I never saw him alive again.

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My last memory of Kieran is him waving to me from the Threes as I left for my final court appearance in 1977. I was released. I never saw him alive again

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I visited Bobby several times with his mother and sister. All the visits took place in Bobby's cell in the prison hospital. To say they were difficult visits for me personally is an understatement. Bobby as always was at pains to relax the atmosphere to try to have a normal conversation.

The strongest memory I have of being with Bobby was a few days before he died.

I had just left Raymond McCreesh's cell and was passing Bobby's. I noticed the cell door slightly ajar and walked in. Bobby was lying back with his head resting on his pillow. The bed clothes were raised off his body. By his head were the rosary beads brought to him by the Pope's envoy Father Magee. By his bed were his mother and sister.

He sensed my presence as I came into the cell. He sat up and asked, "Who's that?" I told him. He stretched out his hand and I held it. He told me he was blind and couldn't see me. His eyes were opened and orange in colour. I did not know what to say. I asked how he was. He told me to tell the lads he was hanging in there. I left him. He died a few days later.

The following week I had to pass by the cell where Bobby died on my way to visit Raymond McCreesh. The cell door was firmly shut. It would open again and hold other hunger strikers who would die there as Bobby did.

Raymond was in bed, weak, unable to move without great difficulty. My memory is that I was on my own with Raymond but this is highly unlikely. One of his brothers, Malachy or Michael, would have been there.

Raymond told me that Francis Hughes, who was in a cell facing him across the narrow corridor, had had a terrible night. He thought he was dead but Francis lived for another few days.

I first met Francis Hughes on a visit with his father and John Davey, later a Sinn Féin Councillor, shot dead by loyalists. It was on the visit he told his father that he was going on hunger strike. He did so in what could only be described as a matter-of-fact way, as if he was imparting an ordinary piece of uneventful information.



The next time I was in Francis's company I was with his brother Oliver and his mother in a cell in the prison hospital. Francis was on hunger strike. He was sick from an early stage of his hunger strike and was sick while we were there. He had difficulty moving and lay still on his bed.

His brother Oliver told Francis that he had been speaking with the Pope's envoy, Fr. Magee, who had been speaking with Thatcher. She told Fr. Magee she would not give in to the prisoners' demands. In that case, said Francis to us, there will be coffins coming out of this place.

A short time later I returned to the cell next to Francis. By this time Francis was dead and buried. His cousin Tom McElwee was in the cell. He was in an advanced stage of hunger strike. He was in bed conserving his energy. His mother and sister were by his side. By this stage five hunger strikers were dead.

I recall Tom saying to his mother that he would not be going back to the H-Blocks, to the awful conditions, unless he had the five demands for the lads. He never returned to the H-Blocks. A few weeks after the visit, Tom was buried alongside his cousin Francis in a graveyard in Bellaghy in South Derry.

On one of my many visits to the prison hospital I saw Patsy O'Hara sitting in a darkened cell. He was wearing a multi-coloured dressing gown. He was in a

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I recall Tom saying to his mother that he would not be going back to the H-Blocks, to the awful conditions, unless he had the five demands for the lads. He never returned to the H-Blocks

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He [Bobby Sands] told me he was blind and couldn't see me. His eyes were opened and orange in colour. I did not know what to say. I asked how he was. He told me to tell the lads he was hanging in there. I left him. He died a few days later

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• Jim Gibney with Bobby Sands' mother 1981



wheelchair. A prison warder was rushing me on. Pasty saw me and waved his long thin arm at me and smiled. His white teeth flashed in the dimly lit cell. I can still see him in my mind's eye.

I smiled and waved back. Many, many times over the last 25 years I have wished I had shook his hand, stopped a while and spoke a few words with him.

On another occasion, in the company of Margaret and Alfie Doherty, Kieran's parents, a prison warder ushered us into a small room at the entrance door of the prison hospital.

From behind the closed door of the room we heard shuffling and whispered, exerted voices. That morning, Joe McDonnell had died. I believe the exerted voices were of those carrying Joe's body from the hospital on his last journey home to his family.

Over the 25 years many books, articles, theses, films and plays have recorded the heroism of the Hunger Strikers - rightly so. However, little has been said about their relatives and what they went through during those agonising months.

They were practically prisoners themselves when their sons were moved to the prison hospital. They moved in with them to be there as the clock ticked away on their lives.

Their relatives faced many difficult moments while they sat by their beds watching them slip away. The pressure

must have been unbearable.

I recall one occasion, in the company of Bobby's mother and sister, when we were called into the doctor's surgery inside the prison hospital. We were on our way to visit Bobby.

On the table was a small cassette recorder which was turned on. The doctor was clearly recording the conversation. Without as much as an expression of concern, sympathy or apology, he told Mrs. Sands the most intimate details of how Bobby's life would end.

He concluded by saying to her that she could prevent all of this from happening by taking Bobby off the hunger strike. Her response was to ask to be taken to her son.

When we arrived in Bobby's cell he was in bed. He knew there was a delay and asked why. His mother tried to brush his query to one side but he insisted and she told him what the doctor had said. His response was to tell his mother to ignore such remarks and to listen to what he wanted and no one else.

For me these were heart-rending rare moments. For the Sands family and for the other families, they were part of their hourly experience while their sons died on hunger strike.

The people of Ireland and in different parts of the world were transfixed for seven months by the Hunger Strike of 1981. I recall a journalist at the time describing the events of those months as "a conveyer belt of coffins" coming out of the H-Blocks. It was an incredible human and political drama.

Bobby Sands, in one of his many comms from the prison, captured the mood of the prisoners on hunger strike and the protest for political status when he said that what was lost in the prison struggle was lost for the Republic and what was won was won for the Republic. In that awful year, much was won for the Republic, although at a terrible price.

When the Hunger Strike ended on 3 October, ten men were dead; over sixty had lost their lives, most on the streets of the Six Counties.

The struggle was changed forever – and those close to the Hunger Strike were, as well.



Four years On the Blanket

A Hunger-Strike which IRA prisoners commenced in Belfast Prison in May 1972 ended 35 days later when British direct-ruler William Whitelaw gave in and granted 'special category status', that is, political status to the political prisoners. From then until 1976, many thousands of Irish men and women served their prison sentences under this special category regime in the cages of Long Kesh, and in a wing of Armagh women's prison. Between the years 1971 and 1975 thousands of additional prisoners, interned without trial, 'enjoyed' a similar status in Armagh, Magilligan, Belfast prison, the prison ship Maidstone, and Long Kesh.

The existence of thousands of prisoners, interned and sentenced under a regime which recognised them as political prisoners, combined with the popular support they enjoyed, the intensity of the armed struggle plus



• The prison ship Maidstone

popular dissatisfaction with British policies, and in many quarters with the British presence itself, forced the

British government, after some earlier political and military miscalculations, to instigate a number of classical counter-insurgency measures. Primarily, the objective was to isolate those engaged in the resistance struggle from their support and to 'normalise' life in the Six Counties.

CRIMINALISATION

This attempted 'isolation and normalisation' policy took on a number of forms, all interlocked. For example, there were various attempts at political normalisation, the so-called 'primacy of the police', the gradual withdrawal of British army units and the Ulsterisation of British military forces plus the 'criminalisation' of the prison population. This criminalisation attempt was part of the overall effort to project the resistance struggle as a criminal conspiracy and ran parallel, during a confused period of the armed



• H-Block march, Dublin, 1978
(middle) Relatives Action
Committee march, Derry (bottom)
H-Block cell during the Blanket
and No-wash protests



struggle, with a propaganda thrust which saw the use of such terminology as 'paramilitaries', 'Godfathers', 'mafia' etc., etc., by British government spokespersons.

A major obstacle to this criminalisation policy was the fact that almost two

thousand prisoners, recognised by the British government as political prisoners, were held under a British prison regime which directly contradicted the British government's propaganda claims. Long Kesh, by name, internal regime and appearance was known

worldwide as a concentration camp and the large number of political prisoners drawn from all over the Six Counties enjoyed - through family, community and local connections - maximum support.

In January 1975, a British commission (The Gardiner Commission) made a number of important recommendations. These included the phasing-out of political status and the ending of internment. Long Kesh had already been renamed HMP The Maze. A 50% remission scheme was introduced to accommodate the release of sentenced prisoners and to add to an already confused situation the internees, in an exercise thinly disguised as a humanitarian gesture, were released.

H-BLOCKS

An arbitrary date, 1 March, was set and the British declared that anyone arrested after that date would not be treated as political prisoners and would serve their sentences in new cellular accommodation.

The H-Blocks, designed to maximise the control of prisoners in four small wings of twenty-five single cells instead of the traditional large wings, were born. In British terms, the strategy was simple. Linked with other counter-insurgency measures, against the background of a de-escalating and politically confused resistance struggle, the prison population was to be decreased to a small number of 'ordinary' prisoners accommodated in HMP Maze.

Outside the prison, however, the situation started to change, the British without the benefit of internment orders employed new 'legal' methods to intern their opponents and to demoralise an uncompromising population.

CONVEYOR BELT

Castlereagh torture centre came into its own, rules of evidence were changed, extra Diplock (non-jury) courts were



brought in, judges were appointed and the H-Block conveyor-belt went into full gear. Now instead of internment the British had a legal-looking process of arrest, charge, remand, trial and sentence. That the arrests were arbitrary, the charges based on forced confessions, the remands lengthy, the trials farcical and the sentences totally unjust was incidental. The propaganda-machine adequately covered all that. At least in the beginning.

BLANKET AND NO WASH PROTESTS

It failed however to take account, as did all the policy makers, of the new generation of political prisoners. Instinctively they refused to accept the new status quo, refusing to co-operate with the prison regime or to accept prison discipline. Refused their own clothes the political prisoners were clad only in a blanket, and as their numbers increased and the Blanket Protest strengthened news of beatings, deprivations and maltreatment began to leak out of the H-Blocks of Long Kesh and the women's prison in Armagh.

In March 1978, eighteen months after the start of the blanket protest, with over 300 protesting prisoners, the prison administration stepped up its harassment and forced the blanket men on to the no-wash, no slop out protest.

• **Belfast marchers in support of the Blanket Protesters; (below) highlighting the conditions and torture**



This was to last for a full three years and arose essentially because the men were refused washing or toilet facilities. The same thing was to happen later in Armagh in February 1980, when the prison administration attacked the women political prisoners, assaulting them and withdrawing toilet facilities.

The majority of protesting prison-

ers, both men and women, were in their late teens or 20s and over 80% were imprisoned solely on the strength of forced confessions. They were refused from the beginning of their sentences all exercise facilities, reading or writing material, and access to radio or newspapers. Kept in cells on a punishment diet, with loss of all remission and without furniture, they were constantly beaten and harassed. A protest campaign, mostly confined to the Six County ghettos, was conducted on their behalf by Sinn Féin and Relatives Action Groups.

CARDINAL Ó FIAICH

It was not until Cardinal, then Archbishop, Ó Fiaich visited the prisoners on 31 July, 1978 and condemned the conditions under which the prisoners were being held that public interest increased. He said, "Having spent the whole of Sunday in the prison, I was shocked at the inhuman conditions prevailing in H-Blocks 3, 4 and 5 where over 300 prisoners were incarcerated. One would hardly allow an animal to remain in such conditions, let alone a human being. The nearest approach to it that I have seen was the spectacle of hundreds of homeless people living in sewer pipes in the slums of Calcutta. The stench and filth in some cells, with the remains of rotten food and human excreta scattered

around the walls, was almost unbelievable. In two of them I was unable to speak for fear of vomiting.

"The prisoners' cells are without beds, chairs or tables. They sleep on mattresses on the floor, and in some cases I noticed they were quite wet. They have no covering except a towel or blanket, no books, newspapers or reading material except the Bible (even religious magazines have been banned since my last visit), no pens or writing material, or TV, or radio, no hobbies or handicrafts, no exercise or reception. They are locked in their cells for almost the whole of every day and some of them have been in this condition for more than a year and a half."

THE 5 DEMANDS

Public interest had also been aroused by the Amnesty International report of June 1978 which stated categorically that, "maltreatment of suspected terrorists by the RUC has taken place with sufficient frequency to warrant establishment of a public inquiry to investigate it."

However, the plight of the H-Block and Armagh prisoners again faded to some degree from the public view, until the establishment of the National H-Block/Armagh Committee in October 1979. This committee, elected from a broad based campaign, advocated, with endorsement of the prisoners, five basic demands whose implementation would resolve prison deadlock. The five demands were:

- (1) No prison uniform
- (2) No prison work
- (3) Free association
- (4) Full remission
- (5) Visits, parcels, and recreational/educational facilities.

In March 1980, Cardinal Ó Fiaich again visited the prison, and the following day he and Bishop Edward Daly met British direct-ruler Humphrey Atkins for talks to attempt to settle the crisis, especially since the Blanketmen were now advocating hunger strike as a way out of the deadlock.

In an attempt to create an atmosphere conducive to a settlement and to take pressure off the British administration, the IRA quietly ceased its attacks on prison officials. These talks



• Supporting the women prisoners on hunger strike at Armagh jail 1980

dragged on for over six months before Cardinal Ó Fiaich and Bishop Daly had to admit they were getting nowhere.

The Blanketmen and protesting women prisoners, totally exasperated, finally commenced hunger-strike on 27 October 1980. The first H-Block hunger-strike which was to last 53 days saw the greatest nationalist mobilisation in Ireland since the early days of the civil rights anti-internment campaign. That peaceful and disciplined campaign, organised by the National H-Block/Armagh Committee, attracted on a single issue scores of thousands of people and united people of different political persuasions. The campaign itself came under attack from British and pro-British elements, and campaign leaders John Turnley, Miriam Daly, Noel Little and Ronnie Bunting were murdered while Bernadette and Michael McAliskey were wounded.

1980 HUNGER STRIKE ENDS

The hunger-strike ended on 18 December 1980 when the British government presented two documents to the seven men who had fasted 53 days. The three women hunger strikers ended their hunger strike the following day. On Thursday afternoon, 18 December, as the condition of hunger striker Seán McKenna rapidly deteriorated, the British minister in charge of the Six Counties - direct ruler

Humphrey Atkins - suddenly and without public explanation postponed a statement he had been due to make to the British parliament and ensured that it was delivered to the seven hunger strikers in the prison hospital along with a 34-page document entitled 'Regimes in Northern Ireland Prisons - Prisoners' day to day life with special emphasis on Maze (that is the H-Blocks, and Armagh).

This document was new to the men and to the general public and was a major elaboration of how far the British government had gone in meeting the political prisoners' five demands. "If they choose to live, the conditions available to them meet in a practical and humane way the kind of things they have been asking for," said Atkins.

The fact that a British cabinet minister postponed a parliamentary statement to send it to protesting republican prisoners in order to seek a settlement to the 53-day-old hunger strike was a unique act of political recognition in itself and the delivery of the 34-page document reinforced this political recognition.

The delivery of the document and the ending of the hunger-strike ushered in a new atmosphere and Bobby Sands, the Blanketmen's O/C, was given freedom to liaise and meet with the hunger strikers in the prison hospital and each of the Block O/Cs and it was with him that the jail governor met



• 1980 hunger strike march, Belfast

directly, thus conferring recognition of the republican command structure. This recognition was reinforced when on Friday, 19 December, all of the H-Block O/Cs were brought out of their blocks for a further meeting with Bobby Sands in H-Block 3. Bobby Sands himself publicly expressed satisfaction at the new era of co-operation inside the jail, unprecedented since the British government had embarked upon its policy of criminalisation in march 1976.

However, to the dismay of the prisoners, within days the atmosphere in the prison changed as the spotlight shifted away from the jails. All the document's phrases about the situation not being static, work not being interpreted narrowly and the prison regime being progressive, humane and flexible were soon shown not to be

worth the paper they were written on.

The Blanketmen had hoped to move about 30 men off the blanket and no wash protest before Christmas day but were stopped by Governor Hilditch, who told Bobby Sands that nobody would be moving anywhere until they put on prison-issue clothing and conformed.

In Armagh jail the governor refused even to discuss with the women the question of self-education classes, as outlined in the document.

On 9 January, in the British Parliament, Humphrey Atkins publicly reneged on his 18 December statement by reversing the order in which the men would receive their own clothes.

The prison administration tried to force the men to unconditionally end their protest but at a further meeting between all the H-Block O/Cs on 11

January it was decided to attempt in a step-by-step process and a principled fashion the de-escalation of the protests. Thus, following a period in which the prisoners co-operated to their utmost with a stubborn regime, on 27 January, 96 prisoners smashed up cell furniture in a fit of frustration.

The reaction from the prison administration was swift and brutal. Over 80 prisoners were assaulted, beaten in wing shifts, left overnight without bedding or blankets or drinking water, refused toilet facilities and had meals interfered with or withdrawn altogether.

It was back to square one. Despite calls from the Blanketmen to those who had appealed to them to abandon their hunger striker, none, from bishop to politician, spoke out.



• Press conference announcing an end to the 1980 hunger strike. From left: Danny Morrison, Gerry Adams & former Blanketmen Kieran Nugent and Joe Maguire



MARY DOYLE, a republican prisoner in Armagh Women's Prison during the years of prison protest took part in the first hunger strike in 1980. Here she talks to ELLA O'DYWER about her recollections of the period.

I knew what I was - I was a political prisoner

The first time Mary Doyle went to jail was in March 1974 when, at the age of 18, she was charged with causing an explosion and sentenced to five years.

With the 50% remission in practice at the time, Mary got out of jail in September '76, having served two and a half years. Her mother had been murdered the year before. Mary was back in jail again in 1977, charged with planting incendiary devices. Political status was gone at this stage.

"The screw and governor took great delight in telling me I was now an ordinary prisoner. There were two other women charged with me and when the three of us were brought into reception, there were some screws there from the time I'd been in before. They were saying, 'You don't run the jail now; we do. You're now only an ordinary crim and you remember that.' I laughed at them because I knew what I was. I was a political prisoner and whatever they came up with wasn't going to change that." Mary was on remand for 14-and-a-half months and in 1978 "I got eight years. I didn't recognise the court.

"The no-work protest was going on so I automatically joined that after I was sentenced. There was no uniform in the women's jail, so it wasn't like the men. We didn't have to wear a blanket. Our protest was the no-work protest and we were locked up all the working day, from about 8.30 in the morning until 5.30 in the evening. You got out for lunchtime for a bit. You got out in the evening for what they called evening association. In the evening, when you got out it was to clean your cells, wash your clothes and the like."

But morale in the jail was high. Comradeship was strong. "After my mother was killed, the girls all rallied round me. If anyone saw anyone else down, everybody rallied round. There was great comrade-



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I laughed at them because I knew what I was. I was a political prisoner and whatever they came up with wasn't going to change that

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ship." Then there was the no-wash protest. "I went on the no-wash protest in December '78. That continued until February 1980. Then one day they came in, male and female screws. They locked us in two association rooms. Some girls were badly beaten. They were looking for our black gear.

"Volunteer Kevin Dee Delaney had died the month before. When Volunteers died we had commemorations in the yard. We had one in January for him. They locked us up all day in the association rooms and went in and took the black gear and wrecked our cells. Our personal photos and letters were torn up. The cells were left like a pit.

"They took us out one by one and put us back into our cells. I think they threw us in a sandwich that night. We had asked to use the toilet facilities and we were denied. It was mostly two to a cell and the chamber pots could only hold so much.

"The following day Mairead Farrell, who was OC at the time, demanded to see the governor and for us to be allowed use the

toilets. She also insisted on our right to get an hour's exercise. So they started letting us out one at a time. They'd only let four out at a time to the exercise yard. Everybody automatically ran to the toilet but they had the toilets locked.

"As I said, the chamber pots would only hold so much. We had no alternative. When the doors opened we had no alternative but to empty the pots over the suicide wire. That is initially how the no-wash protest started in Armagh. It wasn't something we had chosen to do ourselves. It was forced upon us."

By December that year the women had decided to join the first hunger strike. This was an idea that had been discussed amongst the women POWs since the summer that year.

"We thought about it seriously. It wasn't something we took lightly."

Three women - Mairéad Farrell, Mairéad Nugent and Mary Doyle herself - joined the fast and remained on it until it ended. "I had thought long and hard about it because I couldn't just think of myself. My Daddy wasn't in the greatest of health and he really hadn't gotten over my Mummy's death. But then I supported the hunger strike and I wasn't going to expect someone else to do something I wouldn't do. Also when



• Republican POWs at Armagh Jail; (below) Mairéad Farrell in Armagh Jail cell

your back is to the wall - and I find this with republicans in any situation in jail - you get stronger and more determined. You get the courage from somewhere. When you know you're in the right you won't let them beat you."

Asked how she thought she would have felt if the hunger strike had continued and she had faced death, she said: "Unless you're in that position you can't really say. I'd like to think I'd have had the courage to see it through, because I went on it with that commitment. My family would have been my only thought and I'd like to think they'd have had the courage."

Mary Doyle has two children. Asked how she would feel if they got involved in republicanism and went to jail and on hunger strike as she had, she said, "I'd be 100% behind them. I'd be a hypocrite if I didn't. But I hope those days are well behind us. What we went through was to make a better life for our children and everybody else."

Doyle has a lot of praise for the women and men who never went to jail, the people who "looked out for you, who had their doors open for you, who fed and clothed you."

Doyle finally got out of jail in 1983. She now works in the North Belfast Sinn Féin office. She enjoys her work very much and is very proud of her past.

"I've no regrets. I've some brilliant memories, obviously sad ones too, but lots of happy memories. I've met people I'd never have met otherwise, people from different parts of the country. There are people I met over 30 years ago who I'm still in contact with."

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I supported the hunger strike and I wasn't going to expect someone else to do something I wouldn't do. Also when your back is to the wall — and I find this with republicans in any situation in jail — you get stronger and more determined

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RAYMOND McCARTNEY is a Sinn Féin MLA for Derry. In 1979 he was sentenced to life in prison for political offences. On arrival at the H-Blocks he immediately joined the Blanket Protest. He was 22 years old. Around this time the idea of undertaking a hunger strike was very much on the agenda in the Blocks and was the subject of much debate through the cell windows and doors at night and between prisoners sharing cells. Here, in conversation with ELLA O'DWYER, Raymond McCartney talks about events leading to the first hunger strike in 1980, the course of the strike itself and shares his thoughts the subsequent and fatal 1981 Hunger Strike.

They died for us all



"What struck me was that, even in 1979, there were people already convinced that a hunger strike was the next step. By Autumn 1979 there was speculation that a hunger strike would be undertaken to commence with the visit of the then Pope."

A tactical decision was later made to cancel that plan and instead to increase public awareness of the prison issue and approach the likes of Cardinal Ó Fiaich and then there was the formation of the H-Block/Armagh Committee.

On Ó Fiaich McCartney says: "He was a man of great integrity. There was no doubt

about that. What we started to realise was that he was also quite restricted by his office. It wasn't a case of his being the Cardinal, the number one man and therefore the whole Church would roll in behind him. But he knew that what we were asking for should be granted. What we wanted was political status and he tried in the best way possible to help us."

The prisoners realised that they needed to define exactly what they wanted, thus the 5 Demands.

"The British wanted to change things overnight from a context in which there

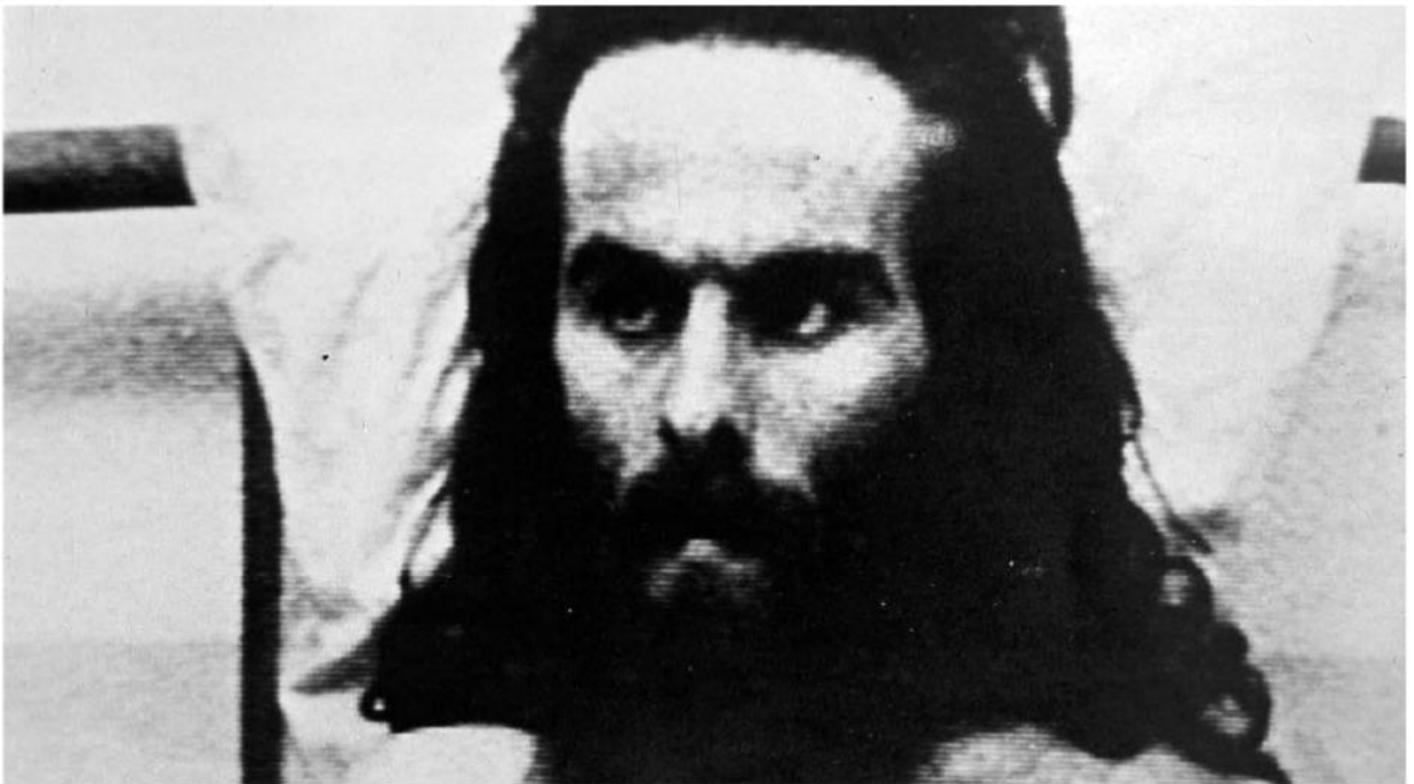
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First of all you asked yourself had you the desire and strength to go on the strike. Can I commit myself to this? Am I prepared to die? The answer was yes

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• Bernadette McAliskey addresses a H-Block rally outside Leinster House, 1980



was political status to a context of criminalisation. If they thought they could turn us, they were in cuckoo land."

Well over 100 people volunteered for the hunger strike and the prisoners took strength from each other and the bond was very close. "The person sharing your cell would have been the person you would have shared many confidences with, sharing stories, letters and whatever news was available."

Initially, seven men - Tommy McKearney, Sean McKenna, Leo Green, Raymond McCartney, Brendan Hughes, John Nixon and Tom McFeeley - joined the fast on 27 October 1980, with the idea that they would be replaced on their deaths by others. The response to the absence of food varied from individual to individual. Sean McKenna's health declined quickly. Asked if he thought he would die himself on hunger strike, McCartney says: "I was one of the people who argued for hunger strike and when that was accepted outside, the process of selecting Volunteers began."

"First of all you asked yourself had you the desire and strength to go on the strike. Can I commit myself to this? Am I prepared to die? The answer was yes. But will I die? That question was never answered because there was always a hope, particularly from the model of 1972, that the hunger strike would force the British government.

"But the ten men who died on the 1981 Hunger Strike answered the question. They did die. If someone asked me if I thought I'd have gone through with the hunger strike, I don't think it's a question you can really answer. Laurence can answer it because he went into a coma. So whatever battle has to be fought within those last 48 hours I think you can only give a view of. Till you're in that position I don't think you can look back and say, yes I would have died."

McCartney talks of the pain encountered by the families: "In one way hunger strike is a very selfless act. But in another way involvement in struggle is a selfish act. You make decisions and you expect your family to go along with it. You can be very focused about your revolutionary goals, but the lives of families are heavily affected."

On 1 December three women - Mairéad Nugent, Mairéad Farrell and Mary Doyle - joined the 1980 hunger strike and continued on the fast until the hunger strike was brought to an end on 18 December.

"On the basis of the information available to him, the O/C of the Blocks, Brendan 'The Dark' Hughes, took the decision to call an end to the strike. It was a tough decision.

"Sean McKenna had gone downhill, he was very weak. You wouldn't have known him. The Dark at this stage was hopeful of a just resolution. There was to be a docu-

• Raymond McCartney on Hunger Strike

“

We found out almost immediately after the end of that [1980] hunger strike that the Brits weren't prepared to resolve the issue. What they were about was an attempt to criminalise and smash the struggle and the second hunger strike would take that fight back

”



• Seán McKenna and Brendan Hughes; (right top) Show of solidarity; (right bottom) Brendan Hughes on Hunger Strike

“

The ten men died for us all. That same willingness to sacrifice everything for what you want to achieve is still very strong in republicans today and it's that same willingness to make sacrifices take will take us to where we're going

”

ment which would realise in a broad sense the five demands. The Dark made his decision on the basis of the document that was coming to the jail. I think he made the correct decision. People could analyse afterwards, and rightly that he and we were outmanoeuvred. But hindsight is a wonderful thing.

"Brendan Hughes could have been put in a position where he could have held out for the document and Sean would have died. If the Brits had approached the whole crisis in good faith, the thing could have been resolved. We found out almost immediately after the end of that hunger strike that the Brits weren't prepared to resolve the issue. What they were about was an attempt to criminalise and smash the struggle and the second hunger strike would take that fight back."

In 1982 the prisoners were asking themselves "where from here?" The decision was made to come off the No Wash Protest and to "go into the system, hollow it out and burst it." This they succeeded in doing, as demonstrated in their ability by 1983 to bring off one of the most impressive prison escapes in modern history.

In 1994 Raymond McCartney was released from prison having served 17 and a half years. Initially he became involved in setting up ex-prisoner groups and with work with Coiste na nIarchimí, the committee for Republican ex-prisoners. In latter years he undertook the challenge of becoming a Sinn Féin MLA. Again as with his personal process of self-assessment he asked himself at the outset if he had what it took to see the job through.

"I asked myself if I had the desire and capacity to do the job. I thought it through and went for it."

A very positive grain traces itself through McCartney's reflections on the hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981 and indeed through his general approach to life. Asked if his reflections of the time were about sadness and grief or if there was anything uplifting about the memory of the time, he gave a brief account of two recent visits he made to the H-Blocks.

"I went up to the Kesh recently. It was a dark and cold day. My mood seemed to reflect the day, I felt a cloud over me. A couple of weeks afterwards I made another trip up. Some of the McElwee family were with me, Mary Nelis and Jim Clarke. It was a beautiful, sunny day. I remember when I



came home that night saying to Rose, my wife, that I felt really, really uplifted that day. And I said to her that that's the way it should always be. Despite all the sadness there are things about that period that should uplift people. Because when the pressure was on, people stood tall. When people had to be counted, these people stood up and were counted. The ten men died for us all. That same willingness to sacrifice everything for what you want to achieve is still very strong in republicans today and it's that same willingness to make sacrifices that will take us to where we're going."

An Ghaeilge i streachailt phríosúin na Ceise Fada

"In the circumstances I was surprised that the morale of prisoners was so high. From talking to them it is evident that they prefer to face death rather than be classed as criminals. Anyone with the least knowledge of Irish history knows how deeply rooted this attitude is in our country's past. In isolation and perpetual boredom they maintain their sanity by studying Irish. It was an indication of the triumph of the human spirit over adverse material surroundings to notice Irish words, phrases and songs being shouted from cell to cell and then written on each cell wall with the remnants of toothpaste tubes."

— Cairdinéal Tomas Ó Fiaich 1978



Is dócha go seasann forbairt na Gaeilge i rith agóid na pluide idir 1976-81 amach i stair na príosúntachta sa chaoi gur bhláthaigh an teanga i gcóinníollacha uafasacha mar dhéis chumarsáide lárnach sa streachailt in éadan coirpeachta sa Cheis Fhada. I ngeall ar an seasamh a ghlac cimit na pluide, níor ceadaíodh aclaíocht choirp agus b'éigean daofa fanacht sa chillín an lá ar fad ach amháin deich mbomaite ar maidin nuair a ligí amach iad fá choinne níocháin. Bhí neamhchead ar leabhair, ar pháipéir nuachta, ar phinn, nó ar fhoinní léitheoireachta ar bith agus ní raibh ceadaíthe acu ach tocht, pluid agus crois choróin Mhuire. Beartaíocht

chomhfhiosach de chuid údaráis an phríosúin agus Rialtas na Breataine a bhí ann chun brostú laethúil na gcimí a bhaint ar shiúil. Mhóthaigh siad go mbeadh meath síceolaíochta de thoradh ar an leamhas agus an aonarachas agus go gcuirfeadh seo stop leis an agóid gan mhoill.

Mheas siad an scéal go contráilte agus nuair a d'ardaigh líon na ndaoine ar an phluid sa bhliain 1977, rinneadh dualgas scriosúil na mbairdeirí níos deacra. Daoradh Jake Mac Siacais chuig na blocanna leathbealaigh fríd 1977 agus míníonn sé an fhorbairt a tháinig ar dhlúthpháirtíocht agus ar mhisneach na gcimí leis an struchtúr nua a bhunaigh siad.

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Bhí an dul chun cinn dochreidte ar fad, déanta na fírinne. Ag an tús, ní raibh ach seachtar nó ochtar de bhunadh na gcásanna le Gaeilge; i ndiaidh bliain go leith bhí 300 cimit le Gaeilge ar a dtoil.

— Jake Mac Siacais

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• Príosúnaigh poblachtánacha ar pharáid sa Cheis Fhada

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Chónaigh siad sna coinníollacha príosúin is míshláintiúla san fhichiú haois agus is comhartha éagsúlachta é gur fhorbair an Ghaeilge i mbrocamas agus in ainnise na timpeallachta seo

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Thosaigh dream beag againn ag beartú pleananna agus muid ar athchur i mBóthar Chroimghlinne. Bhí taití na gcásanna againn agus shocraigh muid eagar a chur ar mhuintir na mblocanna i bhfoirm ranganna oideachais. Úsáideadh an pholaitíocht le meon cogaidh a spreagadh agus an Ghaeilge le spiorad agus féinaithe a thógáil... Dúshlán ollmhór a bhí ann de bhrí go raibh muid faoi ghlas sna cillíní an lá ar fad gan áiseanna ar bith. Bhí 'scairteoir' in achan sciathán agus scairteadh seisean na ranganna amach an doras i bpríseas fadálach foghraíochta. Thosaigh an Ghaeilge ar bhonn slándála agus chríochnaigh sé mar theanga labhartha na mblocanna... Bhí an dul chun cinn dochreidte ar fad, déanta na fírinne. Ag an tús, ní raibh ach seachtar nó ochtar de bhunadh na gcásanna le Gaeilge; i ndiaidh bliain go leith bhí 300 cimir le Gaeilge ar a dtoil.

Níor bhláthaigh an teanga dúchais i gcoinníollacha chomh sainiúil riamh i stair na bpríosúnach Éireannach agus shábháil sé príosúnaigh shoghonta ó ghabháil ar mire i dtimpeallacht mhídháonna. Ar leibhéal praiticiúil, d'fhorbair an Ghaeilge i gcóras pirimide a thug dualgas múinteoireachta do bheagnach achan duine, dar le Breathnach, 'theagasc daoine le Gaeilge mheasartha daoine le beagán Gaeilge agus theagasc daoine le beagán Gaeilge daoine gan Gaeilge ar bith agus d'fhás sé mar sin cé nach raibh ach dornán beag daoine ag an bharr le Gaeilge líofa acu.¹ Sa chaoi seo, is sampla léiritheach í an Ghaeilge don tslí ar chruthaigh na príosúnaigh córas oideachais neamhfhoirmiúil s'acu féin i rith agóid na pluide. Níor tugadh stádas ciarlathach do dhuine ar bith faoi leith agus

ghlac an 'dalta' ról agus freagracht an 'mhúinteora' nuair a bhain siad caighdeán áirithe amach. Níorbh éigean do dhuine ar bith a bheith cáilithe de réir critéir acadúil, ní raibh de dhíth ach a bheith toilteanach an méid a bhí agat a theagasc d'fhoghlaimoirí ar chaighdeán níos ísle againn ag an am céanna.² Chuidigh an córas cumarsáide seo leo bheith neamhpléach ó údarás na mbairdeirí agus fiú gnáthriail na n-údarás phríosúin féin. Bhí siad ábalta straitéis a bheartú ar chursaí agóidíochta agus teachtaireachtaí béil a chur ó sciathán go sciathán agus ó cillín go cillín go hiomlán saor ó thuiscint na mbairdeirí.

Le himeacht aimsire, bhí cumhacht dhóchasach i meanma na gcimirí ach d'fhás gníomhaíochtaí brúidiúlachta na mbairdeirí dá bharr. Cuireann an t-iarphríosúnach Garaf Mac Roibeaird síos ar eispéreas pearsanta:

D'ardaigh imeaglú de réir a chéile; níor ligeadh dúinn an phluid a chaitheamh ag fágáil an cillín fá choinne níocháin. B'éigean dúinn a ghabháil lomnocht, iarracht chun muid a náiriú a bhí ann. Rinneadh ionsaí i gcónaí ar mhúinteoirí Gaeilge... Is cuimhin liom lá amháin ag scairteadh ranga amach ag inse an dorais agus shleamhnaigh bairdeir síos agus chaith sé uisce te fríd an doras ar m'aghaidh. Tugadh greadadh dom go minic fosta ach leanadh múinteoir íasachta ar aghaidh leis an rang dá ndéanadh na bairdeirí ionsaithe tae nó dá dtugadh siad greadadh don mhúinteoir i rith rang Gaeilge... Bhí muid neamhgheilliúil agus thaispeáin seo uilig dúinn go raibh fuath acu dár dteanga dhúchais; rud a thug tuilleadh inspreagtha dúinn.³

D'aithin na bairdeirí tábhacht na Gaeilge san fheachtas in éadan coirpeachta agus sa troid ceithre uair is fiche in éadan leadránachta. Thug an teanga misneach do mhuintir na pluide de thairbhe gur chruthaigh sé balla do bhriste idir aigne agus féiniúlacht s'acu agus iarrachtaí millteacha na n-údarás. San atmaisféar seo, thosaigh an agóid 'no wash' agus shocraigh na cimirí nach bhféadfadh siad an cillín in am ar bith fiú amháin don leithreas. B'éigean daofa fearadh [cac] s'acu a chur thart ar na ballaí leis an bholadh a mhaolú. Chónaigh siad sna coinníollacha príosúin is míshláintiúla san fhichiú haois agus is comhartha éagsúlachta é gur fhorbair an Ghaeilge i mbrocamas agus in ainnise na timpeallachta seo.

Chothaigh seo fuath agus eagla i measc na



mbairdéirí; bhí siad neamhchumachtach agus neamhábailtá dinít na gcimí a bhaint ar shíúil. Thagair an t-iarchime Peadar Whelan don phointe seo, 'Irish was a weapon we used against the screws leaving them feeling totally frustrated and excluded. Our expression of identity left them feeling totally powerless. Knowledge is power and ignorance diminished their sense of power and control.'⁴

I ndiaidh ceithre bliana d'agóidíocht dhian sa phríosún i gcomhar le feachtas tuirsiúil ar na sráideanna taobh amuigh, shocraigh na príosúnaigh ar stailc ocrais mar rogha dheireanach sa troid in éadan dhígeantacht na Breataine. Mar is eol duinn uilig a bheas ag déanamh comóradh ar an stailc ocrais i mbliana, rinne Rialtas na Breataine neamhaird ar ghuth daonlathach an phobail agus le dígeantacht iondúil, lean siad le polasaí na coirpeachta. I ndiaidh sé lá is seasca, fuair Bobby Sands bás ar stailc ocrais; poblachtánach, file, ceoltóir agus múinteoir Gaeilge. Lean naonúr eile é, Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreesh, Patsy O'Hara, Joe

McDonnell, Martin Hurson, Kevin Lynch, Kieran Doherty, Tom McElwee agus Mickey Devine agus d'éag siad uilig sular cuireadh an stailc ar ceal ar an 3ú lá de Dheireadh Fómhair. Ar dtús, níor ghéill na Sasanaigh daofa ach cead a gcuid éadaigh féin a chaitheamh ach de réir a chéile, agus le tuilleadh feachtasaíochta eile, fuair na príosúnaigh an stádas polaitiúil a bhí tuillte acu.

Má ghlacaimid stair agus traidisiún an phoblachtánachais i ngéibheann san áireamh, ba bheag seans praiticiúil a bhí ann go n-éireodh le polasaí na coirpeachta. Thug an réamhshampla stairiúil agus an tacaíocht chumhachtach ar an taobh amuigh neart fforluachmhar d'fheachtas na bpríosúnach i gcoinne bholscaireacht 'choirpeachta' na Sasanach. Rinne said iarracht na príosúnaigh a bhrieadh; ach d'aontaigh siad le chéile iad chuig leibhéal dlúthpháirtíochta agus íobartha thar cuimse i stair na príosúnach Éireannach. Rinne said iarracht an bhéim pholaitiúil a bhaint ón streachailt náisiúnta; ach tharla a mhalairt, d'áiseirigh Shinn Féin mar fhórsa

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Mhair agóid na pluide ar feadh cúig bliana agus sa tréimhse sin d'aosaigh fir óga le chéile, armáilte le teanga dhúchais s'acu, idé-eolaíocht pholaitiúil agus mothúcháin chomrádaíochta bunaithe ar dea-mhéin do chách

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Lena chois sin, tá dualgas ar phoblachtánaigh dhá oiread níos mó oibre a dhéanamh chun fíís Bobby Sands agus na stailceoirí ocrais a chur i gcrích agus áis streachailte, athghiniúna a dhéanamh don teanga

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polaitiúil nua agus polaitíodh an pobal náisiúnach le féinmhúinín láidir. I bhfírinne, seasann an Cheis Fhada mar shiombail agus mar shampla dealraitheach don easpa tuisciana a thaispeáin na Sasanaigh ar shíce an phoblachtánachais agus ar an cheist Éireannach i goitinne.

Mhair agóid na pluide ar feadh cúig bliana agus sa tréimhse sin d'aosaigh fir óga le chéile, armáilte le teanga dhúchais s'acu, idé-eolaíocht pholaitiúil agus mothúcháin chomrádaíochta bunaithe ar dea-mhéin do chách. Léiríodh seo go tragóideach sa stailc ocrais nuair a fuair deichniúr bás in iobairt neamhleithleasach faoin mhana bíobalta a d'úsáid Sands, 'Greater love than this hath no man than that he lay down his life for his friend.'⁵ Mhothaigh siad fiúntas pearsanta agus d'fhéach siad orthu féin ní mar 'chimí cogaidh' amháin ach mar 'dhíograiseoirí' cultúrtha agus polaitiúla. D'fhoghlaim agus labhair na príosúnaigh Gaeilge ar chúiseanna praiticiúla agus polaitiúla agus d'aithin siad an luach dothomaste a bhí aici mar fhriotal cultúrtha. D'fheidhmigh sí mar shlánaitheoir sna coinníollacha uafásacha; bhrostaigh sí an intinn, thug sí faoiseamh ón leadrán. Mar áis fhéiniúlachta, dhlúthaigh sí comradaithe le chéile agus d'fhág sé naimhde scoite amach. Dar le Peadar Whelan:

"Learning and speaking Irish became a crucial part of our struggle against criminality and helped form our identity. We had to fight to learn and speaking it was a form of resistance. Every time we spoke Irish, we were telling our enemy that we were Irish republicans, protesting and struggling. We weren't going to let them silence us."⁶

Is seintimint choitianta í seo i measc iarchimí na Ceise Fada agus aithníonn siad chomh ríthábhachtach is a bhí sé sa bhua in aghaidh an tsrutha treascaigh. D'fhréamhaigh an neart inmheánach seo ó fhealsúnacht chumhachtach nár thuig lucht an ansmachta agus is ábhar mórchúise do phríosúnaigh phoblachtánacha go seasann focail an mhairtírigh Bobby Sands mar chur síos oiriúnach ar an fhealsúnacht seo, 'Glacann siad ár saoirse ach fanann mianta na saoirse inár gcroíthe. Ní feidir é a bhreiseadh agus ní feidir leo stop a chur lenár gcuid smaointe ná lenár gcuid cainte'.⁷

D'éirigh leis an Stailc Ocrais an t-áth a fháil ar chorráil agus croí na ndaoine ar fud na hÉireann. Den chéad uair le fada an lá, bhí baint ag Gaeilgeoirí aitheanta le feachtas



'polaitiúil' i bhfoirm thacaíocht sráide don Stailc Ocrais, bhunaigh said brúgrúpa darb ainm 'Gael's against H Block'. I ndiaidh na stailce, chuir Sinn Féin béim úr ar chursaí cultúrtha agus mhéadaigh ballraíocht an pháirtí le díograiseoirí teanga a fuair spreagadh ó mhuintir na mblocanna.⁸ In mBéal Feirste, d'ardaigh líon na ranganna Gaeilge, bhunaigh Sinn Féin Roinn an Chultúir, tháinig fás forneartmhar ar Bhunscoil Phobal Feirste [an chéad Bhunscoil lánGhaeilge i dtuaisceart na tíre], bhí feachtas forleathan le logainmneacha sráide a chur suas as Gaeilge, agus bunaíodh an páipéar Gaeilge laethúil LÁ. Labhraíonn Féilim Ó hAdhmaill, fear a bhí gníomhach san athbheochan, ar an spleainc a chruthaigh na féidearachtaí seo:

Bhí na stailceoirí ocrais agus cimí na pluide mar spleainc mhisnigh ag an phobal seo. Spreag siad daoine leis an Ghaeilge a fhoghlaim go háirithe nuair a chuala daoine fá dtaobh de na coinníollacha uafásacha, an bhruidiúlacht agus an ganntanas áiseanna. Dúirt daoine 'má ta siadsan ábalta fulaingt leis an teanga a fhoghlaim, thig linne é a dhéanamh le múinteoirí, áiseanna agus timpeallacht ceart!... Mhothaigh daoine faoi chois fosta agus d'amharc siad ar an Ghaeilge mar áis le taispeáint gur Éireannaigh a bhí iontu, nuair a bhí gach duine eile á rá nach raibh seo amhlaidh.⁹

Dála na bpríosúnach féin, d'aithin daoine ar an taobh amuigh feidhm na Gaeilge mar mhodh éifeachtach le féinaithe a chur in iúl. Ina theannta sin, scaoileadh saor a lán príosúnach a d'imir páirt luachmhar san athbheoán cultúrtha seo. Ba léir gur ardaigh tábhacht na teanga sa phobal náisiúnach muinín a tháinig chun cinn sa chomhthéacs polaitiúil úr.

I gcomhar leis na himeachtaí sin, bhí Bunscoil Phobal Feirste i mbun fás millteanach i dtrátha an ama seo agus tugadh aitheantas Rialtais daofa don chéad uair in 1984 i ndiaidh trí bhliana déag gan cuidiú airgeadais. Níl amhras ar bith ar Ó hAdhmaill, a rinne taighde ar figiúirí fáis na scoile, fán phríomhchúis taobh thiar den fhás seo:

Tá ardmholadh tuillte ag bunaitheoirí na céad Bunscoile go háirithe don chinneadh a ghlac siad in 1977 nuair a d'oscail siad na doirse do pháistí nár tógadh le Gaeilge. Thóg siad bunchloch ach murach feachtas na bpríosúnach agus an Stailc Ocras, ní bheadh an fás céanna sa Ghaelscolaíocht. Is fíric staire é gur dhírigh siad aird an phobail ar an Ghaeilge agus cuireann figiúirí na scoile tionchar s'acu in iúl.¹⁰

I mBéal Feirste, cuireadh leis an éacht rathúil seo gan mhoill, bunaíodh Naíscoil sa Trá Ghearr in 1982, dhá cheann eile in Ard Eoin agus Cill Bhuí in 1984 sular bunaíodh an dara Bunscoil, Gaelscoil na bhPáil, in 1986. Ar bhealach indíreach, d'fhéadfaí a mhaíomh go síolraíonn an fhorbairt dhochreidte a tháinig ar an Ghaelscolaíocht ar fud an Tuaiscirt go dtí an lá atá inniú ann ó fobairt

shíoraí na stailceoirí ocrais agus dícheall cultúrtha mhuintir na Ceise Fada i gcoitinne.

Ní mór dúinn uilig an rol ríthábhachtach a d'imir streachailt na Ceise Fada sán athbheoán cultúrtha agus i bhfás an Gaeloideachais a mholadh agus a chuimhniú sná cuimhneacháin i mbliana. Lena chois sin, tá dualgas ar phoblachtánaigh dhá oiread níos mó oibre a dhéanamh chun fíis Bobby Sands agus na stailceoirí ocrais a chur i gcric agus áis streachailte, athghiniúna a dhéanamh don teanga. Caithefear an Ghaeilge a fhoghlaim agus daoine eile a spreagadh chun í a fhoghlaim agus chun í a labhairt. Is féidir linn an Ghaeilge a chur ar ais i mbéal an phobail agus tionscnamh díchoilínithe a fhorbairt a cruthaíonn féiniúlacht radacach polaitiúil ón fhéiniúlacht chultúrtha. Níl amhras ar bith go mbeidh fuinneamh réabhlóideach agus deáshampla stairiúil na n-iarchimí poblachtánacha iomlán riachtach do streachailt chultúrtha na mílaoise úire.

- 1 Agallamh le Mac Ionnrachtaigh, Iúil 2003.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Agallamh le Mac Ionnrachtaigh, Meitheamh 2003.
- 4 O'Hagan 1991, 4.
- 5 Beresford 1987, 77.
- 6 O'Hagan 1991, 4.
- 7 Ní Mhaille, IRIS [November 1982], 29.
- 8 Ó hAdhmaill 1985, 37.
- 9 Agallamh le Mac Ionnrachtaigh, Lúnasa 2003.
- 10 Agallamh le Mac Ionnrachtaigh, Lúnasa 2003.

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Is féidir linn an Ghaeilge a chur ar ais i mbéal an phobail agus tionscnamh díchoilínithe a fhorbairt a cruthaíonn féiniúlacht radacach polaitiúil ón fhéiniúlacht chultúrtha

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• Mick O'Donnell, Bobby Sands, Gerard Rooney and Tomboy Loudon in the Cages of Long Kesh

BOBBY SANDS LEADS NEW HUNGER STRIKE

Bobby Sands was born in 1954 in the predominantly loyalist district of Rathcoole in North Belfast. The eldest of four children, he left school in 1969 and went to work, apprenticing as a coach-maker. In 1972 his family moved to a nationalist housing development called Twinbrook, in West Belfast, having endured years of sectarian intimidation and harassment.

Bobby joined Óglaiha ha hÉireann in his young teens and at the age of 18 he was arrested, subsequently spending three years in jail. Six months after his release, he was re-arrested on active service following a bomb attack. He was taken to Castlereagh and interrogated for seven days.

Refusing to talk or recognise the court, Bobby Sands was sentenced to five years in the cages of Long Kesh, assigned to Cage 11.

Sands was released in April of 1976 and re-arrested in October of the same year. Now married, with a three-year-old son, he was sentenced to 14 years in Long Kesh.

Earlier in 1976 the British Government had introduced legislation to phase out the special category status under which political prisoners in the North were detained and which had been achieved by a hunger strike by republican prisoners in 1972. The new legislation was the central policy plank of renewed British efforts to depict the IRA campaign as a 'criminal conspiracy'. All political prisoners arrested after 1 March 1976 were now to be treated as 'criminals'.

Bobby Sands gained a reputation for being particularly steadfast in his opposition to increasingly brutal treatment from the guards. A number of guards during this time had a habit of drenching political prisoners with hoses, particularly in winter. The prisoners learned to stay clear of windows when they spotted these guards cleaning nearby. One day as the call went down from cell to cell, relaying a warning to stay clear of the windows because the screws were coming with the hose, Bobby, hearing the warning, stepped up to the window,

deliberately making himself a target. While the guard turned the full force of the hose on him, he stood unmoving, refusing to back down as the water poured over him. Only when the guard had given up and moved on did he turn from the window. A cell check later found him lying hypothermic and semi-conscious in a flood of icy water on the floor of his cell.

On 27 October 1980, following the breakdown of talks between British Direct Ruler Humphrey Atkins and Cardinal Ó Fiaich, the Catholic primate of all Ireland, seven prisoners in the H-Blocks began a hunger strike. Bobby Sands volunteered for the strike but when the then-O/C of the prison, Brendan Hughes, went on hunger strike he appointed Sands as his replacement.

During the 1980 hunger strike Bobby was given political recognition by the prison authorities. The day after a senior British official visited the hunger strikers Bobby was brought half a mile in a prison van from H-3 to the prison hospital to

• Bobby outside one of the Nisen Huts in Long Kesh; (below) Bobby (circled) as a young boy on a local soccer team

visit them. Subsequently he was allowed several meetings with Brendan Hughes. He was not involved in the decision to end the hunger strike, which was taken by the seven men alone. But later that night he was taken to meet them and was allowed to visit republican prison leaders in H-Blocks 4, 5 and 6.

On 19 December 1980, Bobby Sands issued a statement that the prisoners would not wear prison-issue clothing nor do prison work. He then began negotiations with the prison governor, Stanley Hilditch, for a step-by-step de-escalation of the protest.

But the prisoners' efforts were rebuffed by the authorities: "We discovered that our good will and flexibility were in vain," wrote Bobby. "It was made abundantly clear during one of my 'cooperation' meetings with prisoner officials that strict conformity was required, which in essence meant acceptance of criminal status."

In the H-Blocks the British saw what they thought was an opportunity to defeat the IRA by attempting to criminalise imprisoned republicans, but the blanketmen, perhaps more so than those on the outside, appreciated before anyone else the grave repercussions and so they fought back.

Bobby Sands volunteered to lead a new hunger strike.

The second hunger strike began on 1 March 1981 and was led by Bobby Sands.

Unlike the previous hunger strike, vol-



unteers would join at different stages, thus slowly maximizing pressure on the British Government. This staggered approach would also avoid a situation where a number of volunteers might die at the same time. The prisoners' thinking was that two or three hunger strikers dying at once would have no more effect on the British than a single death.

Another tactical move came the day after the beginning of the fast when the 425 nonconforming prisoners in the H-Blocks called off their dirty protest, thus centralising public and media attention on the plight of the men on hunger strike.

Bobby Sands believed that his death could secure the five demands and save the lives of his fellow hunger strikers. For the first 17 days of the hunger strike he kept a secret diary in which he wrote his thoughts and views, mostly in English but occasionally breaking into

Irish. On the first day of his hunger strike he wrote:

Sunday 1st

I am standing on the threshold of another trembling world. May God have mercy on my soul.

My heart is very sore because I know that I have broken my poor mother's heart, and my home is struck with unbearable anxiety. But I have considered all the arguments and tried every means to avoid what has become the unavoidable: it has been forced upon me and my comrades by four-and-a-half years of stark inhumanity.

I am a political prisoner. I am a political prisoner because I am a casualty of a perennial war that is being fought between the oppressed Irish people and an alien, oppressive, unwanted regime that refuses to withdraw from our land.

I believe and stand by the God-given right of the Irish nation to sovereign independence, and the right of any Irishman or woman to assert this right in armed revolution. That is why I am incarcerated, naked and tortured.

Bobby Sands was to last 61 days on hunger strike. His sacrifice was to inspire a new generation of republicans and the whole world was to see how Britain behaved towards those who would not bow down to her will.

On 1 March 1981, 25 years ago, Bobby Sands began the first day of his hunger strike.



Four on hunger strike

Belfast republican Bobby Sands completed his third week on hunger strike for political status in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh on Sunday, 22 March 1981. His comrade Francis Hughes from South Derry completed his first week on the strike the same day. Also on that day, Sands and Hughes were joined on their fast to the death by two other blanketmen, Raymond McCreesh from South Armagh and Patsy O'Hara from Derry city.

BOBBY SANDS

Bobby Sands was born in Belfast on 9 March 1954. He became involved in active republicanism in his mid-teens and when he was 18 he was arrested in Lisburn and charged with weapons possession. He was sentenced in early 1973 to five years' imprisonment, which he served as a political prisoner in the cages of Long Kesh.

Sands continued as an active republican after his release in April 1976 and was re-arrested six months later during an IRA operation.

After 11 months on remand, Bobby Sands was sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment. When he was moved to the H-Blocks in late September 1977, he refused to wear a prison uniform, and went on the blanket protest.

Later, under the pen name Marcella, he wrote articles for *Republican News*. In the H-Blocks Sands suffered routine abuse from the prison administration and was forcibly bathed and scrubbed down with deck brushes on numerous occasions.

He was PRO of the blanketmen until he succeeded Brendan Hughes as OC when Hughes went on the first hunger strike in 1980.

Sands played a major part in republican resistance to criminalisation in the H-Blocks and conducted negotiations with the prison governor in an attempt to resolve the prison crisis - negotiations which foundered when the British adopted an intransigent attitude.

FRANCIS HUGHES

One of the most fearless and active

young Volunteers in the armed struggle against British occupation, 25-year-old Francis Hughes from Bellaghy in South Derry joined the hunger strike on 16 March 1981.

Described as "the most wanted man in the North", Hughes was on the run for three years and despite thousands of wanted posters all over South Derry he remained in the area, often living outside in the fields and hills while British forces scoured the countryside for him. In March 1978 two IRA Volunteers dressed in military uniform were crossing a field when confronted by five undercover SAS soldiers. Two British soldiers were shot in the shootout that ensued and the IRA Volunteers escaped the immediate vicinity. A full-scale manhunt was mounted by hundreds of British soldiers and RUC. Thirteen hours later, Francis Hughes was found lying under gorse bushes. He was badly wounded and had lost much blood. The word 'Ireland' was emblazoned across the jacket of his military uniform. He was trailed out of the gorse but refused to answer any questions.

He spent ten months in the military wing of Musgrave Park hospital. As a result of his wounds, his thigh bone was operated on and reduced by one-and-a-half inches, leaving him with a steel pin in his leg and needing a crutch.

In August 1978, he was taken from Musgrave Park to Castlereagh interrogation centre. For the next six days he refused to answer any questions and refused to eat or drink in case the food or water was drugged. He was charged with organising and taking part in a number of IRA operations.

At his trial, which ended after 13 days on 18 February 1980, he was given several lengthy sentences, including life imprisonment.

When brought to the H-Blocks, Hughes immediately went on the blanket

RAY MCCREESH

Raymond McCreesh was born in the village of Camlough in South Armagh,



• Bobby Sands and Francis Hughes



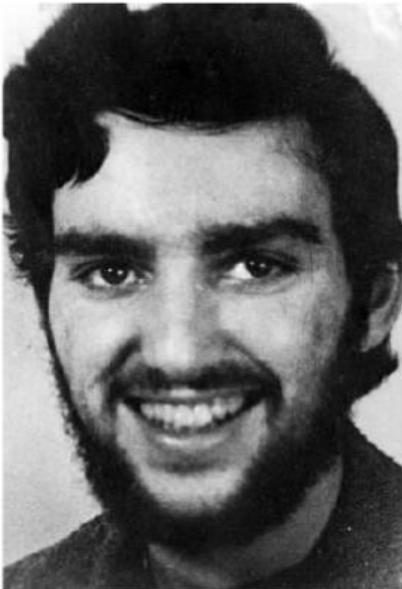
the second youngest in a family of four brothers and three sisters. After leaving school, he attended Newry Technical College, and served an apprenticeship as a sheet-metal worker.

In June 1976, at the age of 19, McCreesh was arrested after a shootout between the IRA and the British Army near Beleek in South Armagh. After nine months on remand he was sentenced in a non-jury court in March 1977.

By the time he embarked on the historic 1981 hunger strike, Raymond McCreesh had spent four years on the blanket protest, and during that time forfeited his visits rather than wear the prison uniform for the half-hour per



• Raymond McCreech and Patsy O'Hara

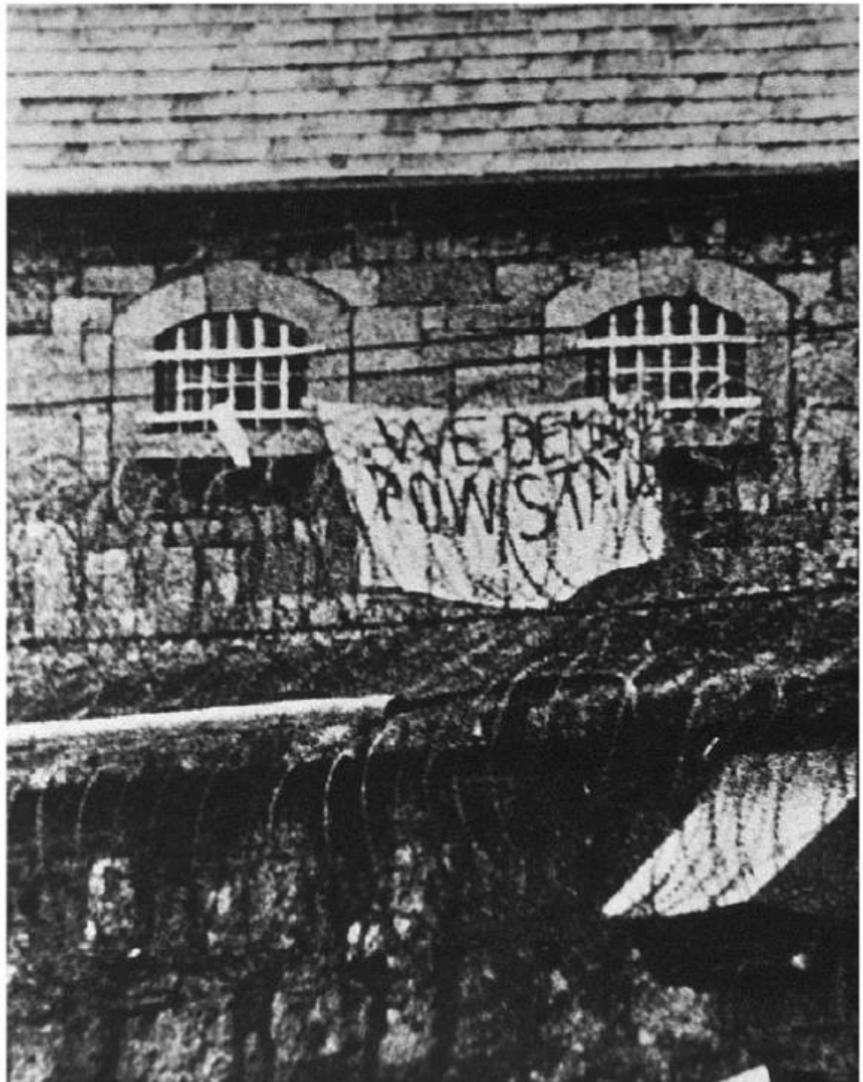


month. He only took his first visit with his parents in 1981 to inform them that he was going on the hunger strike.

PATSY O'HARA

Patrick O'Hara was born in Derry city on 11 February 1957. He was just 11 years old on 5 October 1968 when, along with his parents, he took part in the big civil rights march in Derry which was viciously attacked by the RUC. A year later he again witnessed one of the milestones in the conflict when the RUC invaded, and were defeated, during the Battle of the Bogside in August 1969.

Patrick, known to everyone as Patsy, joined na Fianna Éireann in 1970 and, although under-age, he joined Sinn



• Armagh Jail

Féin in early 1971. A few months after the introduction of internment his eldest brother Seán was interned.

In 1974 his home was continually raided by the British Army and he was frequently harassed and beaten up by them before being interned in October. After his release in April 1975, O'Hara joined the Irish Republican Socialist Party, but within two months he was re-arrested and framed by the British Army. He spent ten months on remand before being acquitted.

The British Army and RUC continued to harass the O'Hara family in 1976 and Patsy's brother Tony was arrested and charged with a political offence for which he was subsequently convicted on the basis of an alleged verbal statement.

Patsy was arrested again in September 1976 and charged with possessing arms and ammunition. This was really internment-by-remand and he was

released after four months, when the charges were dropped.

In June 1977 he was arrested in Dublin, interrogated for seven days, and charged with holding a Garda at gunpoint. He was released on bail six weeks later and in January 1978 he was acquitted.

Patsy was arrested once more in May 1979. He was charged with possession of a hand grenade and was convicted on the basis of accusations made by two British soldiers. He was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment in January 1980 and immediately went on the blanket protest.

This week 25 years ago saw four young men, from various parts of the Six Counties, on a hunger strike to the death in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh, as the republican leadership urged the need for mobilisations and action in support of their demands for recognition as political prisoners.



BY JIM GIBNEY

Key turning point in the struggle

I hid behind the wall of St. Patrick's Catholic Church, less than 200 yards from the front door of Dungannon's Electoral Office in Northland Row. From this safe distance I could watch, unobserved, the comings and goings at the office. It was short of 2.30 in the afternoon, a warm day as I recall now, some 25 years later.

My inside jacket pocket held a little piece of paper, pregnant with historical change, of far-reaching proportions for republicans. Of course at the time I was completely unaware of this. As I paced up and down the car park behind the Church I was more concerned not to be seen by anyone who would recognise me and be alerted to my intentions. The little piece of paper in my pocket was Bobby Sands' nomination paper to contest the by-election for Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

In Ballygawley Road housing estate, a few miles away, Gerry Adams was sitting by a phone. He was in communication with republicans in Lisnaskea, the home town of the recently-deceased MP for the constituency, Frank Maguire. Gerry was also in communication with me - not, I hasten to add, by mobile phone; they were yet to be invented - but through Jimmy McGivern, a local republican, in his car.

Earlier, Gerry had given me my instructions. They were simple enough. If by 3.50pm Noel Maguire, Frank's brother, had not withdrawn his nomination papers for the by-election then I was to withdraw Bobby's name from the contest. Four o'clock was the final deadline to withdraw papers. Three o'clock was the deadline for submitting a nomination. The leadership of Sinn Féin had decided that Bobby Sands would not contest the election if there was another nationalist in the field.

At approximately 2.45pm the word from Gerry, through Jimmy, was that Noel Maguire



• Frank Maguire MP

had been sighted in the company of a local republican in Lisnaskea shortly after 2pm. He had not been seen since then. The grapevine had it he had gone to ground. My heart sank with the news as I prepared myself to withdraw Bobby's papers.

Then another courier arrived at the car park with a more positive rumour. Noel Maguire was on his way to the Electoral Office with the local republican - but no one knew for certain why.

Lisnaskea was a difficult hour's drive from Dungannon. We were all on edge. Would Noel make it to the office on time? Would he be stopped by the British Army at a checkpoint and delayed deliberately until after the deadline? Why was he coming at all, if not to withdraw his name? Maybe he was just coming to tell the growing number of journalists outside the Electoral Office that he intended to stand?

I was not prepared to believe anything unless I saw it with my own eyes. Experience of the previous few weeks taught me that. It was packed with highs and lows as republicans grappled with what to do over Bobby's nomination.

My anxious wait ended well within the time set for withdrawing a nomination. The solitary figure of the white-haired Noel Maguire ascended the steps outside the Electoral Office. It was obvious he had decided to pull out of the contest. In keeping with his gentle demeanour, he announced in a soft voice to the waiting journalists that he was withdrawing from the by-election because he had been told it would help save Bobby's life. He could not have it on his conscience that any action of his would endanger another person's life.

Noel Maguire's gesture was not only magnanimous. It was a pivotal moment which shaped the future conduct of the republican struggle in a dramatic and unexpected way.

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Then another courier arrived at the car park with a more positive rumour. Noel Maguire was on his way to the Electoral Office with the local republican - but no one knew for certain why

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• Joe Cahill addresses Smash H-Block rally at the GPO, Dublin

Had Noel stayed in the contest, then Bobby Sands would not have been elected MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, because I would have withdrawn his name from the election. And the year 1981 might not have been the year the struggle changed so dramatically.

Bobby's election rocked the Thatcher government and the Irish establishment. It also came as a huge surprise to many republicans, with one very senior IRA man saying to me, as we watched the news of Bobby's win on television, that it was worth 20 bombs. It was a spectacular victory against all the odds. It gave the prison struggle, and the struggle generally, a much needed boost.

Following Bobby's election, Kieran Doherty and Paddy Agnew were elected TDs and other prisoner candidates did well across the 26 Counties in that year's general election. The election of two prisoner candidates as TDs was also significant for another reason. It ended Fianna Fáil's reign as the dominant party in the south. They never again formed a government as a single party. That year also saw Owen Carron hold Bobby's seat with an increased majority in the by-election caused by Bobby's death.

In the middle of all that was happening and with Bobby's win in the bag, I argued internal-

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ly for Sinn Féin to contest the May local government elections, held less than a month after Bobby's success. Not surprisingly, I lost the argument. Other organisations like People's Democracy (PD), the IRSP, the IIP and pro-prisoner candidates did stand. The SDLP lost many of their council seats to these candidates – including that of their leader, Gerry Fitt, who was still a Westminster MP at the time. Thereafter the struggle opened up a new front contesting elections.

The election successes of 1981 gave republicans the confidence they needed to take the leap into the unknown electoral arena. I was not there for the internal debate which followed 1981. I was off to jail for the next six years. I can imagine it would not have been an easy debate to win. Republicans were very suspicious of participating in any form of struggle that they suspected was out of step with pursuing the armed struggle. For many, in the leadership and elsewhere, participating in elections was controversial and to be done selectively.

I was at an Ard Fheis in 1980 and heard Sinn Féin President Ruairí Ó Brádaigh denounce those republicans from Tyrone who put a motion to the conference to contest local elections in the Six Counties. Republicans in the 26 Counties were already contesting local elections. He warned delegates that anyone advocating such a course of action would face expulsion.

Between that Ard Fheis and Bobby Sands's election there was a low level debate among some of the leadership of Sinn Féin about how best to build Sinn Féin into a popular political party and the role, if any, of participating in elections. The opposition to fighting elections was very strong. Indeed, this was reflected in the extreme opposition among Fermanagh republicans to the proposal to stand Bobby.

I proposed standing Bobby in the by-election. It came to me in a flash on hearing the news on the radio of Frank Maguire's sudden death. I thought it was a not-to-be-missed opportunity to highlight the hunger strike and the protest for political status. I was to learn very quickly that not all republicans were taken by the idea.

The opposition in Fermanagh centred on the traditional republican hostility to elections. They were seen as a dangerous distraction, summed up in the view that even if Sinn Féin won every seat in the country, the Brits still had to be forced out by arms. There was also a genuine concern for the fate of Bobby and his comrades. Failure to win the seat would strengthen Thatcher's main argument that the prisoners did not have popular support.

The opposition held out over several meetings against the combined persuasive powers of Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, Daithí Ó Conaill, Gerry Adams and Owen Carron – all arguing to stand Bobby.

For republicans 1981 is, understandably so, one of the bleakest years of the conflict because of the deaths on hunger strike of the ten lads. It is also a seminal year in terms of opening up a new and challenging front: participating in elections. This led to other, equally important changes - taking seats in Leinster House and forcing republicans to build a serious party with a radical message.

It all started in earnest 25 years ago in Enniskillen's Technical College, when the Returning Officer, in a breaking voice, announced to the world: "Sands, Bobby, Anti H-Block/Armagh Political Prisoner, 30,492; West, Harry, Unionist, 29,046." Bobby Sands was declared MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

Thirty thousand, four hundred and ninety two...

On 9 April, 1981, the people of Fermanagh and South Tyrone went to the polls in a by-election to fill the seat held by the late Frank Maguire, an Independent MP, who died just five days after Bobby Sands began his hunger strike. Upon hearing of his death I doubt if any of us involved in the H-Block/Armagh campaign thought in terms of an election with a prisoner candidate. Firstly, the death of an MP does not automatically give rise to a by-election. A writ must be moved by an MP in the House of Commons to cause a by-election. Although republicans were friendly with some left-wing MPs, relations weren't of the nature that they would do your bidding. Besides, such a call would have presupposed the existence of a concrete plan or strategy - when there was none.

Bobby Sands' entry into Fermanagh and South Tyrone was an accident of history, and if there is one person who can be 'credited' with allowing that intervention then it is James Molyneaux, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party in 1981, and arguably one of that party's most stupid.

Molyneaux thought that the nationalist vote would be split between the SDLP and an Independent candidate and that a single unionist candidate, in the form of former party leader, Harry West, would take the seat. It was only when the election was called that the idea was suggested that the Smash H-Block/Armagh campaign should make an intervention. Around about the same time that Bernadette

McAliskey let it be known that she was prepared to stand but would stand aside for a prisoner candidate, others, most notably, Jim Gibney from Sinn Féin, were suggesting that Bobby Sands should be put forward.

A meeting was held in Monaghan and, incredibly, a small minority of Fermanagh republicans actually favoured the candidature of Noel Maguire, the former dead MP's brother. However, at the end of the meeting it was decided to stand Bobby Sands, provided he got a clear run against West. Noel Maguire, under tremendous emotional pressure, eventually withdrew his name and the SDLP, fearing a backlash, decided not to put up a candidate, though Austin Currie threatened to stand and SDLP councillor Tommy Murray who signed Bobby Sands' nomination papers was dismissed from the party.

I have never seen an election campaign like it. Thousands of activists were mobilised from across Ireland to go to Fermanagh and South Tyrone to help out in the postering and canvassing. In Dungannon and Enniskillen offices were opened round-the-clock. Some of us from Belfast went up, thinking we were going to teach the locals how to run an election. What we discovered was that working quietly away in the background for decades were people who had dedicated themselves to the electoral registers, ensuring that everyone of voting age was on the rolls, that the sick or those overseas were registered for postal votes, that people were trained in the

DANNY MORRISON was editor of *An Phoblacht/Republican News* and Sinn Féin Director of Publicity in 1981 and was a key contact between the protesting prisoners in the H-Blocks and the Republican Movement outside the jail. A former republican POW himself, Morrison was elected as a Sinn Féin member of a Six County Assembly in 1982. He became a full time writer in the 1990s. He is secretary of the Bobby Sands Trust. This article first appeared in the *Andersonstown News* on the 20th anniversary of the election of Bobby Sands.



• The start of the Fermanagh and South Tyrone by-election: Owen Carron, Gerry Adams, Bernadette McAliskey, Art McCaughey, Francie Molloy, Jim Gibney, Marcella Sands (Bobby's sister), Maura McKearney, Rosaleen Sands (Bobby's mother) and Pat McCaffrey

science of organising an election and supervising the count. They were brilliant.

At after-Mass meetings people would emerge from chapel, stand and listen, applaud and then make generous contributions to the fighting fund. I remember a group of Belfast women return to the election office in Dungannon totally despondent about Bobby's chances after they got an extremely cold reception outside a church on the Ballygawley Road. Francie Molloy asked them to describe exactly where they had made the speeches. It turned out they had been addressing and leafleting parishioners leaving a Church of Ireland service!

In Enniskillen on the day of the count we felt in our bones that Bobby

was going to win. You just knew it from the atmosphere, the people flocking to the polling stations, queueing to vote. In the afternoon when the returning officer declared the vote I couldn't contain myself and let out a huge yell.

For years the British government had been denigrating republicans, declaring they had no support, challenging them to go to the ballot box. Bobby Sands got 30,492, with a majority twice as large as Thatcher's in her constituency of Finchley. Bobby's election agent, Owen Carron, made Bobby's acceptance speech and called for dialogue to resolve the hunger strike. Harry West got up and began to make his victory speech, then appeared confused, then realised that

the unthinkable had happened - Bobby Sands had won!

That night I came back to Belfast with Mr and Mrs Sands and Bobby's sister, Marcella, and went into town to do more interviews. In the car we discussed the impact of Bobby's victory and the hope it gave that his life might be saved, that Thatcher would be compelled to recognise his mandate. But that was not to be. Her reaction was to amend the Representation of the People Act so that no Irish political prisoner in any jail in the world could contest a Westminster election. British governments were later to continually amend electoral rules - on identification, on deposits, on local government oaths - all with the objective of excluding republicans, and all of which failed because Sinn Fein circumvented all obstacles by simply adopting a pragmatic approach.

Republicans and electoralism could have ended there in 1981, had not James Molyneaux, again inexplicably, moved another writ for another by-election! Because of the exclusion of prisoner candidates, this time Owen Carron, a member of Sinn Fein, standing on an anti-H-Block/Armagh prison ticket, was nominated and was elected, increasing Bobby's vote, in yet another dramatic election. Owen's election took place on 20th August, the day on which Mickey Devine became the last hunger striker to die.

In voting for Bobby Sands and Owen Carron the people of Fermanagh and South Tyrone rejected British rule and asserted the integrity of the prisoners and the cause of Irish independence. They provided the springboard for the electoral rise of Sinn Fein and the empowerment of the general nationalist population in its unrelenting challenge to unionist and British misrule.



• Bobby's sister Marcella and mother Rosaleen Sands in Enniskillen following the announcement of the by-election result

Bobby Sands MP

On Thursday, 9 April 1981, Bobby Sands was elected MP for the constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Sands polled 30,492 votes against unionist candidate Harry West's 29,046. There were only 3,280 spoilt, highlighting the failure of the SDLP's and Austin Currie's attempts to sabotage the campaign.

The count, held in Enniskillen Technical College, had attracted crowds of loyalists in a triumphalist mood, no doubt believing the almost-blanket media assertion that Sands had no chance. However, the realisation set in during the course of the count that Bobby Sands would almost certainly be elected. There was a high turnout and low levels of spoilt votes from SDLP strongholds, both factors that were favourable to Bobby Sands. Slowly the loyalists melted away.

In fact, the press coverage had been so vindictive that veteran republican Kevin Agnew was moved to begin his address to gathered supporters outside the count with the words "fellow terrorists". The crowd reacted instinctively, with huge

applause, giving their answer to the lecturing media. The stunning victory prompted a change of heart in some quarters as Austin Currie speculated that it was not, after all, a vote for violence. But Gerry, soon to be 'Lord' Pitt, declared the vote a "mandate for violence".

Unionist reaction was predictable. The Ulster Unionist Party claimed it was evidence of nationalist support for the IRA. Likewise, the Alliance Party said the electorate of Fermanagh and South Tyrone were to be condemned. Ian Paisley declared that "now we know where the Roman Catholics in Ulster and the so-called moderates stand. More than 30,000 of them have voted for the IRA commandant in the Maze prison."

Margaret Thatcher declared in the aftermath of the election that there would be no change in British policy towards the North. Tory Cabinet Minister Francis Pym, speaking a mere two hours after the election, called for an all-party group to examine ways of removing the newly-elected MP.

Reacting afterwards, Bobby Sands issued a statement from his deathbed during which he said: "It is not republican hunger striker Bobby Sands MP that is the problem, but it is Britain's failed policy of attempting to brand Irish political prisoners as criminals which has your government scurrying for legal procedures to unseat a dying man and which, if you allow it, will shame you in the eyes of the world."

Within the 26 County political establishment, Síle de Valera stood alone in welcoming the result. Overall the reaction was one of deep unease.

The mood amongst republicans was summed up by campaign spokesperson Owen Carron speaking from the count directly after the stunning victory. "Despite intimidation from the so-called security forces, the voters of Fermanagh and South Tyrone stood by the prisoners and told Mrs Thatcher today that we, on behalf of the Irish people, will not accept the situation in the H-Blocks and we demand an immediate end to this intolerable situation."

Laurence McKeown took part in the 1981 hunger strike, enduring 70 days without food. Twenty-five years later he spoke to ELLA O'DWYER about his own background, his jail experience, his impressions of Bobby Sands and the effects of a prolonged encounter with death at such an early age.



'He's My Son'

"I was born in the village of Randalstown, County Antrim, a rural place where, typical of the times, there was no water or electricity. Ours was a relatively non-political household. My parents were quiet, unassuming people who lived in a mixed community of Protestants and Catholics, all knowing each other on first-name terms."

In 1969, Laurence was 12 years old:

"Bernadette Devlin, John Hume etc. were on TV regularly and, like many people of his generation, my father was fired up by the civil rights campaign. It touched a nerve. It was a time of heavy discrimination, most obviously in terms of housing. My father and a Protestant neighbour he worked with had submitted identical building plans to the local council. My father's was knocked back and the Protestant's accepted."

Around this time, young Protestants with whom Laurence grew up were joining the Ulster Defence Regiment. "At about 15 or 16, myself and my mates would be stopped by these same recruits who, in the reality of rural Antrim, were neighbours.

"In the beginning they were embarrassed at asking us what our names were and where we were going. They knew our names; they had grown up beside us. They knew exactly

who we were. A pattern emerged where these former acquaintances were ordering us out of cars and lining us up against walls. It wasn't about religion. It was about one side being armed while the other wasn't." This was a turning point for Laurence and, at the age of 16, he became actively involved in republicanism.

"I was arrested on 2 August 1976 and taken to Castlereagh holding centre. This was at a time when Ulsterisation, criminalisation and normalisation was the policy under a Labour government, a time when powers of arrest and detention were extended and the non-jury Diplock courts were introduced.

"When it came to interrogation, the police had a free hand and people could be sentenced to life on the basis of statements - oral or signed. I was ill-prepared for what faced me in Castlereagh."

The physical and psychological torture endured by those who passed through Castlereagh is well documented. "The uncertainty, the unknown, the waiting" and the inevitable brutality. Whether through physical or psychological pressure, the interrogating team aimed to get results. After three days in Castlereagh, McKeown was charged with attempted murder of an RUC man and causing explosions. He was then taken to Crumlin Road Jail in Belfast and subsequently to the H-Blocks at Long Kesh. He was sentenced in a non-jury Diplock court to life imprisonment. At this time other republicans were on the same path, many of whom would subsequently end up on hunger strike: people such as Bobby Sands, Tom McElwee, Joe McDonnell and Kieran Doherty.

I asked Laurence how he felt. Recalling the

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A pattern emerged where these former acquaintances were ordering us out of cars and lining us up against walls. It wasn't about religion. It was about one side being armed while the other wasn't.

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atmosphere of the non-jury court, he said: "The worst of it was that my mother was there. The judge asked if anyone present had something to say in favour of the defendant. I heard this woman's voice, my mother's saying: 'He's my son.'" It was 1978 before he saw her again.

McKeown's arrival at the H-Blocks at the age of 19 was as confusing and torturous as the interrogation period - again the encounter with "uncertainty, the unknown" and an inevitable period of waiting. Following in the steps of Kieran Nugent, he became a blanketman. "Kieran was probably a good man to start the protest. He was that sort of...not a hard man, not macho, but solid."

Instead of being delivered to the protesting block at H5, McKeown was taken to another block simply because, as he later discovered, H5 was full up - full of blanketmen. More and more people were joining the protest. This was a "lonely time" for Laurence as the lone protesting prisoner in H2.

He was taken down to the circle and ordered to take off his clothes. He stripped to his underpants and a screw shouted, "I told you to fucking take off the heap."

"The first days were the loneliest, I was naked and confused as to why I wasn't with the other protesting prisoners in H5" - again the uncertainty, the unknown and the waiting. "Waiting on a beating was worse. There's a kind of relief when it's over."

Bibles are a compulsory feature of all British prisons. On arriving in his H-Block cell, Laurence spotted the inevitable Bible in the bedside locker. "I opened the book in a haphazard way and found myself reading from something called the Book of Sirach. The line I was looking at simply stated that 'gold must be tested at the heat of the fur-

nace'. I took some inspiration from the quote."

As it happened, this interview took place in the small garden at the front of Laurence McKeown's home. In a strange twist of events, just as we spoke, a team of Bible enthusiast neighbours called by to talk about the good book. As their offer was declined, Laurence McKeown had a flashback to a scene in the Blocks. The phantom of the 'prison visitor' had come to mind. Prison visitors, quite like the Bible-loving neighbours, work in teams of usually well-intentioned, ungrounded people with little grasp on reality and too much time on their hands. He described how prison visitors had visited a blanketman's cell one day: a woman came into the cell which was "riddled with shit, rotten food and maggots". This messenger of God didn't ask him how he was coping, how his family fared or how he could possibly survive in such horrific circumstances. "Where is your Bible?" she demanded, to which the young man replied: "I fucked it out the window."

In later years, the Church was to feature in the hunger strike, forming a pressure group aimed directly at the strikers' families.

It was clear that Laurence McKeown's prolonged engagement with death during the hunger strike was part of a journey through self-awareness that had begun much earlier, through the conveyor belt of Castlereagh, the Crum and the Blocks. The blanket protest was a levelling and grounding period amongst protesting prisoners. By March 1978 there were a couple hundred on the protest. Strip searches, abuse and beatings were the order of the day. "We were getting bad beatings; they thought to beat us off the protest. People were being allowed only two showers a week and were being stopped going out to the toilet." The prisoners decided to withdraw co-operation even further. The system retaliated with brutality and in a very short time things had spiralled into the 'no wash' protest. "Shit on the walls, rotting food and maggots occupied the corners of the cells." Yet, typical of the political prisoner, even in these dark circumstances they were actively challenging the system. By 1979 there were many protesting blocks.

The first time McKeown saw Bobby Sands was in H6. I asked him what he was like. "It was the first time I seen him. I might have seen him once or twice before. We'd been through a rough period. But that was a brilliant period in H6; Jackie (McMullan) was there, Bobby Sands etc. People expect leadership people of such calibre to be somehow

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The judge asked if anyone present had something to say in favour of the defendant. I heard this woman's voice, my mother's saying: 'He's my son.' It was 1978 before he saw her again

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spectacular and exceptionally charismatic. I remember thinking he was charismatic, creative and all, but Bobby was also one of the boys, one of us.

"Bobby understood the historical importance of the period. There were political lectures reflecting on various IRA campaigns, splits, the civil rights movement etc. It was a major period of politicisation. We learned to think, question and reflect through discussion."

The blanketmen and then the hunger strikers demanded the dignity and treatment due to political prisoners. This, as encompassed in the Five Demands, was crucial to the revolutionary process in Ireland. To criminalise the prisoners was to criminalise the conflict; to acknowledge political status was to admit that it was a war.

By the 1980s republican prisoners believed that a hunger strike was inevitable. "The idea of a hunger strike was always there in the background. In 1979, with the visit of Pope John Paul, the idea of hunger striking was under consideration." The reckoning was that the Church would have to deal with the hypocrisy of allowing such a scene of brutality and injustice to go on. Brendan 'the Dark' Hughes and Bobby had discussed the idea and raised it with the Movement outside. At that time the proposition was declined for the logical reason that there was not yet enough mobilisation outside. It needed more time. Soon the National H-Block Committee was set up and the time arrived in the early 1980s.

In the aftermath of the end of the 1980 hunger strike, when the British failed to deliver the Five Demands, people like Bobby Sands understood that the next time around people would die.

Asked how he felt at the end of the first hunger strike and the start of the next, McKeown spoke again of a sense of relief. They were again doing something. The prisoners had become accustomed to biding their time, forever waiting for something to happen. Sitting with the "uncertainty, the unknown and the waiting. We had been in the eye of the storm, yet there was a kind of calm during that time." There had been a measure of hope when Bobby was elected MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone. That was swiftly deflated as Thatcher legislated against the possibility of any other political prisoners standing for election.

On 1 March 1981 Bobby Sands began a hunger strike to death, a commitment that he and others like McKeown had already made during the 1980 strike. Bobby Sands was dead



• Watch Tower, Long Kesh

almost 24 hours before word got to McKeown's landing. "Fr Toner came into the Dark's cell that morning. The Dark came to the door and shouted 'Bobby is dead'. It wasn't an angry time. It was more a question of who would take over after Bobby. Many of the screws were tamed down, I think even they realised they were living through the middle of something. The wing was quiet, the atmosphere sombre, even amongst the screws."

While Joe McDonnell lasted 61 days, others survived for a lesser time. "Mickey Devine went on strike a week before me". Devine was the last of the 'ten men' to die. It seemed like Laurence McKeown's time was up.

In the prison hospital he recalls the differing natures of the prison hospital staff. "While one might steal your hospital allowance of fags, other medical staff, though very clinical, were not brutal. Some of these went on to meet gruesome ends, committing suicide or being killed in driving accidents through excessive drinking. After 70 days, that same brave woman who stood in the Diplock court at her son's sentence, took him off the Hunger Strike. He remembers as he drifted into a coma her saying: "You did what you had to do and I have to do what I have to do". The family had come under that 'pressure group'- the church, some neighbourly and well intentioned and most ill-advised. Happily Laurence McKeown and his mother had two years of prison visits before his mother died. The same shy woman who had the courage to shout "he's my son" .

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In the aftermath of the end of the 1980 hunger strike, when the British failed to deliver the Five Demands, people like Bobby Sands understood that the next time around people would die

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BOBBY SANDS DIES



• Demonstration in Paris on the day that Bobby Sands died

On 5 May 1981, Bobby Sands died in the H-Block prison hospital at Long Kesh. He had endured 65 days without food and had spent his last two days in a coma. Sands' emaciated body, lying in state at his home in Belfast's Twinbrook estate, told the story of the torment and suffering that he had endured.

Sands' condition had deteriorated steadily, until the previous Sunday, when he finally fell into a coma from which he

never regained consciousness. Lying in another cell in the prison hospital, South Derry hunger striker Francis Hughes was also reported to be periodically slipping into unconsciousness and there was increasing fear that he too was close to death.

In the weeks and days before Bobby Sands died, there were two major attempts to unconditionally end the hunger strike. The first was an intervention by the

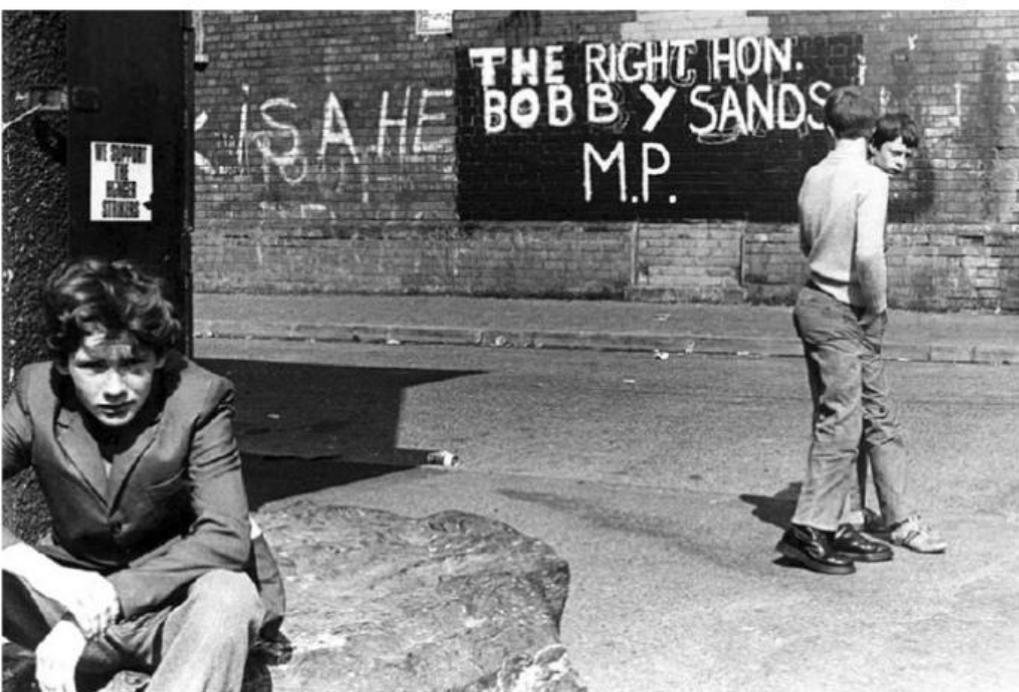
European Commission on Human Rights. This was supported by the Dublin Government and the SDLP as a way to alleviate nationalist pressure on them to take Britain to task by supporting the prisoners' demands. The second was the visit to Sands from the Pope's Private Secretary, Fr John Magee. Both interventions ended in failure following re-affirmations to their relatives by Bobby Sands, Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreesh and Patsy O'Hara that they would not settle for less than the Five Demands.

For over a week before his death, Bobby Sands had been in a critical condition, with death a possibility at any moment. Several times he had reported that he had felt himself slipping into unconsciousness but managed to pull himself back.

His skin had become so thin that he was placed on a water bed to prevent his bones breaking through and a week before he died, he was so weak that his conversation with the Pope's envoy left him totally exhausted.

By Thursday, he had lost all feeling in his mouth and gums and was having great difficulty talking. He was also suffering great pain and medical staff indicated that he was on the point of death.

Of all the interventions in the hunger strike, possibly the most despicable came





from British Labour Party opposition spokesperson on the North, Don Concannon, who on Friday, 1 May, arrived in Ireland and went to the H-Block prison hospital, where he told a dying Bobby Sands that he and his party did not support the hunger strikers' demands.

Concannon's ghoulish visit – to tell a dying man that he did not support him – caused consternation among elements of the British Labour party, 28 of whose MPs had signed a parliamentary motion calling on the British Government to negotiate with the prisoners.

By Saturday, Sands had lost his eyesight completely and had no feeling in one side of his face, and then in the early hours of Sunday morning even his powerful determination could no longer keep him conscious and he slipped into a coma.

From this point on, Sands' death could have come at any moment and his family remained constantly at his bedside. His breathing became more laboured as his body struggled to stay alive, but finally, at 1.17am on Tuesday, 5 May, Bobby Sands died.

However prepared people may have thought they were for Sands' death, the news came as a profound shock to the Irish nation, outraging people north and south. It also caused a huge international reaction.

On the streets of the Six Counties,

crowds gathered and prayed, while others built barricades or fought fierce running battles with the British Army and RUC.

Thousands of people in the 26 Counties reacted immediately to the news, with widespread marches and vigils. Dublin's O'Connell Street was brought to a standstill as hundreds gathered in silent vigil throughout the morning.

On Tuesday evening, the body of Bobby Sands was brought to his Twinbrook home in Belfast. A steady stream of thousands of mourners filed past his open coffin, which was alternatively flanked by guards of honour from Óglaigh na hÉireann, na Fianna Éireann and Cumann na mBan.

On Wednesday Sands' remains, flanked by an IRA Guard of Honour, made the short journey to St Luke's Chapel.

At around 2pm the following day, the funeral set out for the four-mile journey to the cemetery. Men, women and youths wept as the cortege passed by. A piper played the tune of the H-Block song, the words of which are:

"I'll wear no convict's uniform,
Nor meekly serve my time,
That Britain might call Ireland's fight
Eight hundred years of crime."

The funeral stopped close to the Busy Bee shopping centre and Sands' coffin was removed from the hearse and placed on trestles.

• IRA firing party at the funeral of Bobby Sands

Then from among the crowd of people emerged three IRA Volunteers, who fired three volleys from rifles over the coffin.

Sinn Féin's Gerry Adams officiated at the graveside ceremony, which began with the playing of the Last Post. The Tricolour was removed from the coffin and, along with a beret and gloves, was presented to Sands' mother.

The coffin was finally carried to the grave by the IRA Guard of Honour.

In poignant scenes, Bobby Sands' seven-year-old son Gerald helped to spade the soil that buried his father.

The funeral oration was delivered by Fermanagh republican Owen Carron, who had been Bobby Sands' election agent. During the course of the oration he said: "They tried to compromise Bobby Sands; they tried to compromise his supporters, but they failed. Around the world, Bobby Sands has humiliated the British Government. In Bobby Sands' death they have sown the seeds of their own destruction."

It was estimated that over 100,000 people attended what was the biggest IRA funeral since that of hunger striker Terence MacSwiney in 1920.



Brendan 'Bik' McFarlane was Officer Commanding (O/C) the H-Block prisoners during the 1981 Hunger Strike. On the 25th anniversary of the death of Bobby Sands, McFarlane spoke to ELLA O'DWYER about the journey that brought him to undertake one of the most difficult challenges ever faced by an Irish republican.

'The Hunger Strike will never, ever leave me'

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“Things moved at a pace, but there was a lack of real political analysis. Sinn Féiners were treated rather badly. They were illegal until 1974. They were the poor relation, but doing crucial work. During those early days, the political took second place to the military. Some Volunteers thought that if you were in Sinn Féin you didn't have the balls.” However, like a lot of other forward thinking people Bik “didn't like that”

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A noticeable feature of Brendan McFarlane's personality is the comprehensive way in which he looks at things. Observant and lateral thinking, he sees the bigger picture. In terms of awareness, he has an edge. This awareness carried him through his prison sentence and, no doubt, impacted on his selection as O/C during the 1981 Hunger Strike.

Following a group visit to the hospital wing in the H-Blocks on the morning of the 25th anniversary of Bobby Sands' death, I asked Bik McFarlane about his recollection of the Hunger Strike. Conscious of the pain that was likely to be involved in being repeatedly questioned about this time, I wondered how he coped. “Sometimes it's fine, if for instance you're talking with other republicans,” he said. “Other times you get choked up, angry or emotionally charged. The Hunger Strike will never, ever leave me.”

As our group walked around each of the Hunger Strikers' cells in the Blocks that morning, I noticed something that illustrated those emotionally charged moments, while also indicating McFarlane's keen awareness. Each Hunger Striker's cell had a window and in one cell Bik picked up the bed, rearranging its position. “It wasn't facing that direction,” he said. “It was facing this way,” to which Jim Gibney responded: “Yes, you're right, we would have been trying to keep the sun out of his eyes.”

Born in 1951, Brendan McFarlane was raised in the Ardoyne area of Belfast and from an early age had a thirst for knowledge. Between 1968 and 1970 he studied at St David's Catholic seminary in Wales. The desire to learn followed him throughout his life, particularly during his period of imprisonment where, with like-minded people, he engaged in ideological discussion and debate.

While theological studies might seem to be an unlikely pursuit for someone who later became involved in armed struggle, Bik saw no contradiction: “We were studying liberation theology. I'd have turned up somewhere like South America with a bible in one hand and an AK47 in the other.”

As it turned out, he decided to return to Belfast at a time when loyalist attacks against the nationalist community were rife. Then came internment and the British army. Bik took regular holidays from college to Ireland. “After one holiday I went back to St David's, but it wasn't the same. Something twigged.” Two years into his studies, Bik came home and got involved in armed struggle.

At the time the IRA were in defensive mode. “There were loyalist attacks in Derry and Belfast, houses were burnt and riots were the norm. Internment was introduced and the Brits arrived.” The Shankill Butchers were at work and loyalists were kidnapping, torturing and

killing Catholics. The IRA soon moved to the offensive, hoping to “physically drive the Brits out.

“Things moved at a pace, but there was a lack of real political analysis. Sinn Féiners were treated rather badly. They were illegal until 1974. They were the poor relation, but doing crucial work. During those early days, the political took second place to the military. Some Volunteers thought that if you were in Sinn Féin you didn’t have the balls.” However, like a lot of other forward thinking people he “didn’t like that”.

Like many republicans, Bik found himself in a prison cell. “I went to jail at 23, I was an old man by then.” Like his comrades, Mc Farlane was an ordinary person living in extraordinary times. Arrested and sentenced to life in prison, he arrived at Cage 11 where he met Gerry Adams, Brendan ‘the Dark’ Hughes and others.

There was a lot of study, discussion and debate going on at the time but Bik’s initial focus was on escape. On his first night in the cages he discovered, to his delight, that a tunnel was already in place right under his feet. This escape was not to happen and so he ended up spending more time in the company of like-minded people in Cage 11, all engrossed in the pursuit of knowledge. “I found Cage 11 to be a really, really important time. I learned more politics in Cage 11 than I learned in the entire of my previous life.”

Censorship was rife in the Cages. “We had to smuggle in the likes of Kitson’s writings. This was military stuff. We weren’t allowed The War of the Flea.” So the prisoners smuggled that in too. “You could get Harold Robbins and all the filth of the day. You could poison your mind, but you were not allowed to revolutionise your mind.” Bik, Gerry Adams and others worked out for themselves what the British policy of criminalisation was about, an awareness that served McFarlane well when he ended up in the Blocks.

Bik ended up ‘on the boards’, the punishment cells of the H-Blocks, when he and committed escapist Larry Marley were caught in an escape attempt. “The first blanket man I saw was Pádraig Wilson. He was in a cell opposite me with nothing but a blanket. I was wearing my own clothes, had parcels and papers. It was a matter of

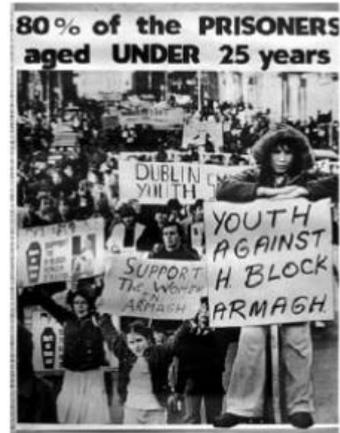
dates - if you were arrested before a given date you had status, if arrested afterwards you were dealt with as a criminal.”

Arriving at the protesting wing of the blocks was a claustrophobic nightmare. “The first two weeks in the blocks were depressing. I had to forget about escapes and the cages and knuckle down to the protest.” But from his previous period in the Cages and his own ability to see the bigger picture, he had long ago figured out what was going on in terms of Britain’s policy on Ireland. The British government aimed to criminalise the struggle and the prisoners seemed like the obvious targets.

“We had to fight or surrender.” Surrender was not on the agenda for republicans. To the British, the prisoners were the soft targets. They were in for a surprise.

“Nobody had decided on a strategy for dealing with the protest,” said Bik. But then republicans do what republicans do. “When the Brits threw down the challenge we accepted the challenge. They chose the battlefield and the prisoners responded.” Kieran Nugent refused to wear a uniform and the rest is history.

By the time it came to the hunger strike republican prisoners were significantly politicised. “Prisoners were thrown to the forefront of the struggle, so they continued to analyse, discuss and look at where they were going”. By the late 1970s the prospect of hunger strike seemed inevitable. The protest escalated and The Relatives’ Action



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I found cage 11 to be a really, really important time. I learned more politics in Cage 11 than I learned in the entire of my previous life

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• Relatives Action Committee demonstration in France





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As Vice O/C Séanna Walsh was the obvious candidate. Bobby had other ideas. He targeted McFarlane for the job saying: “Séanna Walsh is my best mate. When a crisis develops Séanna Walsh will not let me die. You will. You have to.” It was a dubious compliment for Bik

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Committee was established, consisting mainly of mothers, wives, girlfriends and family members. The Pope’s visit in 1979 seemed a likely opportunity. But the time wasn’t right. Later other support groups developed like the H-Block/ Armagh Committee.

In 1980 the time was right. At the end of the 1980 hunger strike when the POWs realised that another strike would take place, Bobby Sands stood down from his role as O/C in order to take part. Replacement was essential, both in terms of Bobby’s position as hunger striker and his role as O/C.

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The idea of replacement hunger striker was a major consideration for Sands and he asked Bik: “Do you have your head around this? You better know what you’re doing. Do you have a replacement for me?” A bit taken aback Bik answered: “Yes I have, its Joe Mc Donnell”. “That’s a good choice” Sands replied, “Joe is a solid man. He won’t let you down.”

On his role as O/C during the Hunger Strike McFarlane says: “I wouldn’t want to see anyone in that position. I didn’t want the job. I might have to make the call if a

potential deal came through from the Brits. But the pressure and heartache I felt paled into insignificance when you looked at the suffering of the Hunger Strikers and their families. I steeled myself to do the necessary.”

Currently people are writing their own versions of history, not least Richard O’Rawe who recently asserted that the offer of a deal from the British Government was put on the table. According to O’Rawe, a conversation was held in Irish between Bik and another republican through the cell windows. O’Rawe claims that Bik suggested to another comrade that it was a deal that should be accepted. O’Rawe’s claim is a “total and absolute fiction”, says McFarlane. “There was no such deal.” According to McFarlane, the IRA prisoners were well prepared for false promises and the British clearly had no interest in a just resolution to the Hunger Strike.

Looking back again on the visit to the jail that morning, McFarlane referred to something Martin McGuinness had said in an interview when he asked what influence Margaret Thatcher exerted today compared to the long standing influence of Bobby Sands.

On the morning spent in the hospital wing of Long Kesh, he said; “This morning was very dignified, very emotional. Another hunger striker Sile Darragh, was there”. One striking feature of the Hunger Strike is that, after a quarter of a century, its impact is still felt. The events of that time projected onto the course of the struggle in a profound way, much as 1916 did. As Bik said, “The hunger strikers in the Blocks play as much of a role today as they did a quarter of a century ago. They are still part and parcel of the struggle.” And, as he stressed, so are the protesting women hunger strikers of Armagh.

Chatting in the kitchen of his Belfast office last Friday afternoon I asked Bik about his dreams before he got involved in Republicanism. “I wanted to be a musician,” he said. “I went out last night and heard a musician play and I’m not a musician”. Brendan/Bik Mc Farlane is no Mozart, but he has his own strengths. Asked what he thought of Bobby Sands he said: “He was of the strongest people I ever met.” When you look at Bik’s ability to ‘twig’, Bobby’s choice of replacement O/C in 1981 makes a lot of sense.

Legendary Volunteer dies on Hunger Strike

On 12 May 1981 at 5.43 pm, just seven days after the death of Bobby Sands, Hunger Striker Francis Hughes died. The South Derry man had endured 59 days on Hunger Strike. His sisters Noreen, Maria and Vera and brother Roger were by his bedside when he passed away.

Paying tribute to Hughes, the IRA said he was one of the bravest soldiers of the armed struggle against British rule.

Sinn Féin's Gerry Adams called on British Premier Margaret Thatcher to accept that her efforts to stare down the Hunger Strike had failed, and for Taoiseach Charles Haughey to end his silence which Adams said encouraged British intransigence.

Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich implored of Thatcher: "How many more Irishmen must go to their graves inside and outside before intransigence gives way to a constructive effort to find a solution?" In the United States, Senator Edward Kennedy decried Thatcher's intransigence whilst Boston City Council renamed the street on which the British consulate is located as Francis Hughes Street.

Speaking to *An Phoblacht* on the day before his son's death Francis Hughes' father told of his last visit to his dying son: "It's a terrible thing to see a young lad dying but amazingly he was in great spirits. His face was just yellow with eyes sunken. Just the same as a corpse lying there. I said do you see me Francis? He said I see the shape of you but I can't see your face. When he had gotten a wee sleep he chatted away and caught my hand and held it tight. I said to him, you're not too bad and he said ah now, tomorrow or Wednesday will see the end of it."

REACTION ON THE STREETS

The evening of Francis Hughes' death saw an upsurge in attacks by the IRA with the British army and RUC coming under fire across Belfast Riots, which had been raging since the death of Bobby Sands, intensified with nationalist youth across the Six Counties engaging crown forces with bricks and petrol bombs.



• **Legendary freedom fighter Francis Hughes, pictured during his capture by crown forces. Hughes lies badly injured, following a gun battle. He wears combat clothing and his hair has been dyed to conceal his identity**

In Dublin the most serious rioting since the 1972 burning of the British embassy occurred. Gardaí attacked a march going from the GPO to the British embassy in Ballsbridge with an indiscriminate baton charge.

Sinn Féin President Ruairí Ó Brádaigh castigated Taoiseach Charles Haughey on his inaction.

On the same evening in a sickening and deliberate act of murder, 14-year-old Julie Livingston was killed by a British army plastic bullet in Lenadoon, West Belfast. Francis Hughes' death was the impetus for an increased use of lethal, plastic bullets and injuries received from them rose dramatically across the Six

Counties after 12 May.

LEGENDARY FIGURE

Francis Hughes had been captured by the British on 16 March 1978 following a gun battle that killed an SAS soldier and left Hughes wounded in the leg. He had been branded the north's most wanted man by the RUC and was a legendary figure in his native South Derry and beyond. He had become involved in the armed struggle after witnessing the brutality of crown forces and experiencing it first hand with harassment and beatings. He had participated in the 1980 hunger strike and in 1981 he volunteered again and was accepted. In an open letter he

wrote to the people of south Derry about his decision to go on hunger strike he said: "I have no prouder boast than to say I am Irish and have been privileged to fight for the Irish people and for Ireland. If I have a duty I will perform it to the full with the unshakeable belief that we are a noble race and that chains and bounds have no part in us."

He was a cousin of Thomas McElwee who, tragically, would also die on the 1981 Hunger Strike.

FUNERAL

In death, the legendary South Derry volunteer instilled as much fear amongst crown forces as he had in life. The RUC hijacked his funeral cortege to prevent it passing through West Belfast on its sad return to County Derry. An RUC man was observed spitting on the coffin.

At the funeral, there were poignant scenes as Francis Hughes' father, Joseph, approached an RUC cordon barring access to Bellaghy. His appeal to be allowed bring his son to St Mary's church fell on deaf ears and the cortege was forced to take a circuitous route. Earlier, the IRA had bid farewell to their comrade with a volley of shots over his Tricolour-draped coffin outside the Hughes family home.

The funeral was marked by a day of mourning with businesses in nationalist areas shutting down and vigils and rallies occurring the length and breadth of the country. There were also numerous rallies abroad.

Chairing the graveside ceremony was South Derry republican John Davey, a friend of Francis Hughes, who was later murdered by a British pseudo gang. The graveside oration was delivered by Martin McGuinness.

Addressing a crowd of thousands McGuinness paid tribute to the bravery of Francis Hughes both as an active IRA Volunteer and as a political prisoner and a hunger striker. Outlining the history of the blanket protest and its escalation into the hunger strikes he rejected British propaganda which sought to portray republicans as sectarian and the IRA as criminals. McGuinness went on to say that the Hunger Strike had challenged the political and religious leadership of the country and they had been found wanting. John Hume and Charles Haughey had been whipped into line by Thatcher.



• Volunteers of Óglaigh na hÉireann fire a volley in salute to their deceased comrade; (below) The Hughes family; (bottom) A crowd of thousands at the funeral heard Martin McGuinness declare of Francis Hughes: "They could not break him. They will not break us"



Concluding with a moving tribute to Francis Hughes McGuinness said: "His body lies here beside us but he lives in the little streets of Belfast, he lives in the Bogside, he lives in East Tyrone, he lives

in Crossmaglen. He will always live in the hearts and minds of unconquerable Irish republicans in all these places. They could not break him. They will not break us."

McCREESH AND O'HARA DIE ON THE SAME DAY

Thursday, 21 May 1981, witnessed the deaths of two more Hunger Strikers. Raymond McCreesh passed away at 2.30am. Later that evening Patsy O'Hara died.

A Mass had been celebrated at Raymond McCreesh's bedside on Wednesday evening by his brother Fr Brian McCreesh. He was semi-conscious and appeared to show some sign of recognition but died just a few hours later. His remains were returned to his beloved Camlough in South Armagh for the funeral the following Saturday.

Leaving the family home in St Malachy's Terrace, the cortege stopped briefly at the lane outside the house where it was joined by a honour guard of IRA Volunteers, Cumann na mBan and Na Fianna Éireann. Led by a lone piper, the cortege paused to allow Raymond McCreesh's comrades fire a final salute over the Tricolour-draped coffin.

At St Malachy's church loudspeakers broadcast the Mass to a huge crowd of mourners. Mass was concelebrated by five priests led by Raymond's brother Brian. In his sermon Fr Wolsey criticised the British for selectively quoting from the Pope's 1979 Drogheda speech: "Violent means must not be used, the Pope says, to change injustices. But neither must violent means be used to keep injustices. The Pope has said so. The first passage has been over quoted; the second one rarely heard."

After the Mass, the funeral procession made its way the short distance to the cemetery where, in sight of the family home, the coffin was lowered into the grave. Chairing the graveside ceremonies was South Armagh republican Joe McElhaw. Defying a British exclusion order, Sinn Féin President Ruairí Ó Brádaigh delivered the oration. Paying tribute to McCreesh, he said: "We are gathered here to perform a last, sad but proud duty for that great Irishman and human being, Raymond McCreesh." He detailed McCreesh's progression from Na Fianna Éireann to the IRA and his capture in 1976 after a gunbattle with the British army. He had fought imperialism, which was the "enemy of mankind".

Ó Brádaigh outlined the area's proud history of resistance to British rule. He accused the British Government of callously murdering McCreesh and his comrades but added that British policy was now in ribbons. "Where now is their Ulsterisation? Where



• Raymond McCreesh's coffin, flanked by an IRA guard of honour is shouldered by his brothers Malachy and Brian; (below) IRA Firing party



now was their normalisation? Where now is their criminalisation?" he asked.

"These hungry and starving men in their beds of pain, by superior moral strength, have pushed the British government to the wall and have shamed them in the eyes of the world", said Ó Brádaigh.

Comparing the Hunger Strikers to Terrence Mac Swiney, the Lord Mayor of Cork who died on Hunger Strike in 1921, he pledged that republicans would continue their resistance to British rule.

PATSY O'HARA

Patsy O'Hara passed away at 11.39pm. By

his bedside were his father James, his sister Elizabeth and family friend James Daly. Speaking of his final moments his sister said: "My Father called, Patsy! And he sort of, as if he recognised the voice, sort of just tried to move his head, just one last time. And then he died. And as he was dying his face just changed, he had a very, very distinct smile on his face which I will never forget. I said, you're free Patsy. You have won your fight and you're free. And he was cold then."

Former leader of INLA prisoners in the H-Blocks, O'Hara came from a staunchly republican family and was much respected in his native Derry. The night of his death saw sustained rioting on the streets of Derry. The RUC replied with volleys of plastic bullets, murdering 45-year-old Harry Duffy in the process. Two days earlier they had murdered 12-year-old Carol Ann Kelly in Twinbrook.

Repeating their actions with the Francis Hughes cortege, the RUC hijacked O'Hara's remains. Long Kesh Governor Stanley Hilditch had informed the family that the remains had been taken to Omagh where they could be collected. About 4.30am the RUC phoned Derry with a message. "If you want to collect this thing you had better do it before daylight." They were



determined to prevent a daytime cortege. In a sickening development it emerged, after the body was finally retrieved by the grieving family, that the RUC ghouls had mutilated the body.

The funeral, the biggest in the city since the Bloody Sunday funerals, was addressed by a number of people. Chairing the proceedings was James Daly, husband of murdered anti-H-Block activist Miriam Daly. He offered his condolences to the family before introducing a member of the INLA leadership who read out a statement. Patsy's brother Seán then addressed the mourners. He compared Charles Haughey to Pontius Pilate and said the Hunger Strikes were an important victory for the cause of Irish freedom as the whole world could now see the callousness of the British.

Gerry Roche of the IRSP detailed the harsh experiences, North and South, endured by O'Hara during his short life. Commending his revolutionary spirit Roche said the attempt to criminalise the prisoners was an attempt to criminalise the entire struggle. O'Hara had recognised this and had resisted courageously. "He believed that it is no crime to fight the British occupation forces, but the duty of every Irish man and Irish woman," Roche said.

An INLA firing party fired a volley of shots over the coffin in a final salute to their dead comrade.

The deaths of McCreesh and O'Hara in the H-Blocks took place against an increasingly violent backdrop outside the prison. The IRA was mounting increasingly effective military operations against the British army, with five British soldiers killed in an ambush at Altnaveigh, South Armagh.

Crown forces attempted to crush rising nationalist anger. In addition to the plastic bullet deaths of Carol Ann Kelly and Harry Duffy, there was a wave of indiscriminate plastic bullet attacks that left

• **Funeral of Patsy O'Hara, Derry; (below) Patsy O'Hara pictured in his prison cell just one week before he died and on the day before Francis Hughes' funeral. The film was smuggled out but unfortunately the camera and a miniature tape recorder were apparently discovered by the prison authorities two days later in the cell of Raymond McCreesh**



hundreds injured, many of them seriously, including Paul Lavelle (15) from Ardoyne who was left in a coma.

The Hunger Strike was causing a huge outcry in the 26 Counties and Taoiseach Charles Haughey was forced to give the impression of doing something, particularly in light of an impending election on 11 June. He promoted as a serious initiative an intervention by the European Commission on Human Rights which amounted to nothing.

Just two days before her brother died, Haughey met with Patsy O'Hara's sister Elizabeth, during which he gave the impression that a development involving Europe was imminent and asked her for a contact number at which she could be reached. The following morning she got a call summoning her to Government Buildings. Haughey was still pushing the Commission angle but told Elizabeth that Patsy would have to come off the Hunger Strike to give time for a complaint to be made to the Commission. It was clear at this point that the Commission was just a diversion. Elizabeth O'Hara broke off all contact with Haughey.

There was mounting anger on the streets in the 26 Counties. Although the H-Block committee was determinedly non-violent as a matter of strategy, there was a wave of incidents across the state such as the 23 May torching of a bus belonging to English fishermen in Ballinamore, County Leitrim. In a vain attempt to distract from the real issue a Government summit was called with much fanfare to discuss "escalating violence".

A statement from the Catholic Cardinal, Tomás Ó Fiaich said: "Raymond McCreesh was born in a community that has always proclaimed that it is Irish, not British. When the northern troubles began he was barely 12, a very impressionable age at which to learn discrimination. Those who protested against it were harassed and intimidated. Then followed Burntolllet, The Bogside, Bombay Street and Bloody Sunday in Derry all before he was 15." The Cardinal went on to say that McCreesh would never have been in jail had it not been for the abnormal political situation. "Who was entitled to judge him?" he asked.

The 20 May local elections in the Six Counties saw a number of H-Block candidates elected. Amongst them was Raymond McCreesh's brother, Oliver.

International support for the Hunger Strikers soared. There were daily demonstrations in the United States. Thousands marched in protest through New York on the Saturday after the deaths of McCreesh and O'Hara. Amongst the countries that saw demonstrations, many of them large, were Australia, Norway, Greece, France and Portugal.

The deaths of Raymond McCreesh and Patsy O'Hara, who had started the strike on the same day, died on the same day and were born within a fortnight of each other in February 1957, marked a critical escalation in the prison struggle, as well as the struggle outside the prisons walls.

Four more join Hunger Strike

During the month of May 1981 more republican prisoners joined the historic H-Block Hunger Strike as replacements for Bobby Sands, Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreech and Patsy O'Hara.

JOE McDONNELL

The fourth man to join the Hunger Strike was Joe McDonnell, a 30-year-old married man with two children, from Lenadoon in West Belfast. A close friend of Bobby Sands, he was captured with him and replaced him on the Hunger Strike.

Joe and his wife Goretti, whilst living with Goretti's sister, were forced out of their Lenadoon home in 1970 by loyalists as the British army looked on. In 1972 McDonnell was badly beaten by the British army and subsequently interned, first on the Maidstone prison ship and later in Long Kesh.

On his release several months later McDonnell immediately joined the IRA and was active in the Andersonstown area. His spell of freedom was short though and he was again interned in 1973.

In October 1976 he was sentenced to 14 years in jail for IRA activities. He refused to put on the prison uniform.

BRENDAN McLAUGHLIN

The replacement for the late Francis Hughes on the Hunger Strike was another County Derry republican, Brendan McLaughlin. Twenty-three-year old Blanketman McLaughlin, imprisoned in H-Block 5, joined the Hunger Strike on 14 May.

McLaughlin was a single man from Greysteel in North Derry. He was reared on a small farm. His father died when he was 12 years of age. After leaving school at 15 he worked in a petrol station and then on building sites. In 1970, at the age of 18, he joined the civil rights struggle and after

the introduction of internment in August 1971 he became actively involved in the republican struggle.

In September 1972, he was forced to go 'on the run' and went to live in the 26 Counties. His mother died on Christmas Eve 1973.

In May 1974 he was arrested out of the house he was living in, charged with withholding information and sentenced to four months in Portlaoise Prison. In late 1974 he returned to Derry.

In May 1976, after a three hour siege at his house in North Derry, he, his 31-year-old brother Michael and Tom McFeely, who was on the first hunger strike in 1980, were arrested.

When Brendan was being interrogated in Limavady RUC barracks he refused to eat or drink or co-operate in any way and was badly beaten.

In February 1977 Brendan was sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment. He immediately went on the Blanket and forfeited his brief monthly visit rather than wear the prison uniform.

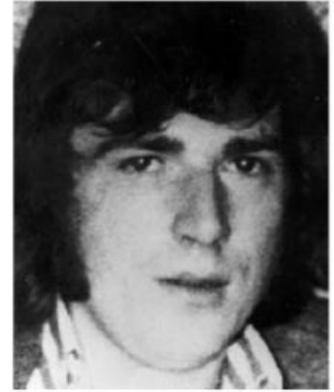
KIERAN DOHERTY

Belfast IRA Volunteer 25-year-old Kieran Doherty joined the Hunger Strike on 22 May, as a replacement for Raymond McCreech. He had spent seven of the previous ten years imprisoned. In 1980 he was amongst those 30 prisoners who went on hunger strike for four days prior to the ending of the original strike.

Kieran was born on 16 October, 1955 in Andersonstown. His father Alfie had an uncle, Ned Maguire, who took part in the famous IRA roof-top escape from Belfast's Crumlin Road jail in 1943. His son, also Ned, was an internee in Cage Five of Long Kesh in 1974, when he took part in the mass escape from the camp during which Hugh Coney was



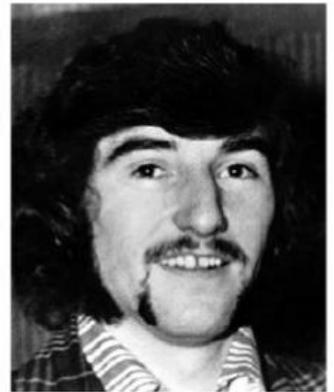
• Joe McDonnell



• Brendan McLaughlin



• Kieran Doherty



• Kevin Lynch

shot dead by the British army. Ned's sisters (and Kieran's second cousins), Dorothy Maguire, aged 19, and Maura Meehan, aged 30, were shot dead by the British army on 23 October, 1971.

Another relative of Doherty's, his uncle Gerry Fox, was part of the famous Crumlin Road jail 'football team', who escaped from the jail by climbing over the wall in 1972.

Kieran himself had never displayed much of an interest in politics until internment. He joined Fianna Éireann in the autumn of 1971. On 6 October, 1972, the British army came to arrest Kieran, despite his father's objection that Kieran was under 17. His father eventually got him released after waking up the sexton of St. Agnes' chapel and obtaining Kieran's birth certificate.

When they tried again Doherty managed to escape across the border, only to make his way back to Belfast at the beginning of 1973. A week or so later, he was arrested and interned in Long Kesh. He was among the last internees released in 1975. He immediately reported back to the

IRA. He had many narrow escapes before his capture in August 1976. He was charged with possession of firearms and explosives and commandeering the car and received 18 years.

Kieran joined the blanket protest immediately. He was constantly in conflict with the warders.

KEVIN LYNCH

Kevin Lynch, who replaced Patsy O'Hara, was born on 25 May, 1956 and lived in the small village of Park just outside Dungiven. He was a keen GAA enthusiast. He witnessed at first hand, crown forces brutality and joined the local sticky controlled Fianna Éireann. Later became involved with an independent active service unit until he emigrated to England in 1973. Upon his return he joined the INLA around August 1976. Arrested in November of that year, he was jailed for ten years. He suffered much brutality at the hands of the warders but was steadfast in his opposition to criminalisation.

No one was surprised by his decision to go on Hunger Strike which he did on 23 May.



BY SEÁN CROWE TD

A time that changed us all forever

Seán Crowe, now Sinn Féin TD for Dublin South-West, recalls the impact the 1981 Hunger Strike had on him and on many young people throughout Ireland.

“

We knew within weeks that the Brits were not serious about breaking the impasse and another hunger strike would be embarked on

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I had been involved in the early protests around the conditions in the H-Blocks and Armagh Prison. Coming from Dublin I didn't personally know any of the prisoners but had taken part in marches and protests throughout Ireland. Most of the prisoners were in their late teens or early '20s. It was easy to empathise with someone around your own age.

The prison conditions they had to endure were barbaric. The first hunger strike in 1980 had ended when a deal was brokered which had the potential, if goodwill had been shown, to meet the prisoners' five demands.

We knew within weeks that the Brits were not serious about breaking the impasse and another hunger strike would be embarked on. I don't remember where I was or what I was doing when it was announced that Bobby Sands would be the first to go on hunger strike. You're supposed to remember these things but for me it's a blank. I do know that I had been dreading such a terrible announcement.

I was given the job of travelling around parts of Ireland establishing Youth Against

H-Block/Armagh groups. We lobbied politicians, church people, sports groups, youth groups and anyone who would listen. We organised action groups in jobs. We held vigils and marches and delivered hundreds of thousands of leaflets and posters throughout Ireland. The politicians, newspaper commentators and opinion makers – the cosy consensus that made up Irish society in the '80s – with some notable exceptions were against the prisoners. Ireland was polarised. You were either for the prisoners or with Thatcher.

Maybe that's too simple but that's how it felt. When you got talking to people on a one-to-one level there was always sympathy there, if not outright support. I suppose some were nervous about expressing support, frightened of the potential of getting hassled by the Special Branch. At that time if you were active even on the periphery of things, they called to your home, to your job, constantly followed you, even out socialising. They stopped your friends and family in an attempt to try and isolate you. You were guaranteed a visit to your home if not a raid,

MARTIN HURSON

Martin Hurson was born on 12 September 1956, in the townland of Aughnaskea, Cappagh, near Dungannon. He was part of a very close and good humoured family. Described as a quiet, religious, and easy-going young man, he nevertheless, before his arrest, enjoyed social pursuits such as dancing and going

to the cinema. He enjoyed the company of other people, among whom he had a well earned reputation for being a practical joker and a bit of a comedian.

Martin was arrested and taken to Omagh RUC barracks on 11 November 1976. He was badly, and professionally, tortured in Omagh for two days. He was beaten about the



head, back and testicles, spread-eagled against a wall and across a table,

slapped, punched and kicked. He was eventually forced to give an incriminating statement.

In November 1977, aided by perjured RUC evidence and totally ignoring clear evidence of torture, a Diplock court sentenced him to 20 years. He went straight on the blanket and joined the Hunger Strike on 29 May, replacing Brendan McLaughlin, who had to come off the strike due to a perforated ulcer on 27 May.

which caused huge problems particularly for young people whose parents didn't share their views.

I remember a march we held out to Charlie Haughey's mansion in Kinsealy. He was Taoiseach at the time and had up to then created a persona around himself about his strong republican credentials. Hundreds of young people took part in the march and I was told later that he informed Mrs. Sands and Marcella, Bobby's sister, that there was nothing he could do and that the people outside were responsible for Bobby's pending death. He was later to give Maggie Thatcher a silver teapot to mark the totality of relationships between Britain and Ireland.

We wore black armbands and badges everywhere, in school, in work and out socialising. I took part in a number of occupations. At the time there were a load of pirate radio stations in Dublin. These were some of the first to be occupied and broadcasts were sent out over the airwaves in support of the Hunger Strikers. Twenty four hours before Bobby was expected to die some of us occupied three radio stations in a row. We were frantic to get our message across.

One day we climbed on top of the engine of the Belfast train and were eventually removed by about three vanloads of Gardai in riot gear. We left the train station, and maybe it was because of nerves (the engine was turned on during the protest) or maybe it was because of the number of cops, but some of us were in bad need of a toilet. We walked a short distance down the street and turned into a pub on Talbot Street. The bright sparks in riot gear must have thought we were going to occupy the pub (God forbid!) and marched in after us. There was uproar in the pub with everyone except the owner and Garda Superintendent having a laugh at the unique situation.

There were few enough moments of levity.

I suppose looking back I was naive; I really thought we could save their lives. But Thatcher wasn't for compromise. It was victory or nothing. I think she believed her own propaganda and the bile coming from her securocrats. This was the IRA's final card, they claimed. Republicanism was on the rack.

The Irish and British establishment combined with the media peddled the story that there was no support. But I remember vividly the day Bobby Sands died, that shops, building sites, factories, buses, everything closed down as a mark of respect. There wasn't a town city or village in Ireland that was not affected. The centre of Dublin was like a ghost town. The media and some politicians tried to explain away this active support by saying that people were intimidated into



• Demonstration in Dublin following the death of Bobby Sands

closing or leaving their jobs. It was a pathetic and disingenuous claim based on nothing but lies.

Unfortunately it was effective to a degree because the support of workers throughout Ireland for the Hunger Strikers has largely been airbrushed from history and memory. It was at a time of high unemployment and low wages yet working people risked a sacking to show their support.

Thousands travelled from all over the country to the funerals. I went to all of the Hunger Strikers' funerals. It was heartbreaking - the grief and anger building up inside you and the hurt and pain that was tying your insides in knots.

I remember the attack on the cortege at Joe Mc Donnell's funeral by the Brits and RUC as we walked to Milltown Cemetery. You could see plastic bullets flying and bouncing over our heads as they tried to arrest the Army colour party; the crowd running at the Brits, attacking them with bare fists and anything that was lying around as they tried to surround a house. I picked up a stick that was lying on the ground and went running up the road after them. My father was screaming at me that they would shoot me and say the stick was a gun. Young people with sticks and stones taking on a modern army - how often have we seen that over the years since then on our TV screens?

It's hard to believe that it's 25 years later. It just doesn't seem that long. The images and emotions are still too fresh. The weeks and months are jumbled together. They marked all of us differently and, then again, maybe not that differently. We lived through a time that changed us all forever. Politically and emotionally it was like I crossed over from a child to an adult, not realising the changes at the time and never being able to go back.

“

I suppose some were nervous about expressing support, frightened of the potential of getting hassled by the Special Branch. At that time if you were active even on the periphery of things, they called to your home, to your job, constantly followed you, even out socialising. They stopped your friends and family in an attempt to try and isolate you

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THE HUNGER STRIKE ELECTION



• Paddy Agnew's mother Jean leaves Dundalk Town hall following the election result

The 26 County general election of June 1981 provided the protesting prisoners in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh with an opportunity to demonstrate the wide level of public support for the Hunger Strikers and the 5 Demands.

Accordingly nine republican prisoners were put forward as election candidates and in a stunning victory for the anti-H Block/Armagh campaign two of them were elected to the Dáil while others attracted very significant support at the polls.

Combined with the election of Bobby Sands in Fermanagh/South Tyrone during the Westminster election, the result demonstrated that the British strategy of criminalisation was in tatters and had been rejected by nationalist Ireland.

In Cavan/Monaghan Hunger Striker Kieran Doherty with 9,121 first preference votes was elected, just 303 votes short of government minister and sitting Fianna Fáil TD John Wilson. The result flew in the face of media predictions that Doherty would secure a maximum of 5,000 first preferences.

The count had gone into a second day before Kieran Doherty was declared elected. Speaking on his behalf, his election agent and Cavan town Sinn Féin councillor Charlie Boylan told supporters that the victory was "a clear indication of the con-

cern of a great many Irish people at the sad situation which exists in the Northern part of our country and more especially in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh itself."

In Louth, another H-Block prisoner, Blanket Man Paddy Agnew, was elected with a first preference vote of 8,368 votes. Fianna Fáil had complacently dismissed Agnew and the party was genuinely shocked by the outcome. Agnew had been arrested by British forces on the southern side of Carlingford Lough by a British military patrol boat. The refusal of the Irish Government to protest this

breach of sovereignty had aroused much local anger.

There had been widespread support for the Hunger Strikers in the Louth constituency, with Dundalk totally shut down by anti-H-Block industrial action on several occasions. This had prompted local Fine Gael councillor and general election candidate Brendan McGahon to blame the success of such actions on intimidation but Agnew's victory exposed this for the lie that it was. McGahon was eliminated on the fourth count after receiving virtually no transfers. His defeat was largely attributed to his open hostility to the republican prisoners.

Local election workers estimated that the vast majority of the constituency's 3,000 first time voters had voted for Paddy Agnew, indicating the widespread support amongst the youth, not just in Louth, but across the country.

As in the Cavan/Monaghan victory it was Fianna Fáil that paid the price by losing a seat. The H-Block election victories and the huge support given to other H-Block candidates denied Charles Haughey's Fianna Fáil an overall majority in Leinster House and was a political price for the government's spineless attitude throughout the Hunger Strike.

In Sligo/Leitrim, the third border constituency, Hunger Striker Joe McDonnell received a very impressive 5,634 first preference votes but failed to take a seat. When his votes were redis-



• (clockwise) Paddy Agnew, Tom McAllister and Tony O'Hara



• H-Block/Armagh Committee election press conference in Dublin attended by members of the Hunger Strikers' families

tributed 2,000 went to Fianna Fáil and nearly 3,000 went to Fine Gael, demonstrating the broad base from which prisoners were receiving support. The desperate economic plight of Leitrim at the time and a determination to be locally represented - there had been no one from Leitrim elected in the previous election - saw two candidates returned from Leitrim, one for Fianna Fáil and one for Fine Gael. Campaigners believed that this was a significant factor in the failure to have Joe McDonnell elected. The result was nevertheless very significant and again indicative of the widespread support that the Hunger Strike had aroused.

Another Hunger Striker, Martin Hurson, stood in Longford/Westmeath where he demonstrated that, as in Sligo/Leitrim, the Hunger Strikers drew support from a wide base. The largest proportion of his transfers actually went to Fine Gael. He had attracted 4,573 first preference votes which represented 10% of first preference votes and was a very strong showing. Hurson remained in the race until the

sixth count, when he was eliminated and his transfers shared out.

In Kerry North former Hunger Striker Sean McKenna received 3,860 first preferences, showing that support for the Hunger Strikers was not just confined to the border area. Again his transfers went across party lines. Significantly Des Foley was returned for Fianna Fáil over the outgoing Fianna Fáil TD. Foley had been a prominent member of the local anti-H-Block/Armagh Committee. Foley's record of support for the Hunger Strikers played a significant role in his election.

In Waterford, Hunger Striker Kevin Lynch got 3,337 first preferences. The vast majority of his transfers went to the Workers' Party, indicating how that party's supporters were rejecting its negative stance on the Hunger Strike.

Transfers from Fine Gael's Austin Deasy pushed Lynch above the Fianna Fáil contender and he remained in the running for two more counts after the Fianna Fáil man had been eliminated.

The constituency of Dublin West provided a surprising 3,034 first preference votes for Blanket Man Tony O'Hara, brother of the late Hunger Striker Patsy. This placed him at a respectable seventh of 15 candidates. Support was particularly high in working class areas such as Ballyfermot. Workers' Party leader Tomás Mac Giolla was defeated, with the largest amount of his transfers going to Tony O'Hara.

O'Hara reached half the quota before being eliminated, leaving his supporters to wonder what could have been achieved if the local campaign had not been adversely affected by internal division.

Former Armagh Prison Hunger Striker and the only woman prisoner to stand as a candidate, Mairéad Farrell secured 2,751 first preference votes in the constituency of Cork North Central ahead of one Fine Gael candidate, one Workers' Party candidate and one Independent.

This was a significant achievement in an area far from the North and with



• Hunger Strike demo at Leinster House on the first sitting day of Dáil following the 1981 general election

only single channel TV news provided by RTÉ's enthusiastic implementation of Section 31 political censorship legislation that prevented republicans being interviewed in the broadcast media.

The humiliation of Fianna Fáil in Jack Lynch's former constituency was emphasised in that only their four candidates remained unelected when Farrell was eliminated, with two of them being elected on her transfers.

There was dissension within the anti-H-Block/Armagh camp in Clare which hampered the election campaign. Nevertheless Blanket Man Tom McAllister had a creditable result with 2,120 first preferences.

His transfers went mainly to Fianna Fáil, whose candidate, Bill Loughnane scraped in on the eleventh count.

In addition to the nine prisoner candidates, four other candidates stood on the anti-H-Block issue. In Dublin North Central Vincent Doherty of People's Democracy received 1,481 first preferences. Joe Harrington, also of People's Democracy, stood in Limerick East, gaining 844 first preferences. Paddy Healy of The League for a Workers' Republic ran in Dublin North East and got 1,063 first preferences and in Cork South West, the local H-Block Action Committee were early in the field with Sean Kelleher, who took 1,097 first preferences.

The anti-H-Block campaign had transformed the 26 County General Election, resulting in the defeat of the

Fianna Fáil government. Facing defeat, Haughey had made his strongest statement yet on the Hunger Strikes, placing the responsibility to find a solution firmly on the shoulders of the British. However, this was widely seen as cynical politicking, offering an excuse to three independents – Neil Blaney, – John O'Connell and John Loftus to support him. As it turned out only Blaney offered his support.

When the shape of the new government finally emerged it was to be a Fine Gael/Labour coalition, supported by one Independent: the anti-republican Limerick TD Jim Kemmy. Labour had suffered serious setbacks during the election and many put this down to the party leadership being out of touch with its base on the issue of the Hunger Strikes: Mass defections in Louth had been echoed to a lesser extent around the country.

Although Fine Gael leader Garret Fitzgerald immediately began making noises about the need to find a solution to the Hunger Strike, even going as far as to say it was his most urgent priority, many commentators felt that this was just recognising the reality that the election had exposed. It was also felt that he saw an opportunity to eat into the base of the so called green wing of Charlie Haughey's Fianna Fáil who had clearly been drifting because of the Hunger Strike.

His appointment to the post of Minister for Post and Telegraphs may

have more accurately reflected what was in his heart however: Paddy Cooney, a vitriolic anti-republican from the infamous 1970s Fine Gael/Labour coalition, which witnessed the use of beating of republicans in custody by the 'Heavy Gang'. That Cooney was to be given responsibility for broadcasting and the implementation of Section 31 censorship at such a sensitive time did not augur well for the future. It was perhaps indicative of the corrosion that Section 31 had engendered within RTÉ that the anchor man of the *Today Tonight* current affairs programme, Brian Farrell, felt compelled to launch into a sycophantic defence of Cooney in response to criticisms in Magill magazine.

The election results had rattled the establishment who had failed to realise the levels of support for the prisoners. It had also severely embarrassed the British Government internationally by further giving the lie to their criminalisation policy.

The vice chair of the SDLP, Seamus Mallon, had been forced to declare that it was highly unlikely it would contest the Fermanagh/South Tyrone seat left vacant by the death of Bobby Sands and the Catholic bishops were openly expressing their worries about the rise in support for republicanism. They had issued a blatantly one sided statement calling on the Hunger Strikers "and those who direct them" to reflect deeply on the "evil of their actions". This gave comfort to the British Government who described it as helpful while once again re-iterating that there would be no compromise with the prisoners. The irony was that the statement had been issued to exhort the prisoners to support proposals by the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace (ICJP) to end the Hunger Strike. It was in stark contrast to a statement by Fr Pierre of the French Commission for Justice and Peace who had said that "The courage of the Hunger Strikers illustrates the nobility of their cause."

The proposals were at best woolly and in any case the British ignored them, prompting Cardinal Ó Fiaich to point out that once again the British had chosen to pick out only what suited them.

Reacting to the Bishop's statement the then Sinn Féin Vice-President Gerry Adams said the bishops "failed to mention the presence of the British government and its military forces as



being in any way instrumental or responsible for the situation. That the Irish bishops making comment about political instability in Ireland have omitted to do this or to examine the effects of the British-imposed partition of our country cannot be but regretted by many Irish people."

In the immediate aftermath of the elections the British Government felt compelled to send two senior Stormont civil servants to the United

States in a vain attempt to offset the negative impact the Hunger Strike was having on its image. A visit to the US by Britain's Prince Charles had been a shambles, even according to the rabidly pro-Tory Sunday Express. Also at this time a US visit by British Princess Margeret was called off, an open admission of the damage that had been inflicted.

All this coincided with a hugely successful tour of the States by John Sands, Elizabeth O'Hara and Malachy McCreesh, all relatives of three of the deceased Hunger Strikers. The election results had clearly invigorated support for the prisoners in America. In Canada, also, ex-Blanket Man Fra McCann was finding increasing support as he toured the country and the prisoners' election victories were a big factor.

In Britain the effect the prison protest was having on the Labour Party was best evidenced by the raft of constituency party organisations which had adopted a position of calling for British troops to be withdrawn from Ireland. On 25 June the 'Don't let the Irish prisoners die Committee' announced that a wide range of trade union, journalistic, labour and theatrical people had signed its petition

on the issue. Meanwhile pickets on the offices of MPs were mounted. Also on 25 June, Prince Charles was reminded of his recent trip to New York when 40 Hunger Strike protestors greeted him on a visit to Central Middlesex Hospital.

Republican morale was boosted at this time also by an increasingly effective and intense IRA campaign. Crown forces were being hit all across the Six Counties with gun, bomb and mortar attacks.

On 10 June republicans throughout Ireland were ecstatic when four IRA volunteers shot their way to freedom from Crumlin Road Prison in Belfast. The morale boost was amplified when one of them, Dingus Magee, turned up giving a defiant victory salute from the podium at Bodentown on 21 June.

All these events occurred against the backdrop of a situation where the condition of Hunger Striker Joe McDonnell was deteriorating rapidly. Unable now to leave his bed unaided, he could only be moved about the prison hospital in a wheelchair. He had gone from 15 stone to eight stone and was unable to open his eyes without feeling nauseated. Doctors had made it clear to his family that time was running out.

THOMAS McELWEE JOINS STRIKE

The tenth republican to join the Hunger Strike was 23-year-old IRA Volunteer Thomas McElwee, from Bellaghy, South Derry. He had been imprisoned since December 1976, following a premature explosion in which he lost an eye. He was a first cousin of Francis Hughes, who died after 59 days on Hunger Strike. They were close friends and lived less than a half mile apart in the staunchly nationalist village of Bellaghy.

McElwee, the fifth of 12 children, was born in 1957. He joined Fianna Eireann when he was only 14, and subsequently joined the

independent unit led by his cousin, Francis Hughes, which concentrated on defence of the local area and ambushes of British forces, before it was recruited in its entirety into the IRA.

The years before Thomas' capture in October '76 were active ones in the South Derry area with a high level of IRA activity against British forces who became reluctant to wander into the country lanes surrounding Bellaghy.

During this time he went to Ballymena training centre to begin an apprenticeship as a motor mechanic.

However, harassment from loyalists forced him to leave and he then went to work with a local mechanic. Like many young men, whenever Thomas went out he was liable to be stopped for lengthy periods of time along empty country roads, searched, threatened, and abused. There were also house raids. The McElwees' home was first raided in 1974, and Thomas was arrested under Section 10, for three days.

Following his conviction McElwee returned to the blanket protest he had joined immediately after his trial. Speaking of his decision to join the



Hunger Strike his mother said: "I know Thomas and Benedict (Thomas' brother) would be determined to stand up for their rights. In the Blocks one will stand for another. If this Hunger Strike isn't settled one way or another they'll all go the same way."

Thomas McElwee embarked on the Hunger Strike on 8 June 1981.

Irish governments cowered before Thatcher

BY MÍCHEÁL MacDONNCHA

We are told that a framed picture of Liam Mellows was one of the few treasured possessions to be seen in the home of Bobby Sands in Twinbrook during his brief period of freedom after his release from the cages of Long Kesh and before his imprisonment in the H-Blocks. There is a resonance between the words of Mellows in his speech against the Treaty that partitioned Ireland, a few months before his execution by the Free State Government, and the words of Bobby Sands in his hunger strike diary.

Mellows spoke prophetic words in Dáil Éireann when he said:

"The time will inevitably come, if this Free State comes into existence, when you will have a permanent government in this country, and permanent governments in any country have a dislike to being turned out, and they will seek to fight their own corner before anything else. Men will get into positions, men will hold power and men who get into positions and hold power will desire to remain undisturbed and will not want to be removed, or will not take a step that will mean removal in case of failure."

Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour were all in government in the 26 Counties during the growing crisis in the H-Blocks and Armagh Prison from 1976 to 1980. A Fianna Fáil government was in power



• Liam Mellows

during the 1980 hunger strike and during the fast to death of the first four hunger strikers in 1981. The remaining six, including Kieran Doherty, TD for Cavan-Monaghan, died during the term of office of the Fine Gael/Labour coalition. The unvarying chorus from those parties, from the Roman Catholic hierarchy and from the establishment media, was for the prison protest to end, supposedly in order to 'facilitate' a solution. Of course it was conveniently forgotten that the prisoners had endured over four years of horren-

dous conditions and had shown their willingness to reach a negotiated settlement with the British Government over prison conditions before they embarked on hunger strike. During that time the silence of Irish governments of all parties was deafening.

In Portlaoise Prison the IRA prisoners, after much conflict - including hunger strikes - had earlier achieved conditions equivalent to those being sought by their comrades in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh. It was politically expedient for the Irish Government to concede those conditions and for the prison administration to deal with the IRA command in the jail. But the Irish Government would not publicly use this argument with the British to achieve a solution to the H-Block crisis, because to do so would expose the hypocrisy of their own position. They never officially granted political status. They branded the IRA prisoners as terrorists. They imposed political censorship of the broadcast media which kept republican voices off RTÉ radio and television. Their political police, the Garda Special Branch, harried republican political activists and made it extremely difficult to mobilise support for the H-Block campaign.

Much of what we have learnt since proves that the primary motivation of successive Irish governments in that era

Eleventh man joins Hunger Strike

Paddy Quinn from Belleeks, South Armagh was the eleventh man to join the 1981 Hunger Strike. He was the third oldest in the family with four sisters and three brothers. After leaving school, where he was a classmate of IRA Volunteer Peter Cleary, murdered by the SAS in 1976, he worked as a draftsman with a consulting engineer in Newry.

The Quinn family was continually harassed by the British army and during an early morning raid in 1979 Paddy and his brothers were dragged from the

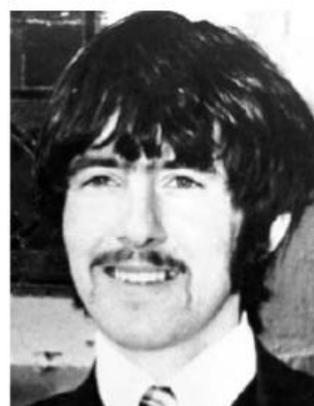
house and beaten up outside the door. Their mother was so traumatised from witnessing this that she collapsed. In an act of callousness her sons were prevented from calling the doctor for over a half an hour.

Again in 1979 another British army raid caused so much damage to the Quinn home that they were forced to sell all the livestock on their small holding and move to a council house in Newry.

On 2 March 1977 Paddy Quinn was sentenced to 14 years for attempting to kill British soldiers, 14 years for

possession of an armalite rifle and five years for membership of the IRA. He was captured 25 June 1976 on the same operation as fellow hunger striker Raymond McCreesh. In the years prior to their capture they had prevented the UDR gaining a foothold in South Armagh.

Immediately on his arrival in the H-Blocks he went 'on the blanket'. He described the Blocks as like being buried alive and two years before he went on Hunger Strike he had said the only reason the blanket men did not commence a



hunger strike was the pressure this would place on the families. As his brother said at the time: "He must have done a brave bit of thinking before he went on it."

Paddy Quinn went on hunger strike on 15 June 1981.

was to avoid any form of confrontation with the British and to keep their own population subdued and ignorant about what was happening in the Six Counties. When Dublin and Monaghan were bombed in May 1974 by a loyalist gang run by British agents, with the loss of 33 civilian lives, the Garda investigation, we now know, was closed after four months. Too much probing would reveal the hand of British intelligence which had also infiltrated the ranks of the Gardaí. An act of war by a foreign power within the jurisdiction of the Irish Government was covered up by the Irish Government itself. To this day the then-Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave refuses to testify to an Oireachtas committee about the response of the Irish Government to the bombing.

The prediction of Liam Mellows had proved correct. Men and women in powerful positions kept their grip on power at all costs. It was inexcusable but entirely predictable that two Irish governments would cower before Margaret Thatcher in 1981. In his prison diary, echoing Mellows, Bobby Sands described the Haugheys and FitzGerald as "political magpies and political opportunists and parasites" and as a "disgusting band of



• An effigy of Margaret Thatcher is burned on a bonfire in Belfast

ambitious, unscrupulous wasters". And in a phrase that speaks to 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland, Bobby wrote:

"Total equality and fraternity can't and never will be gained whilst these parasites

dominate and rule the lives of a nation. There is no equality in a society that stands upon the economic and political bog of only the strongest make it good or survive."

Michael Devine

The twelfth man to join the 1981 Hunger Strike was Michael Devine from Derry. He was the third INLA member to join the 1981 Hunger Strike and had assumed the role of INLA O/C in the Blocks after his friend and comrade, Patsy O'Hara, commenced his hunger strike and he continued in this position even when on the protest himself. Devine was born on 26 May 1954 into the slum that was Spring Town Camp on the outskirts of Derry, a former US military base in the second world war. The sectarian Derry council of the time used it to house impoverished nationalist families in the most appalling of

conditions. Mickey Devine's sister Margaret recalled that the huts were ok during the summer but leaked during the winter. One of Mickey's earliest memories was lying in bed with a stack of coats over him to protect him from the rain.

Perhaps a sign of the single mindedness and determination of his character was that he supported Glasgow Rangers throughout his youth, a difficult course of action for anyone growing up in nationalist Derry.

Devine was present at the Bloody Sunday massacre in Derry in February 1972 and it had a profound effect on him. He said at the time



"I will never forget standing in the Creggan chapel staring at the brown wooden boxes. We mourned and Ireland mourned with us."

Michael was assaulted by the RUC on two occasions in 1969, around the same time as the infamous assault on civil rights campaigners at Burntollet. He joined the Stickies in 1971 and people who remember him from that time recall an able soldier who was 'game for anything'. Increasingly disillusioned with the

Sticks he defected to the INLA in 1974 and was a founding member of that group in Derry city.

Devine fought the brave fight despite the overwhelming odds arrayed against his fledgling organisation. He was eventually captured after an arms raid in Donegal. He made it back to Derry only to be captured and eventually, on 20 June 1977, sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment. Devine immediately joined the blanket protest and 22 June 1981 he went on hunger strike.

It is an indication of the principled and committed nature of Michael Devine that at the commencement of his hunger strike in 1981 he had only 13 months of his sentence remaining.

British amend law to prevent prisoner candidates

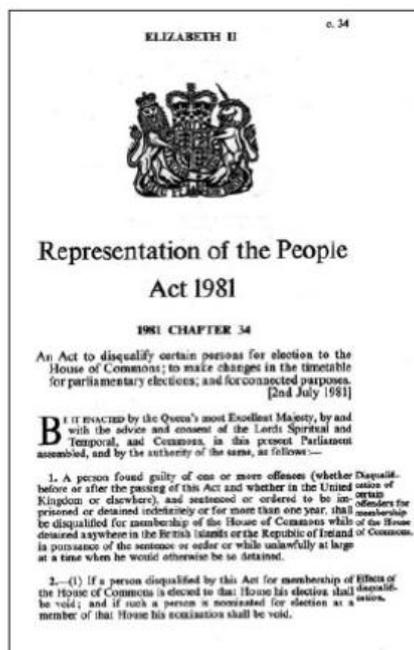
Following the election to the Westminster parliament of IRA Hunger Striker Bobby Sands, the British Government under Margaret Thatcher were determined to change electoral legislation so that the feat could not be repeated. In June 1981 it pushed ahead with an amendment to the Representation of the People Act.

The amendment was specifically designed to bar republican prisoners from standing in further elections. With Bobby Sands' death on hunger strike the Fermanagh South/Tyrone constituency was now due for another by-election. The amendment passed by 348 to 137 in Westminster after Labour allowed its MPs a free vote. A quote from English newspaper, The Guardian, summed up the situation:

"It would be a mistake to assume that because of its grandiose name this measure (The Representation of the People Act) is about representing anybody. Quite the contrary it has to do with non-representation of a certain class of people who are notoriously reluctant citizens of the United Kingdom - the IRA and its supporters."

On 25 June the bill was extended to cover prisoners in jails in the 26 Counties.

On 19 June British Direct Ruler Humphrey Atkins had astonished people when he announced he intended to start a new round of talks with the political parties. A sign of how much pressure the SDLP was under came in Seamus Mallon's prompt dismissal of



the notion, accusing Atkins of great insensitivity towards "a community which is being torn apart emotionally by the continuing tragedy of the hunger strikes".

The SDLP had still to call whether or not they would contest the Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-election. There was speculation that the republican prisoners would stand a substitute candidate. Fermanagh man Owen Carron was the name being mooted. He was a republican of long standing and had been Bobby Sands' election agent. The unionist candidate, Harry West, was expressing hope that the RUC would interview Carron about "his long standing association with the

IRA over many years" before any by-election was held.

In response to requests from, amongst others, Charles Haughey and The Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, Atkins ruled out any concessions to the Hunger Strikers. Speaking on 30 June he said that there would be no concessions towards the granting of the prisoners' Five Demands or political status.

Making vague noises about useful activity as opposed to work, and ordinary clothes as a substitute for prison clothes, and saying the hunger strike must end before anything could happen, the statement was welcomed by the SDLP and the Irish and British media. The ICJP went furthest of all stating that Atkins' statement together with "clarifications" received over a number of days had encouraged them in their efforts to reach a solution.

Rejecting the statement the H-Block prisoners said: "The purpose of this statement is to buy the silence of various genuinely concerned groups - such as The Irish Commission for Justice and Peace who have been lobbying the British for our five demands - by vaguely guaranteeing unspecified further developments of the prison regime at some unspecified time in the future.

"The Atkins statement cannot be taken as a sincere attempt - based on the need to find a solution and avoid any further tragedy - to end the hunger strike, for no one with even the most basic grasp of the situation can expect

LAURENCE McKEOWN BECOMES 13th HUNGER STRIKER

The 13th man to join the Hunger Strike was 24-year-old Laurence McKeown, a single man from Randalstown in South Antrim. He joined seven fellow Blanket men on the fast on 29 June.

At the time of the Hunger Strike his parents still lived in Randalstown and he had a younger brother and an older, married sister. McKeown attended Fairflough primary

school, St Oclan's secondary school, and Antrim Technical College, where he passed six O Levels in 1973. After leaving the college he worked as a labourer before becoming involved in

republican resistance in late 1973.

In June 1974, Laurence went 'on the run' to avoid possible arrest and lived for a while in the South, returning after about six months.



• Following the election of Bobby Sands, the British Government under Margaret Thatcher was determined to change electoral legislation so that feat could not be repeated

us to submit to such an ambiguous and distorted statement.

"To do so would be an insult to ourselves, our comrades who died, our steadfast relatives and supporters and all those bodies who want to see a just settlement to this issue.

"It is becoming blatantly obvious that the British are intent on creating a worsening situation if this statement is anything to go by. Even as one of our comrades lingers on death's doorstep we call on the British to climb down

from their high horse and act in a responsible manner and initiate meaningful dialogue with the prisoners to find a solution.

"Lastly we wish to state in unequivocal terms that contrary to what the British say, the Five Demands, which we are committed to obtaining, would go far to give back all prisoners dignity as human beings of which we are robbed at the present and we would welcome their introduction for all prisoners."

Taoiseach Charles Haughey said of the ongoing impasse: "I have explored every means of finding a solution on humanitarian grounds," before declaring "I intend to take a fresh initiative to find a solution, which will bring the present tragic and dangerous situation to an end." In the end this new initiative amounted to a statement criticising the intransigence of the British but not a lot else. Sinn Féin described it as four months and four deaths too late.

He was arrested on 2 August 1976 and taken to Castlereagh where he was interrogated for three days. He was charged, on the basis of an alleged verbal statement, with the attempt-

ed killing of an RUC man and causing explosions.

At his trial on 26 April 1977, McKeown was sentenced to life imprisonment and subsequently joined the blanket protest

in the H-Blocks.

In December 1980 he was among those 3 prisoners who were on hunger strike for four days prior to the ending of the original seven-strong strike.



The death of Joe McDonnell



• Joe McDonnell's wife Gorretti, his children and his brother Frankie pay their respects

IRA Volunteer and Hunger Striker Joe McDonnell from Lenadoon in Belfast passed away at 5.15am on Wednesday, 8 June after 61 agonising days on the Hunger Strike. His wife Gorretti had maintained an almost constant vigil by his side but with a callous act of disregard for her feelings when he died, the RUC called her in, ostensibly to identify the body.

From Wednesday evening through to the Friday morning McDonnell's body had lain in state in the family home. During this time thousands of people filed past the coffin to pay their respects to the fallen Volunteer.

In a reflection of the effect the Hunger Strike had throughout nationalist Ireland those filing past came from throughout the country. There were people from Dublin, Sligo, Leitrim, Crossmaglen, Tyrone and further afield.

Individuals who paid their respects included relatives of other Hunger Strikers – Rosaleen Sands, mother of Bobby, and Pauline McGeown, wife of Pat who was at that time on hunger strike. A particularly poignant visit was that of Jimmy Dempsey whose 16-year-old son John, a member of Fianna Éireann, had been shot dead by a British soldier in the disturbances following McDonnell's death. Also present was Joe McDonnell's brother Frankie – one of the longest serving blanket men who had been released for 12 hours in order to attend the funeral.

It was a measure of the ripple effect that the Hunger Strike, and more particularly British intransigence and brutality, were having on the nationalist community that at the same time another blanket man, Tommy Cosgrove, was out on temporary release to attend the funeral of his sister, Nora McCabe, killed by an RUC plastic bullet – also in the disturbances following the death of Joe McDonnell.

At midday the coffin was sealed and a Tricolour and the black beret and gloves of an IRA Volunteer were pinned to it. With British army helicopters hovering noisily and provocatively overhead the cortege moved off. Led by a lone piper, it made its way to Oliver Plunkett Church at the top of Lenadoon for Requiem Mass.

After the service the coffin was carried towards Milltown cemetery. McDonnell's three brothers were amongst those carrying the coffin and it was flanked by his wife Gorretti and their children Bernadette and Joseph and other members of the immediate family. When the cortege reached the Andersonstown Road the coffin was placed on trestles and an IRA firing came forward and rendered a final salute.

After observing a minute's silence the IRA firing party disappeared into a nearby garden. Then, a barrage of high velocity gunfire was heard as it became obvious that crown forces were attempting to kill or capture members of the IRA firing party.

Simultaneously the British army and RUC opened up on the cortege with a hail of plastic bullets amidst scenes of pandemonium and panic. In the assault, one of the mourners – a brother of then Sinn Féin Vice President Gerry Adams – was shot and seriously wounded. He was then taken to Musgrave Park military hospital.

Luckily, the head of the funeral cortege had moved on a few minutes before the attack and was making its way towards Milltown. Six IRA Volunteers took the coffin on their shoulders for the last leg of the journey to the Republican Plot.

Chairing the graveside proceedings was Eamon McCorry of Sinn Féin. He extended the sympathies of the Republican Movement to the family and went on to condemn the SDLP and the Dublin government who had not applied sufficient political pressure on British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. As a result, Thatcher was claiming that not one responsible person in Ireland was asking her to concede the prisoners' 5 demands.

After the blessing, conducted by Father Matthew Wallace, John Joe McGill, Chairperson of Leitrim County Council and election agent for McDonnell in the 26 County general elections, gave the oration. Speaking of the deceased Hunger Striker, he said: "He has died rather than debase the cause he served, rather than live with the forced tag of criminality on him. His courage is an inspiration, not only to his fellow prisoners, not only to the Irish people who admire such courage – the world stands in wonder and admiration, accepting that men such as Joe McDonnell are not criminals, but patriots."

McGill went on to lambaste British policy in Ireland, saying: "The policy of England and the English government towards Ireland down through the years has been one of jailing, shooting and hanging. Today, this week, their policy has changed somewhat. They have left over hanging and replaced it with the rubber bullet, plastic bullet and live round.

"Men, women and children are murdered in the streets of Belfast and Derry and in the occupied part of the north eastern Six Counties. I want to say here that the responsibility for this lies with the British government, and I say to the British Government that she has no right in our country and never had, and that the way forward is for her to withdraw her forces from the occu-



• IRA firing party lower their heads in honour of their comrade Joe McDonnell

ped part of our country and let the Irish people resolve their differences themselves.

"She is not here as a friend, she is here as a treacherous foe, and we recognise her as such."

In conclusion he said: "We will build Joe McDonnell a memorial, we will build so many of his comrades who are buried here a memorial, and their memorials will be the freedom and the unity of the Irish people."

Throughout the 26 Counties there were

numerous vigils, reflecting the growing anger of the population, and in the north, as previously mentioned, two people were killed by crown forces in the aftermath of Joe's death.

More worrying for the British was the continued and growing support abroad. In the United States there were numerous protests in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and San Francisco to name but a few. There were also numerous demonstrations in

Australia and New Zealand.

In France, lawyers formed a commission tasked with investigating conditions in the H-Blocks and French parliamentarians wrote to the Inter-Parliamentary Union in Geneva, asking it to take action in support of the two H-Block TDs.

In Italy, an incendiary bomb exploded on the roof of the British Consulate and there were protests and demonstrations in Belgium and Portugal.

PAT McGEOWN JOINS THE FAST

The Blanketman who replaced the late Joe McDonnell on the H-Block Hunger Strike was 25-year-old Pat McGeown from West Belfast.

Born on 3 September 1956, McGeown was a veteran of the armed struggle, having joined Na Fianna Éireann in 1970 at the age of 13. He was on active service on scores of occasions in his native city.

One of a family of five, with one older sister and three younger brothers, Pat was married with a six-year-old son in 1981 when he became the 14th man to

embark on the Hunger Strike.

McGeown was interned in Long Kesh in 1973 when he was just 16 years of age. He was released in 1974 and re-arrested in November 1975, charged with possession of explosives and with bombing the Europa hotel in 1975. He was on remand for seven months and in 1976 was handed down three concurrent sentences, two of 15 years and one of five years for IRA membership. McGeown was imprisoned with political status in the cages of Long Kesh.

In March 1978 he, along

with Brendan (Bik) McFarlane (O/C of the Blocks in 1981) and Larry Marley, Δ60 attempted to escape dressed as prison warders. They were caught before reaching the perimeter of the jail. McGeown was stripped of political status and put on the boards in the H-Block punishment block for 13 months where he immediately went on the blanket protest.

He was sentenced to six months' imprisonment for the escape attempt which he served in the H-Blocks with the other blanket men. However, when the six



months was up he was not transferred back to the cages but kept in the H-Blocks. By the time he replaced the late Joe McDonnell on hunger strike, McGeown had spent the previous three years and four months on the blanket.

Shock at death of Martin Hurson



• IRA guard of honour removes the coffin of Martin Hurson from trestles at the graveside

The death of IRA Volunteer Martin Hurson on 13 July 1981, after 46 days on the Hunger Strike, was unexpected. The suddenness of his death, coming only five days after that of Joe McDonnell, came as a shock, since two previous Hunger Strikers – Kieran Doherty and Kevin Lynch – had been almost a week on hunger strike ahead of Martin.

Hurson had replaced South Derry man Brendan McLaughlin who was forced to come off the Hunger Strike due to a burst stomach ulcer. His health, since being moved to the prison hospital, had been deteriorating at a far quicker rate than that of his comrades. Throughout the

Hunger Strike he had difficulty keeping down the required daily five pints of water. This problem caused him to hallucinate and he suffered from a degree of incoherence in his speech. He rapidly deteriorated towards the end.

Martin Hurson was the sixth H-Block Hunger Striker to die. Coming two weeks earlier than might have been expected, his death disproved the assessment that the Hunger Strikers were not in danger until around the 60-day stage. Even as the young Tyrone man was dying, the vindictiveness of the prison authorities never abated. Though the family had been sent for due to his serious condition, Hurson's

brother Francie was refused entry to the prison because he arrived after 10pm. He spent the night outside the H-Block gate as his brother Martin died inside.

The following morning Martin Hurson's body was removed by the RUC to Omagh hospital without consultation with the family. This move was designed to deny mourners en route the opportunity to pay their last respects. Despite this, over a hundred cars followed the hearse from Omagh to the Hurson home in Cappagh, County Tyrone. Relatives, friends and comrades carried the coffin for the last mile home, escorted by a uniformed guard of honour and followed by a large procession of sympathisers. Later at the Hurson home, guards of honour from the IRA, Cumann na mBan and Na Fianna Éireann stood to attention as unending lines of mourners filed past the coffin.

On Wednesday afternoon Martin Hurson's relatives carried the Tricolour-draped coffin, with gloves and beret on top, down the country lane from his home to the hearse waiting to take his remains to Galbally church. A lone piper led the hearse, which was escorted by an IRA guard of honour, followed by Cumann na mBan and Na Fianna Éireann. Wreath bearers headed the thousands of mourners as three British army helicopters flew overhead. Following the funeral Mass the guard of honour carried the remains to the burial plot. Four armed and uniformed IRA volunteers emerged from the mourners and fired volleys from handguns in honour of their dead comrade.

MATT DEVLIN REPLACES MARTIN HURSON

Matt Devlin from Ardboe, County Tyrone replaced Martin Hurson, another Tyrone man, on the 1981 Hunger Strike on 15 July. At this point there were eight men on the strike. Born on 30 April 1950, Matt was the second eldest in a family of six. His father died in 1973. Matt was arrested by British forces in February 1977 and taken to Cookstown and

then Omagh barracks, where he was interrogated for four days. On the basis of a forced statement he was charged with attempting to kill members of the RUC. In October 1977, Devlin was sentenced to seven years and immediately went 'on the blanket'. He was one of the 30 men who joined the first hunger strike in 1980.

Described as "a tall, well built country man" before his arrest, he was under eight stone by the time he reached the 46th day of his fast. His parents were not republican. Matt attended Rock primary school and though not keen on studying, he was an avid reader. He played football with the local club and in 1979, as Matt was on the blanket and

no-wash protest, Ardboe Gaelic Football Club elected him as its President. In 1967 he started as a farm labourer, work he thoroughly enjoyed. He also worked for a year in England as a labourer. On returning to Ireland he resumed work as a farmer. "He was crazy about farming," former cell-mate Joe Boyle recalled.

Around 1974, motivated



• Martin Hurson's sisters Josephine, Rosaleen and his fiancé Bernadette Donnelly at the funeral

They then stood for a minute's silence.

Tyrone republican Francie Molloy presided over the graveside ceremonies. The 1916 Proclamation was read out and a bugler sounded the Last Post as IRA Volunteers stood to attention in salute of their former comrade. An impassioned and comprehensive oration was given by Sean Lynch, who had been Hurson's election agent in the 1981 general election. Speaking of Martin Hurson's past, Lynch described the 26-year-old as "a member of a large family whose mother died when he was only a boy, a young man who played Gaelic football for the local GAA club in Galbally, a lover of all things Irish who was forced to emigrate and who returned and threw in his lot with those who dispute the claim of England to rule over one inch of Irish soil."

Lynch talked about the sacrifices of freedom fighters of the time, saying they possessed the same "virtue of patriotism, of spiritual, unselfish love of country as it was understood by Mercier, Casement, Pearse, McSwiney, Stagg, Sands, and Martin Hurson". He went on to say their sacrifices would "save the cause of Irish independence from destruction at the hands of foreign enemy and native compromiser, and carry it to victory yet". There was a certain prophetic note to Lynch's words and again when he said that the spirit of Martin Hurson shines and "calls like a voice from heaven, filling young hearts with courage and determination."

He went on to outline the origins and sources of not only the horrendous conditions endured by prisoners in Armagh and the Blocks, but also "all our social



and political evils - the British connection". He also pointed to the "pretence and skulduggery" of the Irish Government of the time who, six deaths later, still refused to support the prisoners' five demands.

Only three days separated the funerals of Joe McDonnell and Martin Hurson and the proximity of the deaths intensified the depth of frustration and sadness felt by supporters of the Hunger Strikers. Ireland was awash with protests but the British Government wouldn't budge.



by the injustice of British rule that he could see around him, Devlin started helping the local IRA. For

two years he was involved in moving and dumping equipment, driving Volunteers and scouting for the local unit. Fulfilling his tasks eagerly and showing himself to be reliable and fearless, he was accepted into the IRA in 1976. One of his first operations, in June 1976, was an ambush in which Devlin and two other Volunteers, after four days lying in wait, opened fire on an RUC landrover. After a number of operations in the

local area, several raids took place, with dozens of jeeps, saracens and helicopters. A number of men, including Matt Devlin, were arrested.

Matt Devlin, who would have been released in 1980 had he accepted criminalisation, volunteered for both the first and second hunger strikes. He was strong and determined. In a letter addressed to one of the many rallies in Ardboe, Matt summed up the context in

which he and his comrades were on hunger strike: "In the weeks that passed, you have buried the seventh and eighth of my comrades to die on hunger strike. On the days before their deaths, we heard the cries 'Croppies lie down, for God's sake' from the Church. Day-by-day we come nearer to death. For five years we have suffered all sorts of degrading treatment as we tried for a peaceful and just settlement."



Le AENGUS Ó SNODAIGH TD

Ceachtanna crua a d'fhoghlaim mé i 1981

Is cuimhin liom go maith an Samhradh 25 bliain ó shin, is cuimhin liom an uaigneas, an gruaim agus an brón a bhí thart ag an am. Is cuimhin liom chomh maith an spiorad, an bród, an crógachta agus an samhlaíocht a bhí thart chomh maith. Ag an am bhí mé ag druidim ar 17, déagóir mé le tuairimí déagóra ionam, ach le eachtra polaitiúil mór ag gearradh trasna ortha agus á mhúnlú.

An céad cuimhne agam faoi Stailc Ocras 1981 agus a bhain leis, ná freastail ar agóidí i 1980 ag lorg cearta chimí pholaitiúla do fir an Cheis Fhada agus mná Charcair Ard Mhaca. Is cuimhin liom léamh faoi na n-éileamh a bhí ag fir agus mná an chéad Stailc Ocras in *An Phoblacht* an cúpla uair a cheannaigh mé é ó na both nuachtáin ar Sráid Uí Chonaill i mBaile Átha Cliath, ná ag léamh an píosa beag a bhí anseo agus ansúid i nuachtáin is eile a cheannaigh m'athair. Níor raibh faic le clos ar RTE ag an am, cinsireacht an leithscéal dár ndóigh, ach níor chosc Mír 31 nuacht a chraoladh – meon frithGhaelach, frith-phoblachtánach a stop sin.

Fiú ag an am sin thuig mé go raibh an stáit naimhdeach, bhí siad naimheadeach i gcoinne Gaeilgeoirí chomh maith mar a d'fhoghlaim ár gclann; agus bhí fhois agam conas a chaith an Craobh Sliabhín agus a Heavy Gang le poblachtánaigh.

Nuair a cuireadh deireadh leis an céad stailc ocrais, bhí áthas orm, shíl mé, cosúil len' alán eile, go raibh bua éigin faighte ag ár gcimí, ach ansin chuala mé an scéal i Márta go raibh tús curtha le Stailc Ocras eile. Chinn mé dom féin go mbeidh mé níos gníomhach san feachtas seo. Go luath ina dhiaidh cinneadh Roibeárd Ó Seachnasaigh bia a dhiúltú mar agóid ar son ceartaí bunúsach cimí pholaitiúla, thosaigh na picéidí i lár na cathrach athuair agus isteach

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D'fholgaim mise, agus deirfhinn alán eile, níos mó an lá úd agus tréimhse na Stailceanna Ocras ina iomlán faoi fimínteacht, agus chomh lofa is atá, an stadas quo sa stát seo ná mar a d'fhoghlaim mé ó shin

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liom go rialta nuair arbh fhéidir.

Is cuimhin liom oíche amháin a chaitheamh sa mbaile ag dearadh postaeirí daite le crocadh timpeall mo choláiste, Coláiste Eoin ar Bóthar Stigh Lorcáin, ag impí ar daltaí agus muinteoirí araon freastal ar máirseál ó lár na cathrach go Ambasáid Shasana i nDroichead na Dortha. In aineoinn gur i nGaeilge a bhíodar, níor luí siad isteach le polasaí na scoile agus réabhadh síos iad agus chaith mé seal in oifig an príomhoide an Báthair de Barra ag míniú mo scéal dhó.

Ar aon chaoi lean mé mo earcú ciúin féin sa scoil, ach ní raibh mé liom féin. Bhí dream dúinn ar scoil a bhí d'aon tuairim, mar aon le muinteoir nó dhó, Tony Gregory ina measc. Chonaic muid a chéile ag na léirsithe, ach ní rabhamar eagraithe mar cumann nó grúpa.

Bhí grúpa áfach i mo cheantair sa mbaile, Dumhach Trá – ceantair ard nósach den chuid is mó – ach bhí go leor againn a tháinig le chéile roimh máirseál is a leithéad agus ar shiúl isteach le chéile, nó a chuaigh ar bus le chéile.

Is cuimhin liom an buairt a bhí orainn is na Stailceoirí ag dul i laige, an áthas agus an dóchas a bhí orainn nuair a bhuaigh Bobby a shuíochán, agus ansin an díomá, an eagla agus an fearg nuair a dhéan Thatcher neamhaird dó agus nuair a fuair sé bás.

Chuile seachtain léigh mé *An Phoblacht* ó clúdach go clúdach, d'fhoghlaim mé agus na mílte eile faoi na fir cróga a bhí ag streachailt i gcampa Géibhinn An Cheis Fhada, ghlac muid misneach as gníomharthaí Óglaigh na hÉireann i coinne fórsaí an Choróin agus ó fás an ghluaiseacht taca a bhí ag léirsiú mór thimpeall na cruinne.

Is ag Ambasáid Shasain a fuair mé mo chéad léasadh ó fir 'cróga' sin a bhí in ainm

an pobail a chosaint, An Garda 'Síochána'. Bhí máirseál oíche ó Sráid Uí Chonaill am éigin i mí Meitheamh chuig an Ambasáid, ach ní raibh mé in ann bheith ann ag an tús mar bhí mé ag feidhíocht páistí m'aintín. Tháinig m'aintín abhaile luath agus rothaigh mé síos óna teach in aice le RTE go dtí an Ambasáid, áit a bhí an an máirseál díreach tar éis tuirlingt. Agus mé ag glasáil mo rothair d'ionsaigh Garda mór mé lena smachtín, arís agus arís eile. Ní mé amháin a bhí faoi ionsaí! Bhí mé ar tí casadh air agus deileál leis, ach tharraing cairde ón scoil siar mé. Lean na Gardaí sa tóir orainn an bealach ar fad arais go Sráid Uí Chonaill, ár mbuaileadh nuair a fuair an deis. D'fhill mé ar Bóthair Mhuirfean liom fhéin chun an rothair a bhailiú, bhí na bóithre tréigthe ar nós go raibh Dlí Airm i réim.

Timpeall an ama seo bhí Tóghcháin Theach Laighean ar siúl agus muid ar fad a bhí gafa sa feachtas agóideach ag tnúth go b'fhéidir le toradh maith go cuirfeadh sé cnámh droma i seasamh an rialtas úr agus iad ag deileál le Thatcher ina dhiaidh, agus chomh maith go dtóghfar roinnt dena iarrthóirí H-Bloc. Tóghadh Ciarán Ó Dochartaigh agus Paddy Agnew agus bhí vóta substaintiúil ag alán eile. Ba léir don domhain arís go raibh tacaíocht ag na Stailceoirí, rud a bhréagnaigh an seasamh a bhí glactha ag Thatcher agus rialtas na 26 Contae.

Is cuimhin liom go maith ciréib na Gardaí i Iúil 1981. Ba ceann dena léirsiú ba mhó don bliain a bhí ann, bhí teannas le mothú san slua agus bhí fearg ann de thairbhe an oiread sin de na stailceoirí tar éis bás a fháil faoin am seo; Bobby Sands, Francis Hughes, Patsy O'Hara, Joe McDonnell, Kevin Lynch, Martin Hurson, Kieran Doherty agus nach raibh rialtas Garret Fitzgerald pioc níos fearr ná Haughey – níos measa a bhíodar. Nuair a shroich muid line na Gardaí, bhí bacanna miotal trasna an mbóthar aca. Bhí siad ullamh do ionsaí, na smachtíní amuigh aca, na cloigid ortha agus na sciath móra os a chómhair. Taobh thiar dóibh, bhí na saighdiúirí armtha agus faoi ordú lámhadh dá mbriseadh muid tríd.

Séard a bhí i gceist againn ná agóid a dhéanamh ag an Ambasáid, nó b'fhéidir gur ag filleadh ar Feabhra 1972 nuair a dóadh go talamh an Ambasáid deiridh a bhí i gceist – ní fios.

Tá's agam, gur sheas an cuid is mó den slua ag féachaint ar Gardaí agus léirsitheoirí



• Agóid i mBaile Átha Cliath ag tacú leis na Stailceoirí Ocras



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Chuire seachtain léigh mé An Phoblacht ó clúdach go clúdach, d'fhoghlaim mé agus na mílte eile faoi na fir cróga a bhí ag streachailt i gcampa Géibhinn An Cheis Fhada, ghlac muid misneach as gníomharthaí Óglaigh na hÉireann i coinne fórsaí an Choróin agus ó fás an ghluaiseacht taca a bhí ag léirsiú mór thimpeall na cruinne

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agus iad ag babhtáil clocha trasna an chlaí miotal, go dtí gur briseadh an claí. Is ansin a d'ionsaigh na Gardaí i gceart le brídiúlacht agus gráin nach bhfacathas ó shin fiú ón RUC agus iad do mo ionsaí blianta ina dhiaidh. Fuair mé léasadh chomh láidir faoi dhó an lá úd go cuireadh pairilis orm ar feadh coicís ina dhiaidh.

D'fholgaim mise, agus deirfhinn alán eile, níos mó an lá úd agus le linn tréimhse na Stailceanna Ocras ina iomlán faoi fiminteacht, agus chomh lofa is atá, an stádas quo sa stát seo ná mar a d'fhoghlaim mé ó shin. Chruthaigh atá feicfidh agam ó shin na ceachtanna sin.

Is ag an am sin a chinn mise ar níos mó a dhéanamh chun saoirse na hÉireann a bhaint amach agus fáil réidh leis an chóras lofa a bhí sásta seasamh siar agus ligint do rialtas Shasain deichniúir cróga a mharú. Ní hé amháin gur sheas siad siar, thug siad tacaíocht do Thatcher agus fórsaí Shasain in Éireann agus ní mhaithe mé sin go deo dóibh.

Thug crógacht an deichniúir misneach dom ó shin san saol polaitiúil a roghnaigh mé. I measc laochra na nGael go raibh siad agus alán eile a fuair bás ag streachailt don Phoblacht roimhe agus ó shin.

Kevin Lynch laid to rest in Dungiven



The death of INLA Volunteer Kevin Lynch after seventy-one days on hunger strike occurred on 1 August 1981, followed the next day by that of IRA Volunteer Kieran Doherty. They were the seventh and eighth men, respectively, to die on the fast.

Kevin had been lapsing into frequent periods of unconsciousness in the last four days, having already lost his sight, hearing and speech. His family were at his bedside throughout the final days until he died in the early hours of Saturday morning.

His funeral took place the following Monday, in his home town of Dungiven in County Derry. Between the return of his body to his home and the removal for Requiem Mass on Monday afternoon, a constant stream of mourners queued outside to pay their respects. The road was decorated with Tricolours and black flags, along with posters of Kevin Lynch. The RUC and the UDR made every effort to disrupt the funeral, holding up cars and forcing buses to park outside of town so that the passengers would have to make their way on foot. Ulsterbus in Belfast cancelled bookings at the last minute. Nevertheless, mourners came in convoys

of cars and black taxis. At midday the coffin, bearing the Tricolour, Starry Plough, gloves and beret, was carried to the nearby church. The procession was led by a lone piper, followed by the Lynch family, relatives of other hunger strikers, and senior representatives of the IRSP and the broad Republican Movement, along with the National H-Block/Armagh Committee.

Five British Army helicopters flew overhead as the coffin entered the church grounds. Applause broke out momentarily as an eighteen-strong INLA guard of honour marched up to escort the coffin to the church door. The priest who celebrated the Mass, Fr John Quinn, expressed outrage later when the INLA Volunteers escorting the coffin fired three volleys after it had left the church. So enraged was he that he refused to wear his vestments at the graveside. This same priest had failed to refer to the suffering of the hunger strikers themselves and failed also to condemn British intransigence. He also tried to imply that the family had been opposed to the military funeral - an opinion later refuted by family members, who criticised the press and those who had made unsolicited comments on their

behalf. At the graveside, the piper played *I'll Wear No Convict's Uniform*. The *Last Post* was also played and wreaths were laid, including ones from both the INLA and IRA Army Councils.

A uniformed Volunteer then read a statement on behalf of the INLA Army Council, stating regret at Kevin's death and applauding his heroism. "Kevin Lynch has made the greatest sacrifice, and he has done it in the face of the repressive machinery of British imperialism and in the wake of the greatest gesture of defiance against those who control the prisons and those who rule and ravage our country."

A short oration was given by Councillor Seán Flynn from Belfast, Vice Chair of the IRSP:

"Kevin epitomised all that is good in a young Irishman, playing our national sports of hurling and football. He excelled at both, and in 1972 captained his native county to win an All-Ireland medal at hurling."

He went on to contrast Lynch's Gaelic spirit with the performance of the Gaelic Athletic Association leadership off the field. "Yesterday the Derry County Board and South Antrim County Board asked for

a minute's silence before the All-Ireland hurling semi-final between Limerick and Galway. It was no surprise to me when Croke Park refused. President MacFloinn last week declared that no clubs, grounds or units were to be used for H-Block activity, as it contravenes rule 7." He added that work would be done to encourage support for the Five Demands amongst the GAA.

On Kevin's courage and determination, Seán said, "It must be remembered that if Kevin had conformed to the British authority he would be a free man today; but to Kevin, Kieran Doherty, Patsy O'Hara, Bobby Sands, Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreech, Joe McDonnell, Martin Hurson and the continuing hunger strikers, they knew if the political prisoners were criminalised then the British Government would attempt to criminalise the struggle on the outside." He added that Kevin Lynch knew the consequences of going on hunger strike. "Deprived of every other means of defending his political integrity, he defended it with his life. Those who imply that he might have been ordered to do so, or could be ordered to cease to do so, fail to understand the depths or the personal integrity, the individual courage and the dedication to the principles he believed in, that made Kevin Lynch the person he was."



• A lone piper led the cortege; (left) The funeral of Kevin Lynch makes its way through Dungiven

LIAM McCLOSKEY

Liam McCloskey, from Dungiven, Co Derry, replaced Kevin Lynch on the hunger strike. He was 25 years of age in 1981 and was the 16th man to join the fast. He and Kevin were neighbours, friends and cellmates. Liam McCloskey came from a staunchly republican family. He was among the civil rights marchers on Bloody Sunday when the British Army opened fire, killing fourteen people. Liam was arrested in December 1976 and charged along with fellow INLA member Kevin Lynch. He was very severely ill-treated in Castlereagh before being taken to Crumlin Road jail, where he spent a year on remand

and was finally sentenced to ten years' imprisonment. He immediately joined the blanket protest. Had he conformed to the corrupt prison regime he would have been released four months after joining the hunger strike, under the 50% remission system. But Liam was not for conforming. He was severely beaten by prison warders in September 1978 during a brutal wing shift. His nose was broken and he suffered a perforated eardrum. Liam has been described as a quiet and dedicated County Derry republican. As a youngster, he was remembered as a shy person who loved animals and fishing. Another of his hallmarks was his determina-



tion - a characteristic that displayed itself in his life as a republican, and particularly during the three years he spent on the blanket and no-wash protests. His family were not entirely surprised when they learnt that Liam was going on the hunger strike in place of his comrade Kevin Lynch. Liam's mother decided to intervene should her son

fall into a coma. On 26 September, after 55 days, Liam's hunger strike came to an end. His mother issued a detailed statement outlining the reason why her son came off the hunger strike: "My son reluctantly ended his hunger strike and only did so after I convinced him that I would not let him die. I told him that I would intervene if he lapsed into a coma, and it was better for him to come off hunger strike now rather than run the risk of permanent damage to his eyesight or other vital organs." She went on to state that she and her family fully supported the prisoners' Five Demands and that she didn't want her son and the other prisoners to live in the conditions that had led to the hunger strike.



• The funeral of Kieran Doherty TD passes through West Belfast

BIG DOC'S FINAL JOURNEY

IRA Volunteer Kieran Doherty, TD for Cavan-Monaghan, died at 7.15pm on Sunday, 2 August, the day after Kevin Lynch's death. Kieran had joined the hunger strike one day before Kevin Lynch and survived a day longer.

Kieran Doherty embarked on his fast upon the death of Raymond McCreesh. He managed, with difficulty, to speak to his family almost to the end, though his sight had almost completely gone. Kieran, or Big Doc as his comrades affectionately called him, had a strong spirit of survival which kept him conscious for most of his 73 days on hunger strike.

Kieran's body was brought out of Long Kesh and through Andersonstown to his parents' home in Commedagh Drive at two o'clock in the morning. About a thousand mourners accompanied the coffin and even larger crowds came out on Monday morning to pay their respects. The next day, hundreds of stewards took position on the funeral route as Kieran's coffin was carried out of his parents' house, escorted by an IRA guard of

honour. An IRA firing party came out of the crowd and, lining the side of the coffin, fired a volley of shots. As British Army helicopters hovered overhead, the crowd cheered at the Brits' inability to prevent the firing party from honouring their dead comrade.

The cortege then moved through Andersonstown, led by two pipers. It will be recalled that during the hunger strike some of the clergy had set out to undermine the prisoners' protest. In contrast to the attitude of the priest celebrating Mass at Kevin Lynch's funeral, Fr Hansen's sermon demonstrated a fundamental understanding of the issues at the core of the hunger strikers' protest. While the presiding priest at the Lynch funeral refused to wear his vestments at the graveside because of the presence of a firing party, the priest at Kieran's funeral recalled having visited Doherty on the 13th day of his fast and remembered it to be a cheerful event. He went on to recount Kieran's words when he asked him if he would consider com-

ing off the hunger strike. Kieran replied: "Look, Father, I could not give up. If I did I would go back to criminal status. I am not a criminal. I never was and never will be one." Recalling those words at the funeral of Kieran Doherty, the priest said, "Basically, I had to agree with him." He finished off by saying that "Kieran was very much his own man. He died quietly and very determined, serene and dignified." Fr Toner, who was criticised by Bobby Sands in his diary, was in the congregation, listening but apparently unmoved by Fr Hansen's words.

It was estimated that a crowd of about 20,000 attended Kieran's funeral. Chairing the event, Sinn Féin member Jimmy Drumm referred to the ongoing pursuit of the Five Demands. "The British Government needs to be moved on the issues of work, association and segregation." He finished by saying that with the basis of a just settlement "then we and the families will be spared the anguish and suffering of such funerals as this, and the prisoners



• Scene during the funeral Mass at St Theresa's Church; (below) Kieran Doherty's coffin is carried by his sister Mairéad (left) a family friend Siobhan McKenna (centre) and sister-in-law Betty Doherty (right)



who have suffered so much will be able to live in tolerable conditions." Kieran Doherty was the eighth man to die on hunger strike in 1981 and two more would follow.

The oration at Volunteer Doherty's funeral was given by Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin, Kieran's Director of Elections during the 1981 general election. Ó Caoláin said that the people of Cavan-Monaghan had taken the 26-year-old to their hearts and that they were proud to elect him as their public representa-

tive. Ó Caoláin criticised the Irish Government's handling of the hunger strike, saying, "Their gamesmanship for petty political scores has been a major factor in the continuing deaths in Long Kesh. The people of Cavan-Monaghan hold the present coalition government directly responsible, through firstly their inactivity, and afterwards their open support for pressure to be placed on the hunger strikers and their families."

Ó Caoláin recalled all the other Irish

hunger strikers who had died as a result of British intransigence, three of them elected representatives: Terence MacSwiney, Bobby Sands and Kieran Doherty. Again of Doherty, he added that Kieran had taken his place amongst all those who fought for the three tenets of republicanism: "Equality as embodied by James Connolly, who struggled to achieve a classless society; liberty, the liberty of Patrick Pearse, and the fraternity of Wolfe Tone."



BY CAOIMHGHÍN Ó CAOLÁIN TD

(Director of Elections for Kieran Doherty TD 1981)

I ndíl Chuímhne

We never really knew him. We never had the honour of meeting him. But for the many hundreds of people throughout Cavan and Monaghan who campaigned for his election in those strained and stressful months of May and June 1981 we felt then and ever since that he was that brother of whom we were most proud.

His actions, and the stance that he and his comrades took over the months of March through September 1981, and that of others of their number in Long Kesh and the women in Armagh Gaol in the preceding year, left an indelible mark on all our lives and changed the course of life for many. Without question they also helped shape the course of contemporary Irish history.

A quarter of a century after the death of Kieran Doherty his legacy, and the legacy of those who stood with him in direct defiance of the savagery of the British state and its efforts to criminalise and defeat the republican struggle, continue to light the way to our shared goal of a united and sovereign Ireland, an Ireland whose citizens of all past allegiances will live in the celebration of a new pluralist and egalitarian society.

“Let our revenge be the laughter of our children” wrote Bobby Sands.

Throughout the years since Kieran's death those same hundreds of committed republican activists – some have passed away along the way, others have taken their place and more – have striven to see that day. They have spearheaded real change, not only across counties Cavan and Monaghan where today they experience real political strength, but have clearly demonstrated to others throughout Ireland the way forward and the skills necessary for the struggle for

• John Pickering and Kieran Doherty; (right) Solidarity staged funeral passes through Monaghan town after the death of Kieran Doherty TD



the re-establishment of the all-Ireland Republic declared in Easter week 1916 to succeed. That it will succeed, by our efforts and the efforts of others who also yearn for its achievement, we are in no doubt. Like Bobby Sands we too are blessed by that indomitable thought.

Very few of those who came together to form the County Monaghan H-Block and Armagh Committee had previous electoral experience, fewer still of other than local election contests. The 'broad' republican core group who steered the campaign throughout Co. Monaghan had tirelessly pursued its objectives of popularising the five demands of the prisoners and maximising political pressure on the government of the day. The hope was that the Irish government would exert every pressure in turn on Margaret Thatcher and the British government to concede the reasonable demands of the men in Long Kesh and the women republican prisoners in Armagh.

With the advent of the second hunger strike and the subsequent Fermanagh/South Tyrone Westminster by-election victory of Bobby Sands, the ante was raised and the campaign went into a previously unimagined gear. As the prisoners responded to the treachery of Thatcher and her Ministers, the campaign activists also responded with a new and vigorous effort throughout the length and breadth of Ireland and nowhere more so than in these counties.

The General Election of June 11 1981 presented the opportunity to not only emu-

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The General Election of 11 June 1981 presented the opportunity to not only emulate the achievement of those in neighbouring Fermanagh and South Tyrone but most importantly of impacting as never before on the conscience of the political establishment in the 26 Counties

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late the achievement of those in neighbouring Fermanagh and South Tyrone but most importantly of impacting as never before on the conscience of the political establishment in the 26 Counties. All too sadly, and with but one or two exceptions, the political establishment closed its eyes and ears to the plea of countless thousands of their fellow Irish nationals.

Once the decision to contest was taken it was morning, noon and night until the polling stations closed on Election Day. Postering, leafleting, canvassing, public meetings, after Mass addresses, protests here and there. What we lacked in experience and expertise we made up for with energy and enthusiasm. And it was infectious.

9,121 electors made Kieran Doherty, a 25-year-old from Andersonstown, Belfast, who had never been to Cavan or Monaghan in his lifetime, their Number One choice on the ballot paper. The euphoria and sense of achievement were palpable. The great joy for many was to witness the rekindled hope in the faces of Kieran's anxious mother and father, Margaret and Alfie.

Sadly that renewed hope was all too soon to fade. Difficult weeks followed and despite the unfaltering efforts of campaigners throughout Ireland and internationally, Kieran Doherty's young life ended after 73 days on hunger strike on 2nd August 1981.

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He joined his comrades Bobby Sands MP, Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreesh, Patsy O'Hara, Joe McDonnell, Martin Hurson and Kevin Lynch, who died the day before. They would be followed by Thomas McElwee and Mickey Devine.

We never really knew him. We never had the honour of meeting him. But we understood.

The admiration and affection of the republican people of Cavan and Monaghan for Kieran's courageous parents Margaret and Alfie are both special and enduring. The dignity of Kieran's loving and grieving parents is an abiding memory for all who were witness to those days.

The struggle continues. The goals that Kieran and his comrades set out to achieve have yet to be realised. Today, young republicans are asked only to invest their considerable energies and talents in the struggle for Irish freedom, justice and peace. The invitation is open to all. The challenge ahead is all our responsibility. God willing, I will live to see the day when the dream that Kieran Doherty and his comrades and countless thousands of brave and sincere Irish men and women have kept and nurtured in their hearts will be the new reality in our land. It is then we will know that Our Day has Come.

I measc Laochra na nGael go raibh a anam dilis.

The death of Thomas McElwee



Thomas McElwee, at the age of 23, was the 10th man to join the 1981 hunger strike. From Bellaghy in South Derry, he was imprisoned in 1976 after a premature bomb explosion in which he lost an eye.

Thomas was a cousin of another hunger

striker, Francis Hughes, also from Bellaghy. They had been boyhood friends, both going on to join the IRA. On 10 August 1981, for the second time, Bellaghy was visited by thousands of mourners gathered to pay their respects to a deceased hunger striker.

McElwee died on 8 August on the 62nd day of his fast. Francis Hughes had died three months earlier on 12 May.

The RUC and British Army converged on the roads around Bellaghy and six British Army helicopters hovered overhead. Thomas's brother Benedict had been denied a visit with his brother the previous week and was then callously asked to identify the body when he died.

IRA and Cumann na mBan guards of honour lined the path to the McElwee home as the coffin was carried out by his eight sisters. A volley of shots was fired as the cortege reached the road. The crowd in the fields and hillsides cheered as the firing party disappeared out of range of the crown forces.

Two pipers led the cortege along the five-mile route to the church for Requiem Mass. Thomas's brother Benedict was allowed 10 hours parole for the funeral. In another instance of church interference in the hunger strike, the priest at the Mass in Bellaghy Parish Church criticised the hunger strikers and called for an end to the fast. Some women in the congregation

PAT SHEEHAN

On 10 August 1981 Belfast man Pat Sheehan replaced Kieran Doherty, another Belfast man, becoming the seventeenth participant on hunger strike. At the time of the hunger strikes he was serving a fifteen-year sentence. Arrested in January 1978, he spent thirteen months on remand in Crumlin Road jail. He was charged with taking part in an IRA bombing of a warehouse in Belfast and found guilty on the perjured evidence of one witness, whose account was hotly disputed. On arrival at the Blocks, Pat immediately joined the blanket protest.

Pat grew up on Isodore Avenue in the Springfield Road area of Belfast. It was a 'mixed' area and Pat's

playmates were largely Protestants. One morning in 1970 a gang of loyalist youths armed with bricks, cudgels and batons came to the door to threaten the family. Pat's mother recognised one of the boys, as he had been in the house on a number of occasions. She asked him why he was among this gang. He answered, "Because you have turned this place into an IRA den."

Pat would sometimes go to visit friends in the Clonard area. The British Army patrolled the street and Pat was regularly stopped. In 1972 he joined na Fianna Éireann. According to a former comrade, he was very eager and at the age of fifteen



tried to pass himself off as older so that he would be accepted into the IRA. He was found out. At about the same period, an assassination attempt was made on the family, who decided to move and went to live on the Falls Road.

Pat was described as intelligent, politically aware and extremely calm as an operator. These characteristics were quickly noted

while he was in the Fianna and when he reached the required age he joined the IRA. In 1979 Pat arrived in the Blocks, immediately joining the protest. Though he was a quiet person he, like Kieran Doherty (Big Doc), was singled out for beatings because of his self-confidence. On the twenty-first day of his hunger strike, Pat wrote a letter home in which he described how he felt at that stage of the fast: "I'm still keeping okay and have no medical complaints so far, although I still have the constant craving for food."

Pat Sheehan was fifty-five days on hunger strike when the strike ended on 3 October. He was by then having trouble with his eyesight and weighed only seven stone. Pat was moved to an outside hospital for medical treatment.



• IRA Volunteers prepare to fire volley of shots over the coffin of Thomas McElwee; (left) Thomas McElwee's eight sisters - Kathleen, Mary, Bernadette, Annie, Enda, Nora Pauline and Majella - carry the coffin of their brother

got up and walked out, disgusted that the priest would use the pulpit on such a tragic occasion to deliver an insulting political speech.

Thomas McElwee's dying wish was to be buried beside Francis Hughes.

The graveside oration was given by Danny Morrison, then Sinn Féin Director of Publicity.

Thomas McElwee has been described by friends as being "sincere, easy-going and full of fun". He was also intelligent and determined, something Morrison captured in his remarks on the young Volunteer: "I know that the McElwee family, just as the families of other dead hunger strikers know what I mean, when I say that their son was invincible from beginning to end, in life as well as in death."

Morrison went on to criticise the Church and the SDLP for cultivating defeatism throughout the hunger strike rather than pressuring the British Government to come to a just resolution of the protest. He referred back to the sermon delivered earlier at McElwee's Requiem Mass. "Those of you who were able to hear Fr Flanagan's

sermon today will have been struck by what is wrong with the Church's politics. We were asked to pray for an end to the hunger strike, for an end to violence and for peace," he remarked, adding that certainly people should pray for those things. "But," he added, "there is a bigger prayer which we have to make, and that is a prayer for an end to the cause of violence: the British occupation of our country. It is time the Church prayed and called for that."

In his oration, Morrison also called for decisive and effective action at ambassadorial and international levels on the part of the Irish Government. "The Free State Government, like many other influential bodies in Ireland which represent the vested interests, have not got the welfare of the prisoners at heart and would quite frankly like to see the hunger strike collapse," he said. Morrison also noted and condemned the increasing tendency at the time to blame the republican leadership for the crisis. "For some time now it has been open season for apportioning blame for the continuation of the hunger strike on the leadership of the Republican Movement." This was, he said,

just a variation of former Secretary of State Roy Mason's theme in 1976 and 1977, in which the implication was that those on the outside had forced the prisoners onto the blanket protest.

Identifying the real cause of the problem, Morrison said: "The roots of the hunger strike were built into the British H-Blocks, into the British policy of criminalisation which forced the men on the blanket five years ago and which led ultimately to republicans resorting to the traditional weapon of hunger strike as the ultimate means of gaining their demands." Neither was Danny in any doubt as to the continued determination of the republican POWs in the Blocks. "Their determination has not waned," he said, stressing that neither should their supporters on the outside lose resolve. "Despair is easy; our enemies want us to despair. To struggle on is a harder task, but the reward is there at the end of the road - and Thomas McElwee will be proud of us, as we are proud of him, if we play our full part in winning this prison struggle, in winning, as he set out to win, Irish freedom from the ruins of British rule."

THE DEATH OF MICHAEL DEVINE

On the death of INLA Volunteer Michael Devine at 12 minutes to eight on Thursday, 20 August 1981, his brother-in-law Frankie McCauley said: "One thinks, 'Ten men, how many more have to die? We have ours now over us. Next week it will be big Laurence's people waiting for the same thing. Then the Devlins after that and another boy will go on hunger strike and another. They'll never break them.'"

Michael Devine was the last of the Hunger Strikers to die in 1981. His funeral took place on Saturday, 22 August in his native Derry city, in a grave next to his friend and comrade Patsy O'Hara, who died the previous May. The funeral went from Devine's sister's home in Rathkeele Way directly to the cemetery after Requiem Mass in St Mary's chapel. People came from many parts of Ireland to attend and a long queue of mourners lined up outside the house to pay their respects. Thousands gathered in the street as the coffin was removed from the house, flanked by an INLA guard of honour, followed by relatives and then representatives of the families of the other Hunger Strikers.

Conversation on the day revolved around the courage and determination of the Hunger Strikers and the wavering attitude of the Irish Government, the SDLP and the Catholic hierarchy. Another topic of conversation was the election in Fermanagh/South Tyrone of Owen Carron, who attended the funeral. He was repeatedly mobbed by well-wishers. Three British military helicopters flew overhead. The cortege made its way to the top of the cemetery and to the plot where Michael Devine's comrade Patsy O'Hara was buried three months



previously. A piper playing laments was followed by a guard of honour of eight men in uniform. The two leading Volunteers carried the Starry Plough and Tricolour, followed by six more carrying semi-automatic shortarms in their belts. Three drummers then marched silently forward. A second guard of honour of 16 men flanked the coffin on the last few yards of its journey.

Margaret McCauley walked behind the coffin with Michael Devine's two children, Michael (jnr) aged seven and Louise aged five, and Michael's aunt Theresa Moore. The coffin was laid on trestles and the firing party stepped forward and delivered three volleys of shots over the remains of their comrade. This salute was greeted with loud applause. Terry Robson chaired the ceremony and praised the deceased Hunger Striker who was the former O/C of the INLA prisoners in the H-Blocks. Wreaths were laid on behalf of all the Hunger Strikers' families, the INLA, the IRSP, the National H-Block/Armagh Committee, the IRA and many others. A

girl piper played the H-Block song and a bugler played the Last Post.

The flags were then removed from the coffin for presentation to Margaret McCauley. "The colours," Terry Robson said, "include the Starry Plough and the national flag, the Tricolour. It will also include his beret, his gloves and his belt – denoting his rank as an officer in the Irish National Liberation Army." A statement from the Army Council of the INLA was read out. It said: "The Army Council and Volunteers of the Irish National Liberation Army deeply regret the death of Volunteer and Hunger Striker Michael Devine. The Irish National Liberation Army applauds his heroism in the face of the most extreme deprivation and horror.

"As Officer Commanding our Prisoners of War in the concentration camp at Long Kesh, Michael relentlessly pursued an honourable settlement for the protesting prisoners, not in any elitist disregard for the rights of others, but in the full knowledge that his struggle was merely an extension of the same struggle for which he was



Jackie McMullan replaces McElwee

Belfast Blanketman Jackie McMullan, aged 25, joined the Hunger Strike on 17 August 1981, bringing the number of men on the strike back up to seven.

The Andersonstown republican was the 18th political prisoner to join the strike. He replaced the late Thomas McElwee who died

a fortnight before on 8 August.

This deliberate delay in the replacement was because men were joining the fast at intervals of no shorter than one week in order to ensure that maximum pressure would be maintained on the British government by the threat

of deaths at regular intervals.

Jackie McMullan, held in H-Block 6, was the eldest of seven children – four boys and three girls. His mother died in 1980.

At the time that Jackie McMullan joined the Hunger Strike, his brother Michael was a political prisoner also,



• Frank McAuley, Michael Devine's brother-in-law holds the hand of Michael's seven-year-old son, also Michael, at the funeral; (left) INLA Volunteers carry the coffin of Michael Devine

incarcerated." The INLA statement went on to say, "The creation of the H-Blocks, a development unseen in the history of the sophisticated torture machinery of British imperialism, brought a new unity amongst anti-imperialist organisations and saw a degree of co-operation between people as our nation reacted in horror at what really was going on inside the corrugated and barbed enclosures of Long Kesh."

The main oration was delivered by Naomi Brennan, the Chairperson of the IRSP. She described Michael Devine as "a revolutionary, a soldier, but above all a socialist". She went on to say that Devine saw from the "reality of everyday life in his native Derry what British imperialism means in Ireland. He saw the long years without hope on the dole. He saw the discrimination and gerrymandering from the fat cats behind the Derry walls, and he

liked none of it."

Brennan said that Michael Devine was only a youngster when the RUC batoned the civil rights protestors in 1969, adding that the lessons of the period were not lost on him. She said that 1969 was a time when people had at long last found their voice, learned to stand and demand their rights and that "to stand and fight was far better than 50 years of bending the knee".

On Michael Devine's socialist politics she said that Michael "realised that to have national freedom, we must have socialism, and that, also, to have any chance of socialism, we must have national freedom". Again on Michael's ideological beliefs she said that his "dedication to the socialist cause was a well thought-out one and one which he put into practice. He realised that you had to organise the people to struggle for themselves; that you had to organise a

revolutionary party to guide and direct that struggle; and that you had to organise military resistance to give backbone to that struggle, because that was the only thing that the British had ever really listened to."

She said the prisoners' 5 just demands could, and must, be won. On hopes for the future she remarked, "The hope we have is not in the droppings from this or that British Government, much less from the well-oiled phrases of the SDLP politicians and their likes. No, the hope we have is in the spirit of Michael Devine, unquenchable even in the jaws of death itself."

"While Ireland brings forth young men and women such as him there is hope now and for the future - a certainty that the cause for which Michael Devine gave his young life is just, and is necessary, and we must see it through to the end. And we will."

but was granted the political status that Jackie was denied. Michael was held in the cages of Long Kesh only a few hundred yards away from the H-Blocks.

Jackie McMullan was born on 17 May 1956 in the lower Falls area of Belfast, but has lived most of his life in Andersonstown. He attended St Theresa's primary and St Mary's grammar schools. After leaving

school he worked as an accounts clerk.

McMullan joined the republican resistance in early 1971. Over the next five years he escaped imprisonment although he was arrested 12 times, including being held twice for three-day periods during 1974.

Finally, in May 1976, he was arrested and jailed after eight shots were fired at

RUC men in Sicily Park, Lisburn Road, Belfast.

McMullan, the only person captured after the attack, was interrogated for two days at Dunmurray barracks, and was then charged with possession of an armalite rifle and revolver and with attempting to kill members of the RUC patrol.

While held on remand in Crumlin Road jail, Jackie McMullan shared a cell with

the late Kieran Doherty, who died on hunger strike on 2 August 1981.

On 6 December 1976, McMullan was sentenced in a special, non-jury court to life imprisonment and was removed to the H-Blocks where he joined the then nascent blanket protest.

After five years' imprisonment Jackie joined the 1981 Hunger Strike.



JACKIE McMULLAN, aged 25, joined the 1981 Hunger Strike on 17 August, replacing the late Thomas McElwee. The third of a family of seven, the young McMullan studied in Athlone as a boarder. In Belfast the conflict loomed large and by 1971 he had gone home. That summer his home was raided several times a week and in September his older brother Michael was interned. Later that year Jackie joined Na Fianna Éireann.

In 1973, aged 17, McMullan joined the IRA. He was arrested in 1976 and charged with attempting to kill RUC members. Sentenced in a non-jury court to life imprisonment, he joined the blanket protest.

From 1976 to 1978 McMullan took no visits, refusing to wear the prison uniform and only seeing his mother twice in three years. His mother died in 1980. Neither Jackie nor Michael were allowed compassionate parole to attend her funeral.

A quarter of a century on from the Hunger Strike ELLA O'DWYER spoke to Jackie and his sister Esther.

You have to struggle - nobody is going to offer it to you on a plate

Esther describes the young Jackie as a typical teenager but with a very determined nature. "My brother Michael had been interned while I was in my first year in secondary school and then he got out but was back in jail when I was in second year."

Esther was about 17 when Jackie was sentenced to life. She was three years his junior.

"We never really knew Jackie was involved. He was very, very secretive. My mummy was heartbroken and my Daddy was going to kill him. But when he went to see him in the police station he gave out stink about the peelers. My father and mother were behind Jackie all the time."

The family didn't see Jackie for a long time. As a blanket man he refused visits for over two years. The first time Esther saw him after his arrest was when he appeared in court. He was hurt in Crumlin Road Jail in a fight between loyalists and republicans. "I remember when he came to court. It was frightening. He just looked like a caged animal with the long hair and all."

Jackie's mother got involved with the Relatives' Action Committee. "She joined the marches, toured America, went to Paris and Holland and chained herself to Downing Street in order to highlight the plight of political prisoners at home."

It was more difficult for their father John, as he was not the kind of man who felt

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She joined the marches, toured America, went to Paris and Holland and chained herself to Downing Street in order to highlight the plight of political prisoners at home

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comfortable in the public eye. "I have to say I really admired my Daddy for what he did. He went to meetings up in Stormont and spoke with Lord Gowry who was in charge of prisons.

"I used to pray that if Jackie went into a coma, I wouldn't get the telephone call because I didn't want to make the decision. I could never say what decision I would have made. How can you say, unless you're in the situation, what you would do. Someone's life is in your hands. How can you say what you'd do - but Jackie's strength would have kept us going."

Esther felt strongly for her brother Michael who only got to see Jackie for a short visit when their mother died in March 1980. Jackie went on the Hunger Strike the following year. At times Esther, like other relatives, felt that "there was never going to be an end to it. The families were united until Fr Faul started his shenanigans. Instead of Fr Faul putting pressure on families, the pressure should have been put on the governments. The families were put through enough, they really were."

Asked how she felt when the Hunger Strike ended she said: "To tell you the truth you were relieved that Jackie was not going to die, but heartbroken because the other men had died."

Jackie McMullan was tried, convicted

and sentenced to life imprisonment in the space of 40 minutes. It was an unprecedented sentence in a case where nobody had been injured. Moved to the sentenced wing, McMullan remembers being able to look over the yard where the remand prisoners took exercise. When his comrades learnt of Jackie's heavy sentence they were so taken aback that they started laughing. "They were genuinely amused. They were in stitches." At the time nobody looked too far into the future and the notion of 20 years in prison on a charge where nobody was killed seemed ludicrous.

He took his first visit at Christmas 1979. It was a family visit and his mother was there. His second visit with his family was in 1980 and "was the day they came in to tell me my Ma had died. I was in my cell waiting to take a visit. The door opened. The priest walked in.

"It can't be said often enough how much hardship and suffering the families went through.

"Sometimes the relatives wouldn't sleep for a week before a visit. You often hear of the distress suffered by mothers. My father too suffered and I really admire him. At the time I had to galvanise him into a position where, no matter what pressure he was put under, he would not take me off the fast. My father was an ordinary man who wanted the best for all his children. He didn't want to see us end up in prison, never mind on hunger strike. But he took up the challenge, went to meetings and represented our case.

"I must mention Mickey too. He suffered massively. He was in the Cages at the time and couldn't even do what Esther, Meta, Bernadette, Gerard, and Maurice could do. They could march and protest. Mickey couldn't. It was hard for him."

Jackie had put himself down for both the 1980 and '81 hunger strikes.

Asked how he coped as friends and comrades died McMullan said: "There was powerful grief for people you knew and were close to who died but it really isn't much different than how I'd feel about comrades like Finbarr McKenna, who died in a premature explosion, or Larry Marley or countless other people who I know who have died. I know a lot of people who died."

Asked how he felt when, after 48 days on hunger strike, the protest ended he said: "On the one hand I hadn't died but 10 of my friends had. It seemed at the time that



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It can't be said often enough how much hardship and suffering the families went through

we hadn't achieved our demands and that the protest was broke. But then we started to win the conditions outlined in the 5 Demands. A major escape was pulled off within two years."

McMullan was released in 1992. He worked for a period setting up ex-prisoner groups and currently works with Sinn Féin. Reflecting on his prison and hunger strike experience, McMullan says: "You have to struggle; nobody is going to offer it to you on a plate.

"My memory of the Hunger Strike is only as valid as anyone else's. We all have our various memories of the time. It was part of my life. I like my life; I enjoy it."

Jackie McMullan lives in Belfast with his partner Laoise and young son Manus.

Victory repeated in Fermanagh/South Tyrone

Thursday, 20 August 1981 was a day of both immense sadness and resounding triumph for the H-Block/Armagh campaign. At 7.50am Michael Devine, the 10th Hunger Striker to die, passed away. Later on that day Owen Carron, who had been Bobby Sands' election agent, took the Fermanagh/South Tyrone Westminster seat left vacant by the death of Bobby Sands.

Although it wasn't known at the time, Devine would be the last to die as mounting support for the Hunger Strikers put pressure on both the Dublin and London political establishments - as evidenced by Owen Carron's election.

The British had hoped the intervention of Seamus Close of the Alliance Party and Tom Moore of the Sticky 'Republican Clubs' would snatch enough of the nationalist vote to deny Carron the seat. In the event, Ulster Unionist Party candidate Ken Maginnis managed to increase by only two the number of votes taken by the previous UUP candidate, Harry West - this despite the alleged support of Ian Paisley's DUP. Tom Moore, with a little over 300 votes, was utterly humiliated.

At a tense count, the deputy returning officer, Ken Patterson, had announced an 80% turnout as opposed to 86% when Bobby Sands was elected (traditionally a higher turnout in the constituency tended to favour nationalist candidates), only to have to revise the figure up to 88%. This blunder had led to speculation that Maginnis could win, but this was mere wishful thinking and Owen Carron romped home with 31,278 votes - a 2,300 lead on Maginnis, his nearest challenger.

In an acceptance speech during which he was continually heckled by infuriated unionists, Carron pledged that British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's brutal and unjust policy in the H-Blocks would be brought to an end. News coverage of the speech did not record the heckling, completely changing the context and allowing the Irish Times to declare high-mindedly: "There was a vehemence and vituperation about the post declaration speech of Mr Carron which may hearten some of his supporters, but promises no



• Owen Carron addresses a rally as Rosaleen Sands shares the platform during the campaign to retain the Westminster seat won by Bobby Sands in Fermanagh/South Tyrone

great future for the politics of Northern Ireland."

Carron immediately demanded a meeting with Thatcher to discuss the ongoing crisis at which his press officer, Danny Morrison, would also be in attendance. She refused, saying that they could meet Stormont Minister Michael Allison instead. Carron accepted on the basis that he would pursue all avenues to resolve the H-Block crisis.

Unionist reaction was bitter in the extreme, with Paisley's DUP concluding ominously that the constituency contained 31,000 IRA supporters, in what many at the time viewed as a thinly veiled threat. The following Tuesday the home of Owen Carron's brother Seamus was

bombed in Maguiresbridge, Fermanagh.

Amid reports that Sinn Féin were to contest some seats in the next elections, including West Belfast (then held by the SDLP's Gerry Fitt), Ulster Unionist Harold McCusker declared that Sinn Féin had now overtaken the SDLP as the predominant nationalist party in the North. Sean Farren of the SDLP was stung into declaring that they would oppose Sinn Féin at every election while the SDLP deputy leader Seamus Mallon, belatedly accusing the British of "mishandling" the H-Block crisis, attempted to explain away Carron's stunning victory.

RTÉ television programmes began on Friday evening, 21 August 1981, with the returning officer for Fermanagh/South

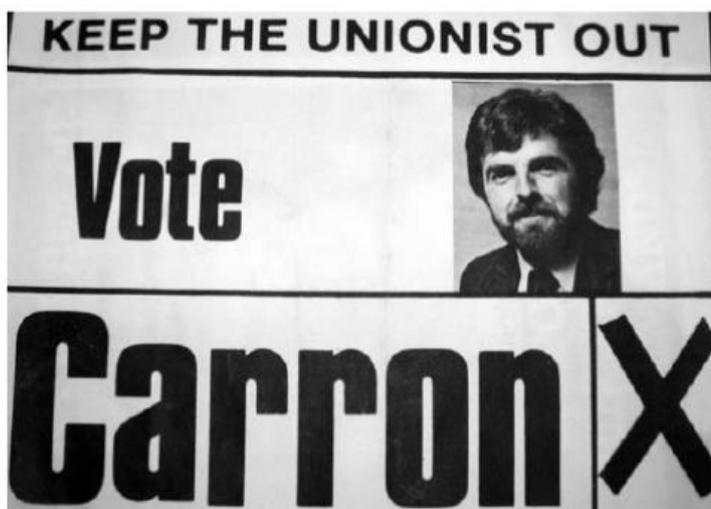


• Owen Carron carries the coffin of Bobby Sands

Tyrone reading out the votes gained by each of the candidates in the previous day's by-election.

As Owen Carron moved to the microphones to make his acceptance speech he was abruptly cut off - and thus ended the total news coverage, for those in single channel areas of the 26 Counties, of an indisputably significant event in Ireland. The ludicrous injustice of Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act, which banned republicans from the airwaves, was exposed like never before, prompting new protests by journalists and others against the outrageous censorship legislation.

The Dublin government's response to the death of Michael Devine and the election of Owen Carron was to attempt to ignore these events. In stark contrast to the previous nine deaths, the Dublin government did not send a message of condolence to Devine's family. Garret Fitzgerald also ruled out meeting Owen Carron. The day after Carron's election victory the Dublin government convened a two-day meeting, the main outcome of which was to rule out meeting Carron or any of the Hunger Strikers' families. The transparently bogus reason given, without



a hint of embarrassment, was that anti H-Block demonstrators had staged a sit-in at Government Buildings a couple of weeks previously.

Thatcher's refusal to meet Carron was thus mitigated by Dublin's refusal to meet him. British attempts to isolate the Hunger Strikers and their supporters and to stonewall all attempts at a solution were effectively endorsed by the Fitzgerald-led coalition whose main priority seemed to be to avoid a diplomatic confrontation with London at all costs.

Criticism of the British policy continued to mount, however, and from some unlikely places. IRA arch-critic Fr Austin Bustace of Donaghmore, County Tyrone

accused Thatcher of seeking to exact revenge on the prisoners for the death, two years previously, of her friend and mentor Airey Neave in an INLA bomb attack outside Westminster.

The Irish Press portrayed the 26 County Government response as confused and contradictory. Their refusal to meet Carron was all the more unjust considering that Government representatives had held a meeting with the UDA just a week previously.

The futility of this stance was evidenced by increasing support for the prisoners. A picket outside the British Consulate in New York was attended by the city's Attorney General.

Amidst unusual reports that republicans were actively encouraging supporters to register to vote, the shape of both British and Irish policy in the future was beginning to emerge - namely, to prop up the SDLP and marginalise republicans.

Despite all the hardship and adversity, the Republican Movement was becoming increasingly confident as the republican people of the Six Counties and beyond mobilised in ever increasing numbers. The die had been cast for the emergence of Sinn Féin as a major political force.



OWEN CARRON was Bobby Sands' election agent in the historic Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-election and was subsequently elected MP for the constituency in the by-election caused by Sands death. Twenty five years after those momentous events he spoke to ELLA O'DWYER.

Nothing would ever be the same again

In 1979 Owen Carron gave up his teaching job in Keady, County Armagh to join his ailing father in Fermanagh where he spent the year building a house on his father's land. During that time the crisis in the H Blocks was coming to the fore through the Relatives' Action Committees. "The first Hunger Strike began. I was friendly with other republican minded people, particularly a woman called Betty Leonard whose husband had been shot by loyalists in 1972. With the help of others, we decided to form the Fermanagh Anti-H-Block Committee." They took the show on the road and campaigned around villages in Fermanagh to raise awareness about the 1980 hunger strike. "We had black flag vigils, candle light processions, we said rosaries at street corners and that kind of thing.

"Then the first hunger strike came to an end in December 1980. We were a bit cut off from the central organisation in Belfast, so we didn't know what was happening strategy wise. December and January came and went and I remember reading in a paper on 1 March that a man called Bobby Sands was going on hunger strike. There was only about six lines on it. It was a feature of the early part of the second hunger strike that there was very little publicity on it. Then on 6 March the local MP Frank Maguire died. He was a republican who we all knew. He was an Independent who had been interned in the '50s. He had been an

• Bernadette McAliskey and Noel Maguire

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The majority of people in the room voted against Bobby standing as the main fear was of splitting the nationalist vote in the area and losing the seat entirely to Unionists. If the seat was split no nationalist could get enough votes to take the seat

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IRA man and we would have all known that. He had been a friend to the prisoners. But he was very much a local man - not someone for the big stage but he threw his weight behind the prisoners and in that sense he was a kind of lone voice."

Carron recalled being at Frank Maguire's funeral: "Bernadette McAliskey was there. She was on crutches as she was after being



shot by loyalists and the whole talk was about who would stand in Frank's place. People wondered if his brother Noel would run or if Bernadette McAliskey would because she was strong on the prisoner issue.

"The next thing I remember was Jim Gibney coming down to us to tell us that there was going to be a meeting in the Swan Lake Hotel in Monaghan and they wanted all republicans from Fermanagh to be there. When we went there republicans from Fermanagh and Tyrone were asked to support Bobby Sands' candidature for the upcoming by-election. Members of the Ard Chomhairle were there, Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, Daithí Ó Conaill, Gerry Adams etc. The majority of people in the room voted against Bobby standing as the main fear was of splitting the nationalist vote in the area and losing the seat entirely to Unionists. If the seat was split no nationalist could get enough votes to take the seat.

"At this point in time Noel Maguire's hat was in the field, Bernadette McAliskey's hat was in the field and now the Ard Chomhairle were promoting the idea that maybe Bobby Sands' hat should be in the field. People were totally fearful that the seat would be lost altogether. So the meeting voted not to run Bobby Sands but afterwards there was another little meeting where myself and some other republicans were talking to Adams, Ó Brádaigh and Ó Conaill and we said maybe if we could push Sands forward there might be a chance. What we didn't know at the time was that Adams and Gibney had gone to Noel Maguire and got a kind of tentative agreement that he might pull out for Sands."

It was decided to have a second meeting and it was agreed this time that that Bobby Sands would go forward.

"As chairperson of the local H-Block Committee I was pushed into the job of

• Bobby Sands (extreme left) in the Cages of Long Kesh

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I came back to Fermanagh where there was very little by way of an organisation. There was no office, I had no telephone. There were no mobile phones then and even landlines were very scarce. You're talking about 25 years ago after all

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becoming Bobby Sands' election agent. It was a daunting prospect and I was also a bit worried. I wasn't sure that the vote wouldn't be split. Over the next couple of days there were frantic efforts to get Noel Maguire to withdraw.

"On the Sunday I had the job of collecting signatures. You had to have ten signatures and two proposers for the nomination papers. The first one to sign it was an SDLP councillor called Tommy Murray who really put his neck on the line and got expelled from the SDLP for doing so. Other than republicans nobody wanted to stick their necks out for Sands.

"Anyway I eventually got all the necessary signatures and on the Monday I went to Dungannon to meet Gerry Adams and Jim Gibney. The problem now was that there were two nominees - Bobby and Noel Maguire and the worry was that the vote could be split. As it turned out Noel Maguire withdrew. Close of nominations was at four o'clock and at five minutes to four Noel Maguire withdrew his nomination. He did it because of public pressure from nationalists and republicans. He was a bit sore about it at the beginning but after that he had no problem with it. He was a great guy actually."

At this stage there was only nine days to get Bobby elected. "I came back to Fermanagh where there was very little by way of an organisation. There was no office, I had no telephone. There were no mobile phones then and even landlines were very scarce. You're talking about 25 years ago after all. We searched the whole town for a room. We went to Catholic businessmen and none of them would give us a room. Some of them threw us out because they were so annoyed that we had got Maguire not to stand. Eventually we got the front parlour of a house belonging to an elderly lady called Maude Drumm.

"People from all over Ireland came to help in the campaign. We had hundreds of people. There had been no organisation and we had to start from scratch. Because there was no candidate to go around I got the job of going around saying I was Bobby's election agent and would they vote for him. Then I had to go to the jail to get Sands to sign the nomination papers."

Asked what Bobby Sands was like, Carron says: "He wasn't what I expected. I had expected this tough man from Belfast. His hair wasn't long like in the posters. It was short. He was more like a university student. I didn't meet him until the 30th day of his hunger strike. He was a bit weak but very cheerful and very calm and collected. He was sitting on the bed and talking about the election."

"There was no bitterness at all in him, even in relation to the prison staff. I remember saying to him that if he wanted to come off the strike, there was no problem and that I'd go and tell the outside world, to which he responded: 'there's no question of that, don't even mention that. I believe I'll have to die and that Hughes will die behind me.'

"Bobby was the first. He knew he was going to die but nobody had gone before him on this hunger strike. He had nothing to go by. He was a pioneer. He was cut off from the world. Anytime there was a crisis they wouldn't let us in. He was alone facing the enemy, making up his own mind. He had only his own star."

Carron later met others of the Hunger Strikers who also deeply impressed him.

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He [Bobby Sands] was a pioneer. He was cut off from the world. Anytime there was a crisis they wouldn't let us in. He was alone facing the enemy, making up his own mind. He had only his own star

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Bobby Sands was only 27 when he embarked on a hunger strike to the death. Asked how it felt to carry the responsibility of representing Sands before the world's media, Carron said: "I was only 26 and had got so involved emotionally as well as my involvement as a republican. At the time I was full sure we were going to drive this thing through. I would have done anything, gone anywhere."

The campaign took off: "Bobby would have sent out comms to read out. We were busy knocking doors, we did every town, parish, housing estate. We covered the whole constituency. We were ambushed by loyalists. There was massive harassment because the RUC and the UDR were out and they were actively campaigning for the unionist candidate Harry West. Our bus was attacked with bricks, posters were being torn down. There was a tremendous edge to the campaign. We had to bring in international observers."

"I remember being on the bridge in Enniskillen once at one or two o'clock and the RUC kicking and beating people. The unionist community and the RUC really knew there was something big happening."

Carron recalled the day of the count and waiting for the result to be announced. "There was a fierce edge. The tension was palpable. The returning officer was a right unionist. The words actually physically stuck in his throat as he announced Bobby Sands to have won the seat. I remember the minute he announced it Danny Morrison roared. He let a big 'yahoo' and that dis-

BERNARD FOX REPLACES PADDY QUINN

On Monday, 24 August 1981, Belfast republican Bernard Fox became the 19th prisoner to join the Hunger Strike protest. It was now six months into the Hunger Strike and Fox replaced Paddy Quinn, whose family had authorised medical intervention after he had fallen into a coma.

Bernard Fox was the youngest member of his family, hailing from the St James's area of West Belfast. Like Bobby Sands, he had served an

apprenticeship as a coach builder, and had worked for more than a year at the same firm as Sands.

He joined the Republican Movement in 1969, becoming deeply involved in the resistance to British occupation.

Fox went 'on the run' after the introduction of internment in August 1971. A measure of his standing within the Movement can be inferred from the fact that, during the 1972 truce, he took part in talks with British

Army officers in Broadway billet.

Arrested in November 1972, he was interned until March 1974 and was then free briefly before being interned again, this time until the end of internment in December 1975. Immediately on his release, Fox went on the run again, finally being captured in November 1977 when he was charged with possession of timing devices and causing an explosion at the Grennan Lodge Hotel



in Belfast the previous month.

He spent 14 months on remand before a Diplock court convicted him on an alleged verbal confession and he was sentenced to 14 years. He immediately joined the blanket protest.

turbed your man altogether. It was brilliant and yet very dangerous. The RUC were going mad. They blocked the street so we couldn't march up. They were furious.

"The world media was there. I was completely out of my depth. I was just a school teacher and I had to make an acceptance speech on behalf of the republican prisoners in the H-Blocks."

Asked if he had thought that the election victory would save Bobby's life he said: "Yes certainly. I definitely thought it would. Many people thought - well, surely now they can't let him die. I suppose we were a bit naïve."

The last time Carron saw Bobby Sands was a couple of days before he died: "It was difficult. I knew he was going to die then. I saw him on the Saturday before he died. He was very bad at that stage. He was blind. All he said was 'Is that Owen?' He asked me was there any change and I said 'No'. So he just said 'just look after my Ma.' That was the last time I saw him alive and then I was at his funeral. There was a massive crowd - huge, huge. I remember Mrs Sands saying she wouldn't have denied him that for anything."

But there were many funerals to follow. Carron recalled Francis Hughes' removal.

"It was a bad experience. When Bobby died his body was brought to the Foster Green Hospital and the family undertaker just went over to the hospital and brought the body back to the house and there was a massive, massive wake. But the Brits wouldn't let a repeat of that happen.

"When we went to the hospital to collect Francis Hughes' body the place was surrounded with RUC. We were intending to bring his body up the Falls Road because there was a huge crowd waiting. When the coffin was put in the hearse they surrounded us and pulled the undertakers out of the hearse. The RUC wanted to take the hearse along a prescribed route.

"There was an awful confrontation at the hospital. I was in the front with the undertakers because they were afraid. They were ordinary men from Derry. When they pulled the undertaker out of the hearse he managed to grab the keys out of the hearse and put them in his mouth and they couldn't get them off him. They forced us through areas in Belfast where we were stoned. The hearse was stoned. Windows were broken in it. They wouldn't allow us into Toome on the way to South Derry because there was a big crowd there waiting for us. By the time



• Owen Carron, pictured in 2006 at the John Joe McGill monument in Ballinamore, County Leitrim

we reached Bellaghy the whole of the windows in the hearse were broken. I got my nose injured. When we arrived it was night and I remember some republicans putting the Tricolour on Francis Hughes' coffin and we took him to the house to wake him.

"On the last day of July myself, Gerry Adams and an IRSP man called Seamus Ruddy went to meet the remaining Hunger Strikers. We went in to tell them the exact story - what was on offer, which was very little and for Adams to tell them that if they wanted to come off the fast there was no problem and that the Movement would back them.

"We went into the Blocks and we met Tom McElwee and Mickey Devine. They later died. We also met Paddy Quinn and Liam McCloskey and Bik McFarlane was there. He was the O/C. We went and visited Kieran Doherty who was falling in and out of a coma. He was dying. I remember Tom McElwee spoke for them all and he asked us was that all that was on offer and Adams said that's it. At that Kieran said 'that's it. We'll give Thatcher all we've got.' They were determined.

"After Bobby's death another by-election for the constituency of Fermanagh/South Tyrone was called. By then the British had introduced a law to say that no prisoner could stand for election so I was asked to put my name forward."

The election was held on 19 August 1981 and Carron took the seat.

"The count was on the 20th, the day Mickey Devine died. So I was elected the day Mickey Devine died. I was at the funeral and it was daunting in a way with all the media. I felt a bit out of my depth but I did it because of what it was for.

“

I remember Tom McElwee spoke for them all and he asked us was that all that was on offer and Adams said that's it. At that Kieran said 'that's it. We'll give Thatcher all we've got.' They were determined

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"I worked as an abstentionist MP. Garrett Fitzgerald refused to meet me. Haughey met me for his own purposes because he had the glare of media there. He wouldn't let me sit down, so we stood in an office. He was a very small man but he had a kind of presence about him. He was tough and in his eyes he was the boss – 'the prince' – that kind of thing. He shook my hand but then again, he'd shake hands with the devil and

“
Garret Fitzgerald refused to meet me. Haughey met me for his own purposes because he had the glare of media there.... He shook my hand but then again, he'd shake hands with the devil and at the time, so would we
 ”

at the time, so would we. Margaret Thatcher refused to meet me. She said I was only a half-baked MP."

Owen Carron was arrested in Fermanagh on Christmas 1985 and charged with possession of a rifle.

"I was in jail in Crumlin Road for a couple of months and I got bail. I jumped bail and I was on the run until 1988 when I was arrested in Sligo. I fought the extradition case and spent two years in Portlaoise."

A photograph of the handshake between Carron and Haughey had been taken during the 1981 Hunger Strike and it was later used during the campaign to oppose Carron's extradition to the Six Counties. "Eventually I won a political exemption and was released but the consequences of being released in the South is that I can't go back to my home in the North. I'm one of the On The Runs (OTR)."

Since his release from Portlaoise Prison in 1990, Owen Carron has lived in County Leitrim where he works as a teacher. He is now director of elections for Sinn Féin's Roscommon/South Leitrim general election candidate Martin Kenny.

Reflecting on the legacy of the Hunger Strike Carron says: "I think that the Hunger Strike was the big event of the latter part of the 20th century, – the thing that changed things forever. I think the Hunger Strike was the wind that shook the barley to the extent that nothing would ever be the same again."

GERRY CARVILLE

Gerry Carville, a single man from Greencastle, County Down, joined the 1981 Hunger Strike on Monday 31 August at the age of 25. He was the 20th man to join the fast. He was the youngest of a family of 11, with six sisters and four brothers. His mother died in 1973 and his father in 1974. Brought up on a small farm four miles outside the small fishing port of Kilkeel, Gerry was an enthusiastic Gaelic footballer in his early teens and played for Greencastle GAC and for Down minor football team.

In 1974, at the age of 18, Gerry moved to Belfast, where he worked as a civil servant. He left the following year and returned to Kilkeel, where he worked on a fishing boat until his arrest in 1977. Gerry's republican involvement followed his active participation in the Civil Rights Movement and his revulsion at the British Army slaughter in Derry on Bloody Sunday in 1972. He joined the Republican Movement in 1974. On 1 April 1977, Gerry was arrested near Kilkeel Barracks, shortly after the



RUC had discovered a rifle in a nearby garden. He was taken to Kilkeel and then Newcastle RUC Barracks, where he was ill-treated and subsequently shot and wounded while trying to escape. Gerry was charged with possession of a rifle with intent and with participation in IRA commercial

bomb attacks on three hotels and a pub. He spent 17 months on remand: nine in Crumlin Road and eight in the H-Blocks. At his trial in September 1978 he was sentenced to 14 years. On being sentenced, Gerry joined the Blanket Protest and subsequently the No-Wash Protest. He suffered several beatings from warders, resulting in black eyes and bruising. At Christmas 1978, he was one of those forcibly scrubbed and Screws sheared off his hair. Gerry Carville was one of the 30 men who joined the first hunger strike in 1980. He remained on the 1981 Hunger Strike until its conclusion on 3 October.

Protest undermined



• Prisoners' relatives arriving at Clonard Church Hall for a meeting with Denis Faul

In early September 1981 the families of the men on Hunger Strike in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh faced horrendously difficult decisions as their sons lay dying while the British Government remained impassive.

On Friday 4 September, Matt Devlin's family authorised medical intervention. At 3pm that day, Matt was reported to have gone into an epileptic type fit and his mother and brother, summoned from their County Tyrone home and told of his dangerous condition, signed the necessary papers for doctors to give medical aid.

On Sunday 6 September, Laurence

McKeown reached his 70th day on the fast and went unconscious. His family authorised medical intervention.

The plan to sustain a state of constant crisis and pressure on the British was therefore postponed at a time when the then leading Hunger Striker, Liam McCloskey, had reached his 38th day, an estimated three weeks before the most critical point. The families of Paddy Quinn and Pat McGeown had already intervened to save their sons' lives.

The British Government at this time was being encouraged in its attitude by the persistent, unhelpful interference in the Hunger Strike by certain members of the clergy and their intense emotional lobbying of prisoners' families. Nevertheless, the Hunger Strike continued and, on Monday 7 September, John Pickering, from Andersonstown in West Belfast,

joined the fast at a time when Gerry Carville from Greencastle, County Down, was on his tenth day.

Bernard Fox was on his 17th day and Jackie McMullan on his 24th day; Pat Sheehan had completed 30 days; Liam McCloskey was on his 38th day.

The fact that McCloskey was an INLA Volunteer and leading the fast scuppered the media contention that the INLA prisoners had withdrawn support from the Hunger Strike. What the INLA had in fact decided to do was to reduce their participation from the one-in-four ratio to IRA hunger-strikers to be more in line with the one-in-ten ratio which corresponded with the size of their group among the protesting H-Block prisoners.

Statement from families

In the aftermath of the family interventions, the families of the

remaining six men on the fast issued this statement:

"We, the families of the present Hunger Strikers in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh, wish to state our public support for the political prisoners' struggle for their 5 demands and for our loved-ones on hunger strike.

"We call upon the British Government to ensure a permanent ending to all the prison protests by implementing the conditions outlined by the prisoners. We request a public response from the British Government to this appeal."

QUINN CRITICAL

In late July Mrs Catherine Quinn, unable to watch her son Paddy writhing in agony, signed for medical intervention.

Paddy Quinn, then 47 days on hunger strike, had reached a critical stage becoming dangerously ill much earlier than expected. His mother and sister, who arrived to visit him at 4.30pm on Friday, found him unconscious as a result of several epileptic attacks which had been caused by a shortage of oxygen reaching his brain. His family, seeing him screaming with pain, told doctors in the hospital to intervene to save his life. The Quinn family later pointed out:

"Had Paddy been conscious, we



could not have taken the decision to give him medical treatment. He was determined to go on to the end. The brave men remaining on Hunger Strike are conscious and while they remain so only they can make the decision to end the Hunger Strike."

Mrs Quinn's understandable action in calling for medical intervention was seized upon by the Catholic Church hierarchy in an attempt to undermine the prison protest.

Despite the family intervention in Quinn's case, the trend for intervention was not yet established and the parents of Kevin Lynch and Kieran Doherty, along with the next-of-kin of Michael Devine, supported their loved ones on the Hunger Strike.

Even after the deaths of ten comrades on hunger strike, there was no demoralisation in the H-Blocks and the commitment to the Hunger Strike and the belief in it as the only weapon

John Pickering — 21st man joins Hunger Strike

John Pickering, from Andersonstown, West Belfast, was 25 years of age when he joined the 1981 Hunger Strike on 7 September. He was the 21st man to join the fast. He was a friend, comrade and cell-mate of Kieran Doherty.

After leaving school at the age of 15, John got a job as an apprentice joiner. Several months later, he was arrested and charged with riotous behaviour; he spent two months in St Patrick's juvenile detention centre in West Belfast.



John joined the Republican Movement as a young teenager. In August

1972, at the age of 16, he went on the run after being threatened during a two-day spell in Dunmurry RUC Barracks with being interned without trial when he turned 17 later that year. In fact, ten days before Christmas of that year, and just two months after his 17th birthday, John was again arrested. He was interned for three years, until November 1975.

Upon his release John once more wholeheartedly threw himself into the liberation struggle. In August 1976, he and three others

(including Kieran Doherty) were captured on active service on the Malone Road. They were all charged with numerous operations including the killing of a UDR soldier.

After spending 17 months on remand in Crumlin Road Jail, John was sentenced to 26 years' imprisonment. He immediately joined the Blanket Protest and was also on the No-Wash Protest, during which time he developed a bad ear infection for which he had to undergo an operation.

for achieving their 5 demands continued. But beyond the prison gates the Hunger Strike was being undermined by attacks from the Church.

After Mrs Quinn's intervention, the three other families did likewise and Pat McGeown, Matt Devlin and Laurence McKeown were taken off the fast.

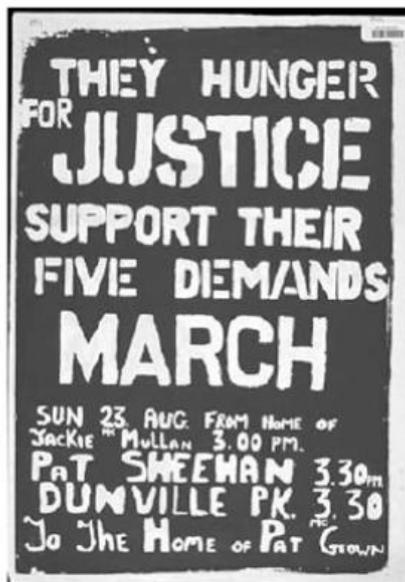
Bobby Sands once wrote of how he suspected Fr Toner, the Long Kesh prison chaplain, of playing a disastrous role during the first hunger strike and of attempting to scuttle the second one. His suspicions were later verified by the behaviour of other clerics.

The medical interventions, pressure from the clergy and the decision by INLA prisoners not to continue with the Hunger Strike on the previous scale were all seized upon to support the case that the strike was collapsing.

However the Hunger Strike continued. During a period when supporters were not faced with the prospect of an imminent prison death, it was a time to be used to assess how best to overcome frustration and to build pressure once again on the British and on the Irish establishment.

DUNDALK CONFERENCE

On 6 September 1981, the day that Laurence McKeown was taken off the Hunger Strike, an important confer-



ence was held in Dundalk. This was an open event held by the National H-Block/Armagh Committee and it demonstrated that, despite the continued intransigence of the British Government after six months of hunger strike and ten deaths, the campaign activists were not demoralised. The conference was by far the committee's best-ever-attended with nearly 1,000 participants from all over the country.

A smuggled out message of thanks from the H-Block blanket men was read out. The men reaffirmed their commitment to Hunger Strike and declared that the intransigence of the British would be reversed when they

realised "how counter-productive is their death policy".

Bernadette McAliskey delivered the committee's report, stating at the outset:

"The five demands have not yet been won... If we did not believe the prisoners' demands could be won, we would not be here. Our task here is to decide what we must do to win the demands and organise to do it."

She went on to say that the committee had made a central error.

"We have not politically convinced the campaign militants why, and how, we should make demands of such groups as the SDLP, GAA, etc, pressuring them and widening the support beyond the committed anti-imperialist.

"The campaign must be broadened. We must directly involve and integrate all those who support the five demands."

Meanwhile the Irish government, SDLP and Catholic Hierarchy all withheld the full pressure they could have placed upon the British. They judged that a victory for the prisoners would further damage British rule (and their own influence) and would promote republicanism.

The Hunger Strike was damaging the British image abroad and led to an upsurge in Irish-American support for the republican cause while destabilising the political establishment in Ireland.

Gerard Hodgins joins Hunger Strike

Gerard Hodgins, aged 21, joined the 1981 Hunger Strike on 13 September. He was the 22nd man to join the fast. From a West Belfast family of three children, Gerard was a former cellmate of the late Bobby Sands. His mother lived in the Turf Lodge area of Belfast and his father had died in 1977.

At the time of his father's death, Hodgins was cruelly refused compassionate parole as part of the British Government's policy to increase, at every available

opportunity, the mental anguish of the blanketmen, in an attempt to break them.

The Hodgins family originally lived in the Springfield Road area of West Belfast, but after internment in August 1971 they were forced to leave due to loyalist intimidation. The family moved to Downpatrick, County Down where Gerard, then aged 11, grew up in relatively quiet surroundings, regularly going fishing and exploring the countryside.

Hodgins worked as a

lorry driver's assistant in nearby Saintfield for six months and later as a labourer in Downpatrick until his arrest in May 1976 when the RUC raided his home. He was then taken to Newtownards barracks where he was held for three days, beaten and threatened. He was charged along with a friend with the attempted killing of several RUC men a week earlier. This charge was later dropped and he was charged with possession of a pistol. Hodgins spent six



months on remand and at his non-jury Diplock trial in November 1976 he was sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment. In the H-Blocks he immediately joined his comrades on the blanket protest.

New Direct Ruler — no change in policy

On Tuesday, 15 September 1981, James Prior arrived in Belfast in his role as British direct ruler in the North. There was some speculation at the time that his appointment might lead to new policies. Such speculation was based on Prior's reputation as a political heavyweight and a 'wet' in the British cabinet, his resistance whilst Employment Secretary to legislation aimed at curbing the powers of trade unions, and consistent press reports over a period of weeks that he would resign before replacing Atkins in Stormont. The fact that he didn't resign was taken as the most explicit confirmation that he had successfully bargained for 'considerable autonomy' on the North,

though he would make no comment on this when asked.

However, after personally handling the H-Block hunger strike crisis, it was unlikely that Thatcher would so easily surrender such control or allow a settlement that would directly contradict her disastrous mismanagement. Besides, the necessary pressure for breaking the back of British repression was not yet built up because of resistance from the Irish establishment to isolating Britain by real and effective action.

MOUNTING IRA ATTACKS

Prior's appointment coincided with Gerard Hodgins joining the Hunger



• James Prior

Strike. He arrived in the North against a background of mounting IRA attacks on British forces and with the prospect of Britain establishing political normalisation (the third corner of the criminalisation/Unionisation triangle) never looking

Jim Devine aged 24 from Strabane, County Tyrone, joined the H Block hunger strike on Monday, 21 September 1981. The Glasgow born man was the 23rd person to join the Hunger Strike. The second eldest in the Devine family with four brothers and five sisters, he was born in Glasgow. The family moved back to Ireland in the 1960s and lived in the predominantly unionist town of Comber in County Down.

Comber, where Jim spent most of his childhood, was a quiet town, but when conflict broke out in 1969 things changed. Several Catholic families were petrol bombed out of their homes. The local primary school which Jim had attended - St Mary's - was bombed by unionist paramilitaries. Jim and several other members of the Devine family were threatened.

Jim Devine joins

On one occasion Jim was forced to stand for the British national anthem at the cinema and, more seriously, in another incident he had a knife put to his throat.

In March 1973 the Devine family left Comber and moved to Strabane in County Tyrone, where both parents originally came from. Jim Devine attended St Colman's High School in Strabane, but left to become an apprentice electrician in a government training scheme in Derry city. Meanwhile Devine was taking a keen interest in the political conflict and became an active IRA Volunteer. In September 1978 he was arrested from his home and after being held and threatened in Derry's Strand Road barracks, he was

charged with various gun and bomb attacks.

Devine was held on remand for 16 months, and then in January 1979 he was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment in a non-jury Diplock court which he refused to recognise. Two months later he was sentenced to a further, but shorter concurrent term.

Jim Devine went on the blanket protest when he was sentenced. Had he conformed and not resisted 'criminalisation' he would have been due for release in 1983.

Devine's embarkation on the Hunger Strike brought the number of men on the fast back up to eight. Out of the eight men, four were in the prison hospital: 25 year old INLA Volunteer Liam McCloskey from Dungiven and three



Belfast IRA Volunteers, Pat Sheehan, Jackie Mc Mullan and Bernard Fox. That week Fr Denis Faul publicly appealed to the next of kin of Liam McCloskey and Bernard Fox to intervene to save their lives. After visiting the hospital, Faul warned that not only Liam McCloskey but Bernard Fox was entering a critical phase. He said Liam McCloskey was going blind and that Bernard Fox was in danger of suffering kidney failure due to his inability to hold down sufficient water.



• Fidel Castro

dimmer. Former direct ruler Humphrey Atkins' attempts to set up a non-elected 50-member 'advisory council' died at birth, and the credibility of the SDLP as the political representatives of the nationalist people had taken such a severe knocking as to call into question its future should it face a republican challenge.

Similarly the Dublin coalition Government's future looked bleak. Its wafer-thin majority was threatened by the outcome of a by-election in the Cavan-Monaghan constituency left vacant by the death of Hunger Striker Kieran Doherty

TD. The Hunger Strike and the consequent politicisation of tens of thousands of people directly shook the political stability of the 26 Counties.

In the same week that Prior arrived in the North, nationalist councillors walked out of council chambers in Magherafelt and Dungannon over the situation in the H-Blocks, and the Irish Independence Party announced a phased withdrawal from several other council chambers. An appeal from the Hunger Strikers' families for all others to follow was rebuffed by SDLP leaders, who said they would not

withdraw. The families said that the council boycott - a peaceful form of protest - would hasten the British in settling the crisis, but the SDLP remained unmoved.

CASTRO PRAISES HUNGER STRIKE 'HEROES'

Despite the inactivity of the SDLP and the political parties in the 26 Counties, international pressure on Britain continued to mount. Leading US politicians attacked Britain, and President Fidel Castro of Cuba, speaking at an international conference in Havana, described the IRA Volunteers as "heroes" who when in prison "should be recognised as political prisoners". The British ambassador to Cuba, David Thomas, walked out in protest Castro's recognition of the IRA as an army of national liberation raised its status in the eyes of Third World countries and progressive regimes. That the British Government's handling of the H-Block crisis had a disastrous effect on Britain's actual strategy in Ireland started to sink through to everyone except the majority of British politicians. The Liberal Party showed more interest in criticising the Tory government's lack of anti-Hunger Strike propaganda than in ways and means of reaching a settlement. Some sections of the British media, however, concluded that far from defeating the IRA, Thatcher's intransigence was actually strengthening it.



The Hunger Strike ends

This week, 25 years ago, the epic and heroic chapter in Irish history that was the 1981 H-Block Hunger Strike came to an end after 217 tortuous days. The momentum of the Hunger Strike had been slowed down by a sequence of events. This process continued when Hunger Strikers Bernard Fox and Liam McCloskey reluctantly ended their fast in the last week in September. This latest development occurred at a stage when the protest had been building up again after Matt Devlin and Laurence McKeown were taken off the fast by relatives at the beginning of month.

On 25 September, after 33 days, Bernard Fox was told he had no more than four or five days to live. He was found to have been suffering from an obstruction in a tube leading to his kidneys. Following a meeting between the Hunger Strikers and the O/C of the republican prisoners, Fox agreed to end his fast and accepted medical attention in order to prevent his premature death through kidney failure.

Liam McCloskey reluctantly ended his fast on Saturday, 26 September after his mother convinced him that she would intervene once he lapsed into a coma. In a statement issued at the time she said that she and her family fully supported the prisoners' five demands, adding: "We don't want our son nor his friends to live in the conditions that created this hunger strike."

FR. DENIS FAUL

Earlier that Saturday afternoon the protesting prisoners in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh issued a statement through the Belfast Republican Press Centre sharply condemning the "hunger strike breaking" tactics of Catholic priest Fr. Denis Faul, whom they accused of deliberately maximising pressure on the families and especially mothers to go against their sons' expressed wishes.

The previous Wednesday, Denis Faul had made a very public appeal to the next-of-kin of Bernard Fox and Liam McCloskey to intervene to save their lives. Faul was using the emotional vulnerability of relatives as a powerful lever against the Hunger Strikers and the prisoners' statement said that Fr Faul had "emerged as the best friend the British



• Denis Faul

Government has". By the Wednesday of that week the foremost Hunger Striker – Pat Sheehan – had gone 52 days without food. He was having trouble with his eyesight and weighed only seven stone. By then the five other Hunger Strikers had completed the following days on hunger strike: Jackie McMullan, 45 days; Gerry Carville, 31 days; John Pickering, 24 days; Gerard Hodgins, 17 days; and Jim Devine, ten days.

Along with the obstacles created by Denis Faul's tactics was the Irish government's failure to put pressure on the British government. The Irish establishment refused to take the type of action needed to shift the British because it believed that the credibility of the IRA was linked directly to the success or failure of the Hunger Strike.

For same reason, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher said that the

Hunger Strike was the "IRA's last card". Even the demonstration of the prisoners' resolve to continue the fast was maligned by Faul who suggested in mid-September that the high proportion of Belfast men on Hunger Strike (then five out of seven) was a deliberate IRA ploy designed to weaken the influence of the Catholic clergy on supposedly more 'susceptible' rural families of Hunger Strikers to end the their fast.

On the Sunday afternoon Faul called a meeting with the families during which he persuaded the majority of them to indicate that they would sanction medical attention for their sons if they could not persuade them off the fast. Faul's intervention took the pressure off the British and the Irish establishments and undermined the Hunger Strike. With all this in mind the protesting prisoners in the H-Blocks and the remaining Hunger Strikers



• Women's Cross Border March, planned during the Hunger Strike which went ahead following the end of the Strike

reluctantly decided to end their historic fast on Saturday, 3 October.

PRISONERS' STATEMENT

The prisoners issued a statement in which they said that they had been "robbed of the hunger strike as an effective protest weapon principally because of the successful campaign waged against our distressed relatives by the Catholic hierarchy, aided and abetted by the Irish establishment (the SDLP and Free State political parties) which took no effective action against the British government and did everything to encourage feelings of hopelessness among our kith and kin. The success of this campaign meant that the British government could remain intransigent as the crucial political pressure which flows from the threat of death or actual death of Hunger Strikers was subsiding, not increasing".

The prisoners re-affirmed their opposition to criminalisation and said that the sacrifices of their ten dead comrades in the face of British intransigence has "given us international political recognition and has made the cause of Irish freedom an international issue. It has increased support at home and abroad for Irish resistance and has shown that the



oppressed nationalist people and the political prisoners are one". This latest point was reinforced by the by-election victory of James McCreesh, father of Raymond, who humiliated his SDLP opponent in the fight for a local government seat in South Armagh on Wednesday, 30 September.

The day after Denis Paul's meeting with the families of the Hunger Strikers, a

number of relatives had a meeting at Stormont with Lord Gowrie, the prisons' minister under Jim Prior. Nothing positive or hopeful emerged from that meeting and it had no bearing on the prisoners' decision to end the Hunger Strike. The prisoners ended the Hunger Strike unilaterally and simply because as a weapon it had been undermined. At 11.30 am Saturday 3 October Brendan McFarlane requested a series of meetings with the O/Cs of H Blocks four, five and six and the Hunger Strikers. McFarlane was allowed to go into each of the H-Blocks where prisoners were on protest and to confer with the O/C of each block. He was then taken to the prison hospital for a meeting with the Hunger Strikers. By arrangement the end of the Hunger Strike was announced from the Belfast Republican Press Centre at 3pm and fifteen minutes later the six men ended their heroic Hunger Strike which lasted 217 days since being started by Bobby Sands on 1 March.

Commenting on the sacrifices of the ten dead hunger strikers, Gerry Adams said: "The heroism of the ten H-Block martyrs, the courage of the men and women protesting prisoners, the stupidity of the British government and the principled response of the nationalist people to

the prisoners' plight has had a deep and permanent effect on nationalist politics in Ireland. Nineteen eighty one – the year of the Hunger Strike – is no mere temporary setback for British policies in Ireland. Nationally and internationally its effects will be felt as the struggle for Irish independence progresses in the months and years ahead."

MEDIA ACTIVITY

Once news of the end of the Hunger Strike on Saturday, 3 October was released there was a major flurry of national, British and international media activity, most of it favourably disposed to the Hunger Strikers and their reasoning for calling off the fast. Saturday morning's *Irish Times*, in expectation of a development, said that "an end to the H-Block Hunger Strike would be greeted with deep relief by the (Irish) government, whose members had viewed the crisis it provoked as a threat to political stability, North and South".

Within 24 hours of the announcement that the Hunger Strike was over British direct ruler in the Six Counties, James Prior flew back to Belfast from England. He said: "I shall go into consultation with



• Gerry Adams

my officials to try and size up where we have got to and I think it would be important to get it right, rather than to hurry over any decisions."

Unionist reaction was to conclude that

British intransigence had paid off – which was a mistaken evaluation and which was to blind them to the political and military cost of that intransigence. However by Tuesday, when Prior announced his reforms in response to the ending of the Strike, the unionists – from Ian Paisley to UDA spokespersons (whose prisoners would actually gain from the Hunger Strike) – were frothing at the mouth and declaring that the British had capitulated to the IRA. What had won these reforms was seven months of hunger strike and a five year old blanket protest - not a British commitment to liberal prison regimes.

In a statement made in Stormont, Prior announced a number of reforms which produced typical reactions: an overly favourable response from Catholic leaders and nationalist politicians, and automatic exaggeration of the breadth of the concessions and condemnation from unionists.

The prisoners were given smuggled copies of Prior's statement but were later supplied with copies by the prison governor. Prior said that the prisoners' views on work and association were not compatible with the British prison system but that there was "room for development here as



INTERNATIONAL PROTEST: Oslo, Norway, 5 May 1981. Demonstration at the visit of Queen Elizabeth

elsewhere". He said that, in future, prisoners would be allowed to wear their own clothes at all times.

On remission, prisoners were to regain only half of that lost as a result of their protest, a particularly vindictive and vengeful outcome. To even qualify for this remission a prisoner would have to complete a period of three months conformity with prison rules, but until the hurdle of what constitutes prison work could be overcome, the prisoners could be classified as protesting prisoners if they refused to carry out what they considered degrading or menial work. Prior said that "the possibility of widening the scope of work in the prisons can be examined but only within certain well-defined limits. I do therefore want to encourage a system where the very advanced training and educational facilities available may be freely used by all prisoners."

In order to implement the change, Prior said that no loss of remission would be imposed for the next 28 days as a penalty for breaches of prison rules arising out of the refusal to wear prison-clothes.

On association, Prior said there would be expansion to include association in adjacent wings of H-Blocks in recreation rooms and exercise areas, over the existing situation where prisoners could mix with one another at meal times, exercise times and in the evening and at weekends.

RESPONSE

The response from the political prisoners came in a statement that said: "we, republican political prisoners in H Blocks 3, 4, 5 and 6, Long Kesh, feel we cannot give an opinion on Mr Prior's statement yesterday because we do not know what Mr Prior has in mind for this prison. We found his statement ambiguous and we will need clarification before we can form an opinion".

The statement went on to welcome the introduction of own clothing for all prisoners, calling it "a move in the right direction". But on the other hand they felt that Prior's attitude to lost remission was "very vengeful" towards them and their families. "Fifty per cent return of lost remission is inadequate. It means that in most cases prisoners will have to serve between two and two-and-a-half years extra in jail. In the present circumstances and atmosphere it represents a major problem. We hope that petty vindictiveness and bureaucracy are not going to be the cause of further confrontation in this dispute."

Just how central a political issue the



INTERNATIONAL PROTEST: Amsterdam protest 17 April 1981; (below) Lisbon, Portugal. Massive march in solidarity with the prisoners of the H Blocks and Armagh, 6 May 1981



seven month Hunger Strike was in both Ireland and Britain was shown by the front page prominence given in most Sunday newspapers to the news of the ending on the Saturday of the Hunger Strike, followed on Monday by a stream of editorials and lengthy feature pieces on the subject. Amongst the various analyses carried in the papers after the Hunger Strike were comments in *The Belfast Telegraph* – “Proceed with care” – and the News Letter which stated “Real fight goes on”. Curiously muted

on the question of a British victory, and mindful of the unimpaired republican capacity for waging war against British occupation, their editorials were a tacit acknowledgement that Britain’s victory was entirely illusory. Isolated internationally for its intransigence, its Irish policies in tatters, the blanket men unbowed and the republicanism strengthened, the British could only revel idly in the mere appearance of victory. Real victory had eluded them.

As a result of Britain’s H-Block death

policy and the bravery of the Hunger Strikers, massive political capital accrued to the IRA, while British rule in Ireland was significantly destabilised. As Bobby Sands wrote in his prison diary on his first day on Hunger Strike: “I am dying not just to attempt to end the barbarity of H-Block, or to gain the rightful recognition of a political prisoner, but primarily because what is lost in here is lost for the Republic and those wretched oppressed whom I am deeply proud to know as the ‘risen people’.”

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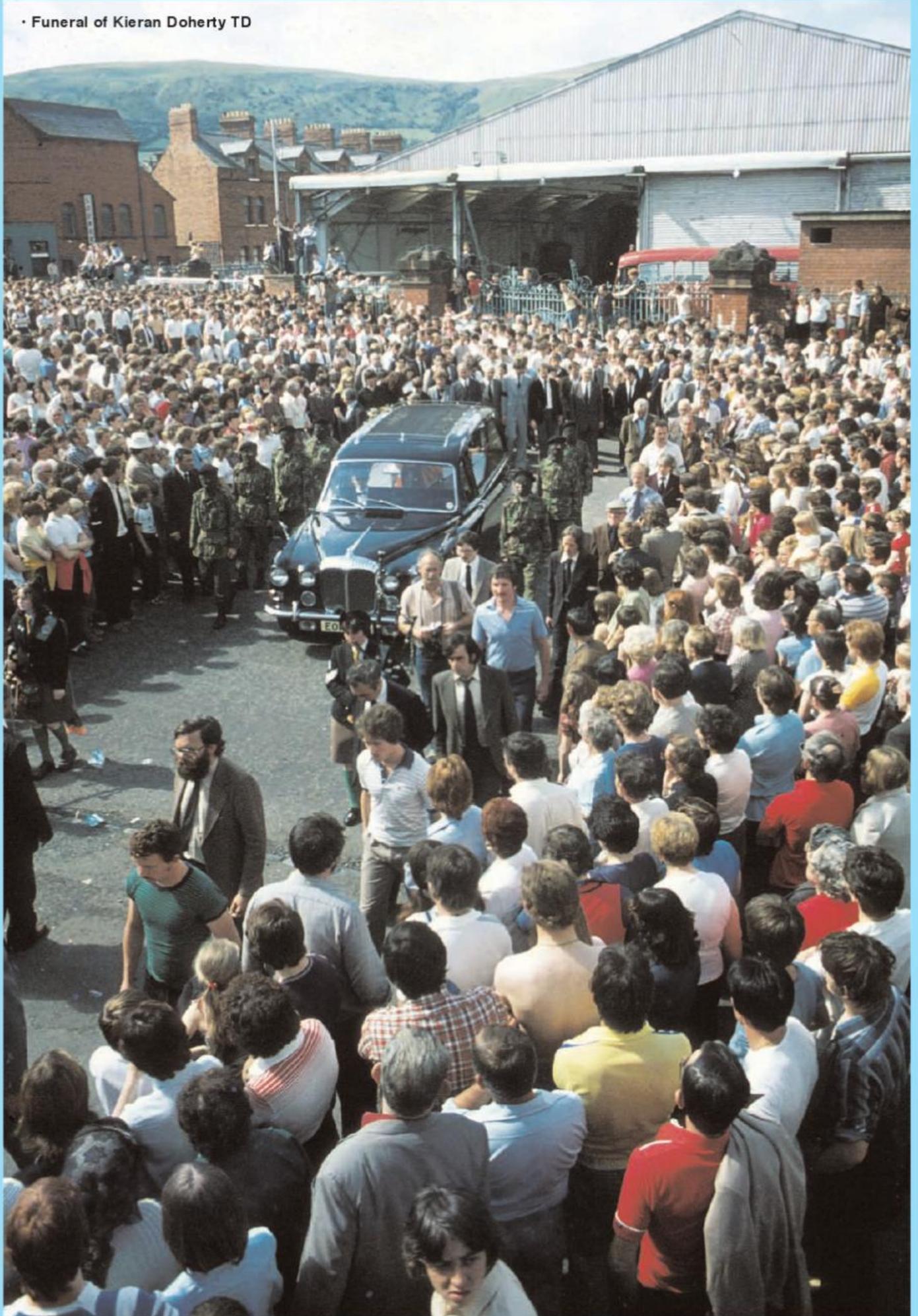
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• Funeral of Kieran Doherty TD



A contingent of republican former POWs, passes a commemorative white line picket on the Falls Road, Belfast as they lead a crowd of over 25,000 people to Casement Park for a 25th anniversary rally in honour of the Hunger Strikers

