

H-BLOCK ARMAGH

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Committee

BULLETIN

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5p

THE PRISONERS' DEMANDS: THE RIGHT NOT TO WEAR PRISON UNIFORM * THE RIGHT NOT TO DO PRISON WORK * THE RIGHT OF FREE ASSOCIATION WITH OTHER PRISONERS * THE RIGHT TO ORGANISE THEIR OWN EDUCATIONAL AND RECREATIONAL FACILITIES AND TO RECEIVE ONE VISIT, ONE LETTER AND ONE PARCEL PER WEEK * FULL REMISSION OF SENTENCE.



5 YEARS OF SOLIDARITY & RESISTANCE

Five years ago this month, Kieran Nugent was sent to the H Blocks. He was the first prisoner to be refused special category status, in line with the "criminalisation" policy of the Mason administration. (Previously prisoners convicted under special legislation had special category status while serving their sentences.) He refused to accept the criminal uniform, and was forced to remain in his cell with only a blanket to wear. Soon Kieran was joined by other prisoners. Arrested under special legislation, tortured, beaten, tried before special courts, and convicted to spend special

(Continued on back page)



Gerard Hodgins, who has completed his first week on hunger strike.

HUNGER STRIKERS' CONDITION

Liam McCloskey, who is 54 days on hunger strike today, was visited on Tuesday by his family. They found his condition had seriously deteriorated. He had gone blind, and could only distinguish his brother by the sound of his voice. He can now only take two pints of water per day and cannot even hold that down. Due to dizzy spells he is confined to bed.

Last week Jackie McMullan was moved to the prison hospital. He has completed 39 days on hunger strike and like Pat Sheehan (47 days) his condition continues to deteriorate, though both men are mentally alert.

Bernard Fox (33 days) was also visited on Tuesday. He informed his family that over the weekend he had been unable to hold down water. However they found him very alert and determined to carry on.

The condition of John Pickering also gives cause for worry. John, who has been on hunger strike for 19 days, is having bad stomach pains. These were so severe that on his eleventh day he suffered a blackout.

JIM DEVINE

The number of prisoners presently on hunger strike was brought up to eight on Monday when Jim Devine became the twenty-third prisoner to refuse food.

Jim is the second eldest in a family of five boys and five girls who live in Strabane. He was born in Glasgow but his family returned to Northern Ireland in the early sixties and lived in Comber, Co. Down. He had a quiet childhood but in 1969 things began to change. Comber was a predominantly loyalist area and several Catholics were bombed out of their homes. The local Catholic primary school was blown up. Jim and members of his family were threatened. On one occasion he had a knife put to his throat and on another he was forced to stand for the Queen at a local cinema. In March 1973 the family moved to Strabane where Mr and Mrs Devine originally came from.

Jim left school before sitting for O-levels and became an apprentice electrician in Derry on a government training scheme. In June 1974 he got a job in the large Dupont complex outside Derry.

It was about this time that he seriously began to question the British presence in Ireland and ask why there was so much unemployment, bad housing, and harassment. This resulted in him becoming active in the Republican Movement.

In September 1978 Jim and his brother were arrested outside his home. They were taken to Strand Road RUC station. Jim was threatened that if he didn't sign a confession admitting possession of incendiaries and bomb making materials at his home, his brother and father would also be charged. He was held for 16 months on remand and in January 1979 received a sentence of ten years from a Diplock court. He refused to recognise the court. Two months later he was sentenced to six years for other offences. Jim has been on the blanket ever since and is now in H Block 6.

RELATIVE

92 relatives of protesting prisoners in the H Blocks and Armagh, accompanied by Owen Carron MP, arrived in Heathrow on Thursday. In an attempt to intimidate the delegation Michael McCloskey, Joe Pickering (whose brothers, Liam and John respectively, are on hunger strike) were held with one other under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. They were released after 40 minutes.

The relatives then went to Conway Hall to give a press conference to a packed hall. The press were addressed by Owen Carron MP, and various relatives who all gave full support to the prisoners. Michael McCloskey, whose brother Liam is the leading hunger striker, said: "The families are fully behind their relatives at present on hunger strike. The men are fully determined to continue despite recent speculation that the whole thing is breaking down."

"All the present hunger strikers have asked their families not to intervene and say that if they do they will go back on the hunger strike."

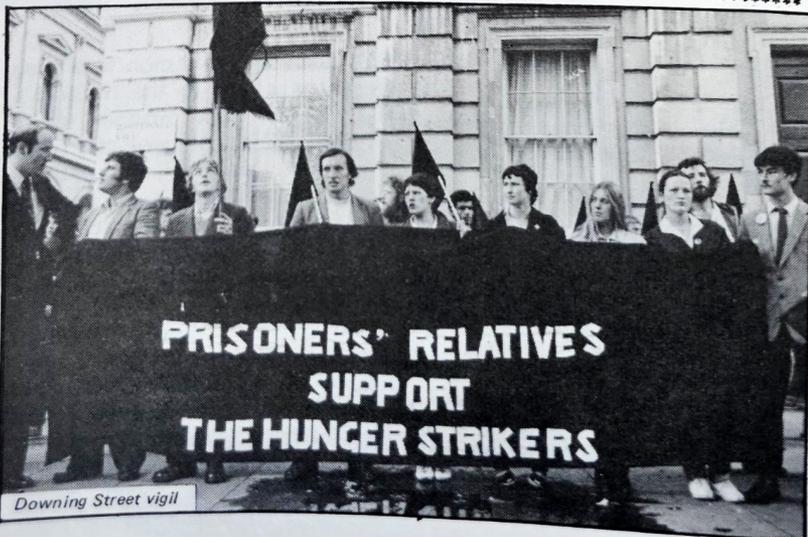
The Press Conference was chaired by the barrister Lord Gifford, who condemned the Diplock Courts as a "facade of justice" at the start of a "conveyor belt which leads to the prisons".

He read out messages of support from Plaid Cymru MP, Dafydd Ellis Thomas and Colin Winter, the exiled Bishop of Namibia, who welcomed the relatives to this country and condemned the root cause of their having to come here: "English imperialism, English colonialism, English intransigence, English policies, and English callousness."

That evening the relatives and Owen Carron were warmly received in the Irish Centre in Camden. Richard Balfe, MEP, condemned his own party (Labour) for its lack of support for the prisoners, and said that "no-one who travels in Europe as I do can fail to realise that there is widespread support for the H Block men."

Maura McCrory of the National H Block/Armagh Committee (Ireland) denounced the way the government "called into question the relatives' sincerity" by describing the visit as a propaganda stunt. "Ninety-two relatives taking all the trouble to travel to London is not a stunt. It is living proof that they support their relatives in Long Kesh and Armagh."

Both she and Owen Carron, who spoke representing the relatives present, received standing ovations.



Downing Street vigil

DELEGATION



VISITS TO UNIONS AND EMBASSIES

The following two days, Friday and Saturday, were spent lobbying organisations including Amnesty International, the National Council for Civil Liberties, and *Spare Rib* magazine. Groups of relatives were received by trade unions such as the NUJ and ASLEF. On Saturday they were warmly received by the Dagenham Foundry Union Divisional Office.

Owen Carron MP accompanied by six relatives met members of the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party.

Relatives of the protesting prisoners also met MPs, councillors and churchmen, and visited a series of embassies. The

Swedish, Iraqi and Algerian embassies were particularly sympathetic. The Cuban Embassy gave a letter of solidarity to the relatives. At the Tanzanian High Commission, the political consul met a group of relatives and promised to pass on their letters to President Nyerere, who would probably raise the issue at the Commonwealth Conference. The consul also said he would welcome a future delegation.

INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

On Friday evening relatives met representatives of international progressive movements including members of the Pan African Congress (Azania), the Mujahedin (Iran), FUEMSSO (Malaya), the Indian Workers' Association (Britain), a Basque journalist and Mary Tyler, who was a



ABOVE: Press Conference.
LEFT: Outside Downing Street.

political prisoner in India for five years. These representatives told of their own peoples' struggles, and expressed admiration and total support for the protesting prisoners in the H Blocks and Armagh.

On Saturday the relatives held street meetings in Camden and Kilburn as well as a vigil outside Downing Street. That evening Maura McCrory addressed people at a Namibia support benefit in Islington Town Hall. The only other speaker was a representative of SWAPO. Maura expressed solidarity with SWAPO and in particular their political prisoners. She said both sets of prisoners faced the same enemy — British imperialism.

CARDINAL HUME

On Sunday the relatives held a two-hour silent black flag vigil outside Westminster Cathedral. At the end Cardinal Hume met sixty of the relatives and read them a bland statement, never mentioning the deceased hunger strikers, but asking them to "open their hearts" to the suffering of others in Northern Ireland. Angered by his refusal to consider the issue in hand — the hunger strike — or to show compassion for their own anguish, the relatives walked out immediately the Cardinal finished reading his statement. Though saddened by this sour note at the end of an otherwise successful visit, the relatives returned to Northern Ireland satisfied with the way the delegation went. Kay Walsh, mother of a protesting prisoner, summed up the feeling of the relatives when she said "We are pleased by the many warm receptions we had. We feel we got through to a lot of people. It helps to know we have friends in Britain, and we are returning heartened."

(Continued from front page)

(long) sentences in special prisons, the prisoners refused to wear the uniform of what the secretary of state described as "ordinary decent criminals" — and so began the blanket protest.

The prisoners demanded recognition of their special status. And as they continued to refuse to co-operate with the prison authorities, harassment and brutality by the warders increased to try and break the protest.

In Armagh women's jail, prisoners (like women prisoners in all British jails) were allowed to wear their own clothes, but also refused to co-operate with prison authorities, especially in the area of prison work. They began to suffer increased harassment.

Outside the gaols, Relatives' Action

Committees (RACs) were formed and campaigned on the prisoners' behalf. Inside the gaols repression increased. Conditions in the H Blocks became so bad that the prisoners refused to leave their cells. The prison authorities replied by taking out all cell furniture except a mattress and a blanket. The warders emptied the slop buckets back into the cells, which was how the "dirty protest" began.

The RACs' constant campaigning led to the formation of the National H Block/Armagh Committee.

In February 1980 protesting women prisoners in Armagh were brutally attacked and were also forced onto the "dirty protest".

Despite embarrassing protests mobilised by the Committees, conditions continued to deteriorate and on October

1st 1980, seven prisoners in the H Blocks began a hunger strike; they were later joined by three women in Armagh jail. The hunger strike ended just before the imminent death of Sean McKenna, when the government conceded the substance of the prisoners' five demands.

When the government reneged on this agreement, Bobby Sands began a new hunger strike on the 1st March 1981.

Ten young men have already died in the H Blocks. Twenty-three prisoners have participated in the hunger strike. Their relatives, who have stood with them all the way, have shown their allegiance once again in last week's Relatives' Delegation.

We here in Britain must respond to their solidarity with increased determination to undermine our government's intransigence.

RELATIVES IN COVENTRY AND MANCHESTER

Because of the difficulty of transporting nearly 100 people around in four days, the recent Prisoners' Relatives Delegation concentrated its activities mainly in London.

However groups of relatives managed to travel to Coventry and Manchester.

On Friday evening a group of relatives spoke to a successful public meeting in Manchester. There was a useful exchange of views and hunger strike supporters in Manchester felt the presence of the relatives gave the local campaign a boost.

On Thursday Joe Pickering and Gerry, McMullan addressed the Coventry Trades Council meeting. They gave a long and detailed account of how their brothers John and Jackie ended up on hunger strike, of the background to the H Block crisis; and why the protesting prisoners in the H Blocks and Armagh have put forward their five demands. The delegates were very moved by what they heard and a move by the Union of Communication Workers delegate to have the existing policy of support for the five demands overturned was defeated by a majority of two to one.

On Friday Gerard and Mary Fox, brother- and sister-in-law of hunger striker Bernard Fox, addressed a well attended public meeting in Coventry. Gerard told the meeting "In no way is my brother a criminal. He is a prisoner of war. He has been tried in special courts without a jury". The meeting attracted large numbers of the city's Irish community, and the Fox's made a special appeal to them for support.

Earlier in the evening the Fox's were at a private meeting for MP Joan Maynard and a group of councillors and trade unionists. All attending declared their support for the hunger strikers' five demands, and there was some discussion on how to break the government's intransigence.

HUNGER STRIKE COMMITTEE AT THE SOCIAL SECURITY

The formation of a workplace H Block/Armagh Committee in the Falls Road Social Security Office has been received with something like hysteria in Northern Ireland. Headline articles in the *Belfast Newsletter* and the *Belfast Telegraph* have reacted almost as if a nest of spies had been found in the Home Office. Stormont Castle have said they are investigating the matter.

Meanwhile, the workers at the Social

Security Office are determined to continue and build support for their committee. They are also actively promoting the setting up of further workplace H Block/Armagh committees among members of their trade union, NIPSA.

The action is in line with the National Committee policy of paying special attention to industrial action in the next phase of the campaign. Other such committees have already been set up in the Royal Victoria Hospital, and the De Lorean car factory.

IF A HUNGER STRIKER DIES, BLACK FLAG MOURNING VIGILS will continue in KILBURN SQUARE for three consecutive evenings or until the day of the funeral, starting each evening at 7.30pm.

MARCH FOR THE 5 DEMANDS
Called by Sinn Fein
SATURDAY 26th SEPTEMBER
IN LUTON

Assemble People's Park 1.30pm and
march to town centre

LABOUR PARTY CONFERENCE
EVENTS

FRINGE MEETING
Organised by Labour Cttee on Ireland
7pm, Tuesday 29th Sept.,
Brighton Pavilion Theatre, New Rd
Speakers: Owen Carron, Joan Maynard,
Ernie Roberts

12 HOUR PICKET, FAST AND VIGIL
all day on Wednesday 30th
outside Brighton Conference Centre
(sea front)

Organised by Brighton T. O. M.

TORCHLIGHT MARCH
Wednesday 30th September
assembling at The Level, Brighton, 8pm
Coach from London leaves York Way
at 6pm, returns York Way 11.30pm
Cost: £2.50 — phone office to book

H BLOCK SOLIDARITY
BENEFIT
with
"The People of No Property"
and Latin American Group
Friday 25th September, 8.00pm
Hargrave Hall, Hargrave Road,
Archway, N19
Organised by Troops Out Movement

SAOIRSE —
IRISH FREEDOM FESTIVAL
October 17th,
Caxton House, London N19
(Org. Cttee for Withdrawal from Ireland)

An all-day event of cultural resistance to Britain's continuing war in the north of Ireland. Exhibitions, films, video, music, poems, talks. Stalls available. Contact: 1 North End Road, London W14 8ST.

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