

H-BLOCK / ARMAGH HUNGER STRIKE

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 18th, 1980

"Having seen the statement to be announced by Humphry Atkins in the British House of Commons tomorrow and having been supplied with a document which contains a new elaboration on our 5 demands which were first enumerated upon by Humphry Atkins in his statement to the House of Commons on December 4th we decided to halt the Hunger Strike." (Hunger Strike Prisoners statement 18.12.80).

The above statement from the hunger strikers on December 18th signalled the end of the drama in Long Kesh and Armagh Jail. Relief and joy was felt throughout Ireland. Sean McKenna was close to death and the other hunger strikers were entering a critical state. With emotion running high, the country awaited an explosion of anger in the event of even one death.

DEATH AVERTED

How was death avoided? On Thursday, December 18, the hunger striking prisoners were given two documents:

- (i) 34 page document which was an elaboration of a statement made by Humphry Atkins in the House of Commons on December 4th;
- (ii) copy of a speech which Atkins was to make in the House of Commons the following morning, Friday.

Having studied both documents, the prisoners came to the conclusion that their basic five demands were being conceded by the British Government. Later, the same evening, the Republican O/C, Bobby Sands, was supplied with the same documents.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 19th, 1980

Bobby Sands met with his colleagues and discussed the Atkins documents. After that discussion the following statement was issued by Bobby Sands:

"We the Republican Protesting Prisoners on the blanket in H-Blocks 3, 4, 5 and 6 salute our comrades in Armagh; in the prison hospital, Long Kesh; in Musgrave Park Military Hospital and in the above H-Blocks on having successfully won their Hunger Strike victory.

"Dependant upon a sensible and responsible attitude from the British Government in implementing their proposals the blanketmen will make a positive response. We are satisfied that the implementation of these proposals meet the requirements of our five basic demands.

"Republican prisoners will not be wearing any form of prison uniform and will not be participating in any form of penal work. The speed at which the phasing out of the blanket protest proceeds is entirely dependant on the sincerity and upon the manner in which the British Government implement their proposals.

"We thank all those who have campaigned on our behalf. We salute our families who have endured great suffering in the last four years and three months and we trust that all those in high places who have refrained from actively supporting us will now ensure that the British stand over their assurances.

"For our part we know that the masses who took to the streets are our real guarantors.

"We thank our comrades in the Republican Movement and pledge them our continuing support in the struggle for a socialist republic. We thank the National H-Block/Armagh Committee and all those who campaigned on our behalf. To those throughout the world and throughout our own country we say 'go raibh mile maith agaibh agus Nollaig shona daoibh. Many thanks and happy Christmas.'"

(Bobby Sands O/C)

On Friday morning, Danny Morrison, Editor An Phoblacht/Republican News, visited Long Kesh and issued the following statement:

"I had a visit this morning with Bobby Sands, O/C Republican Protesting Prisoners in H-Blocks 3, 4, 5 and 6. He was in a buoyant mood and extremely good humoured. Last night he, like the hunger strikers in the prison hospital, were supplied with a copy of a statement due to have been made by Humphry Atkins and which was postponed and a new elaboration of the Atkins Statement of December 4 which listed the prisoners five demands.

"Having studied the lengthy document the protesting prisoners have seen real changes in the British Government's previous inflexible attitude. This morning the prisoners noted a new atmosphere of co-operation and willingness which was reciprocal between the protesting prisoners and the prison administration. The blanket protest, began in September '76 when Kieran Nugent refused to be criminalised by rejecting the symbols of criminalisation, prison uniform and prison work and which has lasted for 4 years and 3 months, will soon be over.

"The British Government can not now claim to be acting under duress; a point which needs emphasising and monitoring by all those who supported a peaceful solution to the long and courageous protest, and so with the speedy implementation and honouring of certain clauses in the document, and the principled co-operation now under way in the H-Blocks, the blanket protest can now be ended during the next week.

"Bobby Sands on behalf of all the prisoners emphasises that families should not bring up clothes and parcels until informed by the H-Block PROs. The protesting prisoners will be wearing their own clothes and will not be engaging in prison work, the two symbols of criminalisation have been neutralised."

ARMAGH JAIL

Later on Friday, the hunger striking and protesting women in Armagh Jail having seen the Atkins documents announced the termination of their hunger strike.

Having been informed of the developments within the jails, the National H-Block/Armagh Committee released the following statement:

"Today, the National H-Block/Armagh Committee salutes the hunger strikers in the victorious outcome of their protest. Rarely in the annals of prison struggles has so much been endured for so long by so many. To the 500 men on the Blanket, the 30 women on protest and the 40 prisoners who undertook hunger strike, we say we are proud of you and have been honoured to have worked for your cause over the last two years.

"Many lessons have been learned during the H-Block struggle over the last four years. Foremost is the moral strength of the young men and women held in captivity by the British. The unique form of protest undertaken by the prisoners was not understood by many but, objectively, it was a classic

example of the triumph of the spirit over personal and material comforts.

"The honesty and simplicity of the prisoners in presenting their five just and reasonable demands was in sharp contrast to the duplicity and dishonesty of the British government. The attitude of the British government in relation to H-Block and Armagh was an insult to the entire Irish race. The deceit exercised by the government particularly on His Eminence Cardinal Tomás O'Flaich, will not be forgotten for a long time by the Irish people.

"In conclusion, the National H-Block/Armagh Committee salutes the thousands of people who flocked to the banner of the hunger strikers. The strength of a roused people was demonstrated on the streets, in offices and on factory floors. That strength coupled with the heroic stand of the prisoners made possible yesterday's victory. That strength is also the guarantee that the British government will implement the five just demands of the prisoners. Any reneging by the British will bring the people back onto the streets in even greater numbers."

COMMENTS

Other people were pleased to learn that an end to the H-Block/Armagh crisis was in sight.

"Thank God", said Cardinal Tomás O'Flaich "I hope the Northern Ireland Office will respond with the flexibility which the European Commission of Human Rights commended to them."

(Irish Press, Friday, December 19th).

"I am particularly glad that the anguish of the parents and families concerned has now ended."

An Taoiseach, Charles Haughey
(Irish Press, Friday, December 19)

Fr. Denis Faul echoed the feeling of all:

"I would hope that the regime of cruel, inhuman and excessive punishments which has gone on in the Maze for the past three years and four months will be ended immediately."

(Fr. Denis Faul, Irish Press, 19.12.80)

The guarded optimism of those closest to the prisoners issue was based on the prisoners own decision that their five demands had been met and on a statement made by Humphry Atkins on Friday evening.

"We shall have the task of cleaning up the cells right away . . . this should take a week or ten days . . . within a few days, clothes provided by their families will be given to any prisoners giving up their protest."

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 20, 1980

The prisoners spoke again expressing thanks to all those who worked on their behalf.

"We the Republican prisoners in H-Blocks 3, 4, 5 and 6, Long Kesh thank all those people who have campaigned on our behalf over the last 4½ years. The struggle for political recognition has been long and arduous and may end soon. This as we said yesterday is entirely dependent on the

sincerity and upon the manner in which the British government implements its proposals.

"While it may be premature we wish to re-emphasise that a resolution of the blanket protest depends upon the above implementation. For our own part we have stated that we will make a positive response when the opportunity arises. We wish merely to warn of the Christmas festival, that they should remain vigilant and patient.
"Beir bua agus Nollaigh shona dhaoibh, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year."

CHRISTMAS

While millions enjoyed the happiness of Christmas a pall of gloom descended on the H-Blocks and Armagh jail again. Contrary to the "new atmosphere of co-operation between the protesting prisoners and prison administration" of Friday December 19, the prison regime had reverted to its system of "cruel, inhuman and excessive punishments." In a sentence, the British had reneged on implementing the proposals accepted by the prisoners.

The attitude of the prison staffs towards the prisoners was obscene, to say the least. Clothes brought to the jail by relatives were refused acceptance and even a parcel brought to one of the hunger strikers in the prison hospital was not allowed. Fr. Denis Faul said the prison authorities had lost a splendid opportunity to end the jail crisis "because of their crass stupidity and complete lack of humanity, generosity and plain common sense."

The British were being true to form in playing their traditional role of reneging on agreements.

1981

The New Year began with an appeal to the public from the prisoners to rally once more to their side. In a statement issued on January 2 the prisoners said:

"On Thursday, December 18, 1980, the British Government presented the Republican Hunger Strikers and our O.C.

with a document which contained in our estimate the requirements of our 5 basic demands.

"In response to this development and against a background of apparent flexibility and co-operation within the prison we, the blanketmen, were hopeful that the ending of the blanket and 'no wash' protest would follow quickly.

"This depended obviously upon a reasonable and sensible attitude from the British Government in implementing their proposals. Given the above we declared that we would make a positive response.

"Immediately before Christmas with a noticeable absence of movement from the British, we issued a further statement drawing public attention to the manner in which the British Government contrary to their earlier indication and assurance, was handling the situation.

"We feel we must again draw the public's attention to the continuing deadlock. The British are intent in deliberately creating as much confusion and upon protracting the deadlock in order to sow suspicion and dissension among our supporters and families.

"The blanket or 'no wash' protest can be resolved quite simply. The British Government and their prison administration are fully aware of this but it appears to us that they lack the will to resolve this issue and that they are committed to going back on their original assurances, including Humphry Atkins' statement about what would happen as the protest was de-escalated.

"We call upon those in authority, in Church and State to urge the British to act in a sensible manner, to immediately and publicly bring pressure to bear upon the British to ensure the speedy resolution of the blanket or 'no wash' protest and the defusion of the H-Block/Armagh crisis.

"We ask our relatives and supporters to remain alert and vigilant. We assure them that we will not continue indefinitely to accept the present unsatisfactory situation. The British Government are past masters of deceit and double

dealing. We were aware of this when we accepted, with some qualification, their document. We were dubious about the sincerity of their intentions but were convinced that even they would not be stupid enough to waste yet another opportunity to settle this issue.

"Should they remain intransigent we will be forced to fall back upon our own resources. In that event our only guarantors, the masses who supported us during the recent hunger-strike will once again be called upon by us to take to the streets.

"If the British Government cling to the forlorn hope that they can yet break the men and women of the H-Blocks and Armagh they have but to look at their failures during the last 4½ years of our protest.

"We will not be found lacking in illustrating our ability and will to, if necessary, escalate our protest."

ACT NOW !

The National H-Block/Armagh Committee are standing fully behind the prisoners in the new phase of their struggle. We will wage a vigorous campaign to force the British Government to implement the prisoners' five basic demands. We will not tolerate English treachery once more (for the umpteenth time in Irish history) which continues to inflict hardship, humiliation and agony on any section of the Irish people.

The massive support, both at home and abroad, secured during the hunger strike campaign is being activated again. We appeal to the Irish people as a whole for moral, financial and practical support. Together we can end four and a half years of cruel and degrading treatment in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh and Armagh Prison.

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APPEAL

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