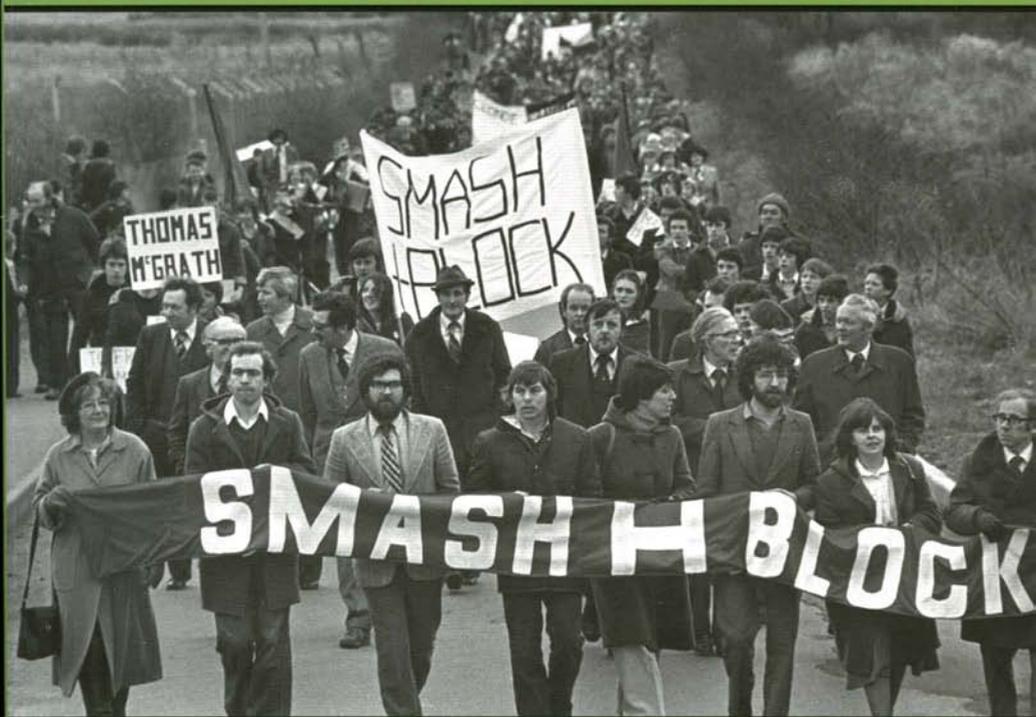


SMASHING H-BLOCK



F. STUART ROSS

Smashing H-Block

The Rise and Fall of the Popular
Campaign against Criminalization,
1976–1982

F. Stuart Ross

Liverpool University Press

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Our simple message to everyone will be 'smash H-Block'
that is what we shall build around

Bobby Sands

Hunger Strike (October–December 1980)

We call on the Irish people to lend us their support for our just demands and we are confident that this support will be very much in evidence in the coming days.

We call on all solidarity and support groups to intensify their efforts.¹
Statement by republican prisoners, Long Kesh
at the start of the first hunger strike.

At a press conference held on 13 October 1980, the chairman of the National H-Block Committee 'said that every effort would be made to make the hunger strike unnecessary'.² Indeed, until now this had been the *raison d'être* of the Committee. Still, the group's press statement admitted that many H-Block activists thought that, 'sooner or later, the prisoners would be forced to embark on a hunger strike'.³ The Committee now pledged its unconditional support for the prisoners and used this opportunity to announce details of the various anti-H-Block actions planned for the coming weeks.

While the mainstream media tended to give short shrift to the statements issued by the National H-Block Committee, quite a bit of attention was paid to a statement released by the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace (ICJP). This group, which had been set up by the Irish Catholic Bishop's Conference in the late 1960s, had sent a report to the Northern Ireland Secretary of State weeks earlier but had received no response other than a formal acknowledgement. Given the imminent hunger strike, the ICJP decided to go public with its views.

The ICJP announced that: 'Like the European Commission on Human Rights, we must express our concern at the inflexible approach of the State authorities who are "more concerned to punish offenders against prison discipline than to explore ways of resolving such a serious deadlock"'.⁴ It was, however, equally critical of the other parties to this conflict, noting the ECHR's rejection of 'political status' and calling 'on the prisoners and those who have influence on them ... to de-escalate the protest'.⁵ Their report summed up the views of many moderate Irish nationalists; it also highlighted the dilemma for many such moderates. While many abhorred the violence of the IRA, they also found themselves increasingly at odds with Britain's policies in the North.⁶

It would not be long before the National H-Block Committee claimed a certain degree of success in its newly invigorated campaign. In a circular sent out to eighty affiliated action groups (as well as a number of ad hoc committees looking to build action groups), the Committee stated: 'Interest in the issue is mounting and people who have, in the past, hesitated to take a stand are now giving of their time and energy to resolve the situation. Scarcely a day goes by without several publicity successes, both nationally and locally.'⁷ But these alleged 'publicity successes' were soon overshadowed by the assassination of two more H-Block activists.

In the early morning hours of 15 October, gunmen smashed down the front door of Ronnie Bunting's West Belfast home. They charged up the stairs towards the bedrooms where they shot dead Bunting and his comrade Noel Lyttle. His wife Suzanne was shot several times and was seriously injured in the attack. While no organization claimed responsibility for the murders, Bunting's widow later argued that the SAS must have been involved in the killings because they were 'too well planned and carried out by men who were cool and calm and knew what they were doing'.⁸

Though Ronnie Bunting was associated with the anti-H-Block campaign, he was better known for his involvement in both the political and military wings of the Irish Republican Socialist Movement. As a Protestant so publicly associated with militant Irish republicanism, he had become a hate figure for loyalist

paramilitaries. Lyttle, on the other hand, had briefly been part of the National H-Block Committee's executive. He had a long history of involvement in republican left politics but had only just joined the IRSP.⁹ An article in the *Starry Plough*, the newspaper of the IRSP, later declared that the two had 'died as they lived – as revolutionary socialist republicans murdered in a conspiracy hatched by the combined military forces of British Imperialism in the Six Counties'.¹⁰

Less than one week later, a home in West Belfast's Twinbrook estate was raided just before a Relatives Action Committee meeting was due to take place. Those arrested were taken to Castlereagh interrogation centre and questioned about local anti-H-Block activities.¹¹ Newspapers described the controversial raid as 'SAS-style', though both the Army and RUC refused to say whether or not the SAS was involved. The SDLP's Joe Hendron later said, 'People in Twinbrook see a similarity between this operation and the killing of Ronnie Bunting last week and they are terrified out of their minds!'¹²

Meanwhile, the National H-Block Committee issued a statement pointing out the similarities between the Twinbrook raid and the murders of Miriam Daly, Noel Lyttle and Ronnie Bunting. They claimed that there was now an 'orchestrated campaign by the British government to take any steps – including murder – to break the H-Block protest'.¹³ Though allegations of security force involvement persisted, the UDA later admitted it had carried out the killings. In the short term, however, the organization simply stated:

The H-Block issue is the latest in a long line of Provisional IRA propaganda in their attempt to discredit the State of Ulster. Let the people who are embarking on this campaign be aware that the UDA will not be drawn into a sectarian war, but that it will use every means at its disposal to eliminate those who pose a threat to the State of Ulster and all its people.¹⁴

In mid-October, a letter written by Minister of State Michael Alison appeared in the *New York Times*. Under the headline 'Father Berrigan's Misconceptions About Ulster Prisons', the NIO official

refuted a number of claims made in an op-ed article penned by the activist priest. He stressed that the prisoners themselves were responsible for the conditions that they found themselves in. 'All were tried publicly before civilian courts, with the normal rights of legal representation and appeal, not military judges.'¹⁵ He then concluded by stating: 'As for the effect of the [prison] protest on opinion here, the fact is that local meetings in support of the protesters attract only handfuls of people.'¹⁶ But, just days later, over 17,000 marched in Belfast in support of the prisoners.¹⁷

As the anti-H-Block campaign stepped up its activities, the Northern Ireland Office dramatically increased its spending on public relations. A short, glossy brochure entitled 'H-Block: The Facts'¹⁸ was soon produced, copies of which were distributed to embassies in the United States, Europe and beyond.¹⁹ 'H-Block: The Facts' explained the background to the protest and the Government's attitude towards it. It was stressed that 'notable progress' had been made 'in establishing a modern prison system with first-class facilities for work, vocational training, education and recreation.'²⁰ All this and more was available to the *conforming* prisoner.

The British Government had already made it clear that there would 'be no compromise on the principle of political status.'²¹ Still, as the then-Prime Minister later wrote in her memoirs, '[t]here were several discussions among ministers in the interim to see what concessions might be made to avert the strike.'²² One such concession – offered just days before the hunger strike was to commence – was the replacing of the prison uniform with 'civilian-type' clothing issued by the prison authorities. While the Government maintained that this idea had been discussed for several months, its timing roused Unionist fears and anger.²³ Still, it was rejected outright by the protesting prisoners as 'an attempt to defuse the momentum of growing support for the blanket men.'²⁴

In late October, the Republican Movement placed a full-page advertisement in the North's main nationalist newspaper calling on activists to support a forthcoming march. It reminded supporters that 'the sound of marching feet in protest must be heard loud and clear on the streets of Belfast, and indeed all over Ireland.'²⁵

This demonstration – held on the last Sunday of the month – was the first of a series of activities organized by the National H-Block Committee throughout the hunger strike period. In the weeks ahead there would be token fasts, pickets, rallies and public meetings the length and breadth of the country.

The H-Block Committee's Belfast march attracted thousands and was dubbed 'the most significant show of support to date for the Smash H-Blocks campaign.'²⁶ Journalist Gerry Foley wrote that Bernadette McAliskey: 'watched the ... demonstration streaming into the Busy Bee shopping centre ... with tears running down her face. It was as if the civil rights movement that she knew eleven years ago had resumed its march.'²⁷ Though this was certainly an overstatement, one could see the logic in such sentiments. As one prisoner later put it, 'it was a good start ... if it can be said that there is a good start to such a sad event.'²⁸

Though the Committee had opposed a hunger strike in the H-Blocks, there was little it could do now to stop it. The morning after the march, IRA Volunteers Brendan Hughes, Raymond McCartney, Tommy McKearney, Leo Green, Sean McKenna and Tommy McFeeley – along with INLA Volunteer John Nixon – refused food. The choice of seven hunger strikers was meant as a nod to the seven signatories to the Easter Proclamation of 1916. On a more pragmatic note, however, the men were also drawn from five of the North's six counties and this would help mobilize activists from across Northern Ireland.²⁹

In a special appeal to all H-Block action groups, hunger striker Brendan Hughes stated: 'Death most certainly awaits us unless you, on the outside, can build a united, strong and co-ordinated showing of concern.'³⁰ This, in turn prompted the National H-Block Committee to urge activists to redouble their efforts on behalf of the prisoners. It was claimed that the campaign had already gained 'great momentum', that more action groups were coming together and that the media were 'being forced to examine the H-Block question because of the pressure of Action group work and tenacity.'³¹

The National H-Block Committee certainly tended to overstate its role in forcing the media's hand. More often than not, however,

it complained about the media and its supposed silence on the H-Block question. Nevertheless, days into the hunger strike, Ulster Unionist MP Robert Bradford publicly asked both radio and television to employ 'a self-denying ordinance of silence regarding support for the hunger strikes'.³² A similar request was made by the General Board of Assembly for the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. This, of course, was an impossible request which was only made all the more so when – barely a week into the protest – Fianna Fáil TD and MEP Síle de Valera accused the Prime Minister of issuing 'callous, unfeeling and self-righteous statements ... in regard to the position of the H-Block prisoners'.³³

Comments such as de Valera's were rare among 'mainstream' politicians and she was quickly rebuked by her party.³⁴ While her words enraged Unionist politicians, their anger was soon assuaged when West Belfast MP Gerry Fitt stood up in the House of Commons and declared:

I do not want to see any coffins coming out of Long Kesh, but I did not want to see any coffins coming out of little churchyards and chapels in Northern Ireland, when the victims of these murderers were being carried out. I cannot forget how many funerals there were of the victims of the men of violence.³⁵

He then called on the Government to 'show their resolution and not allow themselves to be blackmailed by people giving support to the hunger strike'.³⁶

As his biographer later noted, reaction to Fitt's speech was immediate – 'almost as soon as he had finished speaking, stones and paint had been thrown' at the family home on Belfast's Antrim Road.³⁷ Less than two weeks later, the *Belfast Telegraph* reported that a local councillor from the Republican Clubs had her home 'daubed with H-Block slogans, following her refusal to support the campaign for political status'.³⁸ Though neither politician would be intimidated, their outspoken views on the prison crisis soon cost them dearly at the polls.

A growing number of people *were* giving support to the hunger strike and the campaign for political status. Activists were responding to Sinn Féin's call 'for massive protests on the streets,

outnumbering anything seen in the last decade.’³⁹ Within days of Fitt’s Commons speech, a work stoppage and march in Derry City generated tremendous support. As one local campaigner observed:

a large crowd of demonstrators poured into and eventually filled the Guildhall Square. Their banners identified schools, local estates and communities, women’s and youth groups and, despite the official trade union movement’s condemnation of the action, numerous workplaces and trade unions.⁴⁰

It had been over a decade since so many people had taken to the streets.

By early November, the National H-Block Committee claimed that there were 125 affiliated action groups throughout Ireland. In an internal report on these groups, the Committee noted how ‘[s]ome have a very Republican profile while others are almost entirely “humanitarian”’.⁴¹ Likewise, some groups were described as ‘very well-organized and effective’ or ‘relatively successful and active’, while others simply as ‘newly formed’.⁴² Those action groups considered to be particularly strong included Sligo, Cork, Galway, Tralee, Wexford and Dun Laoghaire. On a county level, Leitrim, Mayo, Monaghan and Mid/South Meath were also identified as strong. Most Northern areas had already been organized by the Relatives Action Committees, though some new groups – mainly Youth Against H-Block groups – had come together. Still, the report identified a number of ‘weak’ or ‘marginal’ areas where ‘special attention should be directed’.⁴³

The H-Block Committee’s tiny Dublin office – ‘where their only equipment was a golfball typewriter and a Gestetner’ – kicked into overdrive.⁴⁴ A November circular sent to all action groups by Cristin ni Elias, secretary of the Activities Sub-Committee, stated the group was ‘spending money as fast as it comes in’.⁴⁵ Most of this money was being spent on publicity and it was claimed that an ‘incredible amount of ... material in the form of leaflets, posters and stickers ... [was] being sent out every day’.⁴⁶ Committee affiliates were urged to send proceeds of a national fundraising effort to the Dublin office without delay. An ‘Action Group Levy’ – a minimum

of £10 per week – was also requested of the various local H-Block committees to help pay campaign expenses.

Press releases had already been sent out announcing activities ranging from token fasts in Navan, to torchlight parades in Monaghan, to public meetings in Buncrana. Large ‘regional rallies’ were being planned in counties Waterford, Kerry, Donegal and Louth. A Trade Union Sub-Committee announced that it was organizing a conference at Dublin’s Ormond Hotel. H-Block activists from the Tralee Action Group (including IRA man and future Sinn Féin TD Martin Ferris) embarked on a walk from Tralee to Dublin to help raise awareness and support for the hunger strike.

Activists were reminded that ‘[e]very town and village in your area should be leafleted and posterred’ in advance of the Committee’s forthcoming national demonstration in Dublin.⁴⁷ This event was billed as a ‘mass lobby and march to Leinster House’, with the stated aim of convincing ‘Mr. Haughey to pressurize the British government to change their stance’ vis-à-vis the prisoners.⁴⁸ In the South, members of the Dáil and local councillors were approached and asked either to sponsor or to participate in the action. Meanwhile, advertisements appeared in Northern papers urging ‘all elected councillors in the 6 Counties ... to withdraw from the district and city councils now and not to return until the H-Block issue ... [has] been resolved’.⁴⁹ Neither request met with much success.

The National H-Block Committee’s ‘Leinster House Lobby’ took place on Saturday, 22 November. Supporters gathered at Dublin’s Parnell Square before setting off to Kildare Street. It was claimed that the demonstration ‘took more than an hour and a half to cross over O’Connell Bridge’ and that ‘the first marchers had reached Leinster House before those at the back had moved off’.⁵⁰ While crowd estimates ranged ‘from twelve to over twenty thousand’, it was without doubt the largest show of support for the prisoners that Dublin had ever seen.⁵¹

Outside government buildings, a number of speakers took their turn at the platform. Maura McKearney, mother of hunger striker Tommy McKearney, and former blanket man Liam Carlin addressed the crowd. So too did Independent Fianna Fáil TD and

MEP Neil Blaney, who argued that politicians had ‘nothing to fear and a great deal to gain by showing themselves in favour’ of the men on hunger strike.⁵² Sinn Féin’s Martha McClelland then told the crowd that women in Armagh jail would soon be joining the deadly protest.⁵³

Margaret Thatcher had already reiterated that the British government would ‘never concede political status to the hunger strikers, or to any others convicted of criminal offences in the Province.’⁵⁴ Nevertheless, a line of communication had been established with republicans ‘[t]hrough a contact in the British Foreign Office.’⁵⁵ None of this was known by rank-and-file anti-H-Block activists. Indeed, only senior members of the Republican Movement were aware of this. Thus, in the public arena things appeared as confrontational and fractious as ever.

The propaganda war was now in full swing, though in many respects the British government found itself playing catch-up. In mid-November, Minister of State Michael Alison briefed American journalists in London. Before the end of the month, the *Belfast Telegraph* reported that two Tory MPs – Mr John Biggs-Davison and Dr Brian Mawhinney – had embarked on a seven-day east-coast tour of the United States.⁵⁶ All of this led Sinn Féin’s Danny Morrison to quip: ‘For an issue which according to British propaganda is not “political”, the H-Blocks are certainly preoccupying a lot of the British government’s time.’⁵⁷

Closer to home, efforts to counteract the prisoners’ campaign soon backfired. In what journalist Chris Ryder called ‘an unusually bold move’, a camera crew from Britain’s long-running current affairs programme ‘World in Action’ was allowed into the H-Blocks to shoot a documentary.⁵⁸ While the programme aired a number of opposing views on the prison protest, a brief interview with IRA hunger striker Raymond McCartney incensed Unionist politicians. One newly elected MP – the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)’s Peter Robinson – ‘sent a telex to the Director General of the Independent Broadcasting Authority before the programme aired calling on it to be either banned or have the “offensive” interview dropped.’⁵⁹

The day after ITV had broadcast the programme, Ulster Unionist leader James Molyneaux raised the issue of the interview with the Prime Minister. His party colleagues also lodged their protests. While Mrs Thatcher shared their 'distaste at seeing convicted murderers on television', she believed 'the Government ... [had] absolutely nothing to hide about the Maze prison or about their attitude to those on hunger strike'.⁶⁰ Days later, the Revd Robert Bradford – one of Molyneaux's colleagues at Westminster – challenged the Government to bring back capital punishment. He argued: 'If we are ever going to get rid of terrorists in Northern Ireland – terrorists convicted in the courts should be shot.'⁶¹

On 1 December, three women – IRA Volunteers Mairéad Farrell, Mary Doyle and Mairéad Nugent – joined the hunger strike.⁶² It was later admitted: 'There had been much debate [within the Republican Movement] ... concerning their desire to play their full part on the protest.'⁶³ Nevertheless, a press release from Sinn Féin emphasized that 'Irish women have [always] taken their places in the struggle on equal terms with their brother Irishmen.'⁶⁴ It was not surprising that they had made this decision. What was unexpected, however, was that two weeks later six members of the Ulster Defence Association would go on hunger strike demanding segregation from republican prisoners.⁶⁵

The loyalist hunger strike put the leadership of the UDA in an awkward position. While the organisation had been calling on its supporters to help them in their fight for segregation, it had also referred to IRA hunger strikers as 'Judas lambs [being led] to the slaughter'.⁶⁶ A statement which appeared in the *Belfast Telegraph* admitted: 'There is disagreement within the hierarchy of the UDA regarding the time of this action.'⁶⁷ Initially, the hunger strikers' names were not released; however, other imprisoned loyalists began to show their support for the men. A number of UDA and UVF prisoners refused to leave their cells; others joined the 'clean' protest and refused to wear prison clothing. The head of the Church of Ireland, Dr Robin Eames, later told the protesting loyalist prisoners that '[o]ne result of your protest action is to cause division and bewilderment within the community from which you came.'⁶⁸

In the days that followed, thirty more republican prisoners joined the hunger strike. Over sixty new action committees had come together since the strike began. Clearly the heightened sense of crisis in the jails contributed to this rapid growth. The National H-Block Committee claimed that the 'vast majority of these ... [bodies were] elected local committees, a few ... [were] ad-hoc groups of activists'.⁶⁹ Many of the groups also set up subcommittees focusing on the women in Armagh, youth outreach or trade union support. A big push was also being made for another mass mobilization in Dublin.⁷⁰

Two weeks after the National H-Block Committee's first major demonstration in Dublin, a second march and rally took place in the capital. This time campaigners made their way from St Stephen's Green to the British Embassy in Ballsbridge. Protesters were stopped before reaching the embassy by Gardaí dressed in full riot gear. Though some minor stone-throwing incidents did occur, the event was well stewarded and largely peaceful. Sinn Féin's Dáithí Ó Conaill and the IRSP's Osgur Breatnach spoke from the platform, as did the father of hunger striker Tommy McFeeley and ex-prisoners Shirley Devlin and Joe Maguire.⁷¹

Before the rally outside the British embassy concluded, a number of trade unionists took to the platform to plug a planned day of industrial action on 10 December. Though these labour activists spoke only in a personal capacity, they included the deputy general secretary of Local Government and Public Services Union, Phil Flynn, and the general secretary of the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union, Matt Merrigan. While it was later claimed that 'thousands of workers responded to ... [the] strike call', such actions were not without controversy.⁷² Soon after, it was reported that '[t]raders and industrialists in the County Monaghan border town of Castleblaney ... set up a Citizens Action Committee to protect the town from what they described as intimidation by H-Block campaigners'.⁷³

Organizers of the day's events claimed that this action was even larger than the Leinster House march. They later printed a flyer claiming that RTE's coverage of both 'marches was totally false and calculated to minimize the growing support for the demands of

the Hunger Strikers.⁷⁴ Anti-H-Block activists had long argued that they were not given proper coverage on Ireland's national broadcasting network and there was more than a grain of truth to such charges. At about the same time as these mass demonstrations, an RTÉ journalist and presenter named Mary McAleese wrote: 'Consistently H-Block coverage is biased at worst, misguided at best.'⁷⁵ McAleese later became the eighth President of Ireland.

The 1980 hunger strike ended on 18 December after fifty-three days (the women in Armagh came off their hunger strike the following day). With hunger striker Sean McKenna just hours from death, the prisoners decided to accept an offer from the British government which they believed might offer some sort of a solution. The National H-Block/Armagh Committee put out a press release the following day saluting 'the thousands of people who flocked to the banner of the hunger strikers.'⁷⁶ It went on to claim that

[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 renegeing by the British will bring the people back onto the streets in even greater numbers.⁷⁷

But many activists were not so sure this was a victory, and nor were the prisoners.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in B. Campbell, L. McKeown and F. O'Hagan (eds), *Nor Meekly Serve My Time: The H-Block Struggle, 1976-1981* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale, 1994), p. 114.
- 2 'Widespread Response', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (18 Oct. 1980).
- 3 Press Statement, National H-Block Committee, 13 Oct. 1980 (Linen Hall Library Northern Ireland Political Collection).
- 4 'Compromise on H-Block, Commission Appeals', *Derry Journal* (17 Oct. 1980).
- 5 'H-Block Compromise is Suggested', *Irish Times* (14 Oct. 1980).
- 6 In her history of Catholics in the North, Marianne Elliot argued: 'The

- discomfiture and helplessness of constitutional nationalism during the hunger strikes was palpable. How could it denounce what the hunger-strikers were doing without also damning the traditions of Tone, Emmet and Pearse – the “good” republicans of the past who had laid the basis for the Irish state?’ Marianne Elliot, *The Catholics of Ulster: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 450.
- 7 ‘Circular – to All Action Groups’, National H-Block Committee, 21 Oct. 1980 (Linen Hall Library Northern Ireland Political Collection).
 - 8 Quoted in D. McKittrick, S. Kelters, B. Feeney and C. Thornton, *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children Who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2001), p. 840.
 - 9 Lyttle joined the IRSP a few weeks before his assassination. He had previously been a member of the Red Republican Party.
 - 10 ‘Ronnie and Noel Were Murdered ... But Their Ideals Live On!’, *Starry Plough* (Nov. 1980).
 - 11 “‘I Thought We Were Dead” – Terror Raid Mother’, *Irish News* (22 Oct. 1980). See also ‘The Twinbrook Raid’, in Raymond Murray, *The SAS in Ireland*, rev. edn (Cork: Mercier Press, 2004), pp. 265–9.
 - 12 ‘Twinbrook in Terror after Army Swoop – SDLP Claim’, *Belfast Telegraph* (23 Oct. 1980).
 - 13 ‘Four Held as RUC Defends SAS Raid on Belfast House’, *Irish Times* (21 Oct. 1980).
 - 14 ‘Did Loyalist Gang Murder Bunting?’, *Belfast Telegraph* (29 Oct. 1980).
 - 15 ‘Father Berrigan’s Misconceptions About Ulster Prisons’, *New York Times* (20 Oct. 1980). Berrigan claimed the prisoners were tried before military judges.
 - 16 ‘Father Berrigan’s Misconceptions About Ulster Prisons’, *New York Times* (20 Oct. 1980).
 - 17 ‘Thousands Out in Support as H-Block Fast Begins’, *Irish News* (26 Oct. 1980).
 - 18 ‘H-Block: The Facts’, Northern Ireland Office, Oct. 1980.
 - 19 ‘Britain’s Countering Ulster Prison Fast’, *New York Times* (16 Nov. 1980). The brochure was quickly followed by a second brochure entitled ‘H-Blocks: The Reality’.
 - 20 ‘H-Block: The Facts’, Northern Ireland Office, Oct. 1980. The full quote reads: ‘It is perhaps particularly unfortunate that the publicity given to activities by the protesting prisoners – who constitute less than 20% of the non-special category convicted prisoners – has drawn attention away from the notable progress which has been made in Northern Ireland during the last few years in establishing a modern prison system with first-class facilities for work, vocational training, education and recreation.’
 - 21 ‘Hunger-strikers Will Be Drawn from Each County’, *Belfast Telegraph* (11 Oct. 1980).

- 22 Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 389. Thatcher continues by saying: 'There was never any question of conceding political status. But the RUC Chief Constable believed that some concessions before the strike would be helpful in dealing with the threatened public disorder which such a strike might lead to though we did not believe they could prevent the hunger strike, we were anxious to win the battle for public opinion.'
- 23 During Prime Minister's Questions at the House of Commons, the MP for North Down (Mr James Kilfedder) asked: 'Is the Prime Minister aware of the righteous anger of reasonable Ulster people, who feel that the offer of civilian-type dress to prisoners in Northern Ireland is the first stage of capitulation to the evil murderers and men of violence in H-Block, who have made a propaganda exercise of this issue?' Hansard, HC vol. 991 col. 202 (1980).
- 24 'A Cruel Piece of Teasing and Political Brinkmanship', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (1 Nov. 1980).
- 25 *Irish News* (25 Oct. 1980).
- 26 'Thousands Out in Support as H-Block Fast Begins', *Irish News* (26 Oct. 1980). A torchlight rally was held outside Dublin's General Post Office that same day; it attracted 'several hundred'. *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (1 Nov. 1980).
- 27 'Bernadette and the Politics of H-Block', *Magill* (Apr. 1981).
- 28 Sean Lennon, quoted in Campbell, McKeown and O'Hagan, *Nor Meekly Serve My Time*, p. 115.
- 29 See Laurence McKeown, *Out of Time: Irish Republican Prisoners Long Kesh, 1972-2000* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale, 2001), 75.
- 30 'To All Action Groups (Commencement of Hunger Strike)', National H-Block Committee, 29 Oct. 1980 (Linen Hall Library Northern Ireland Political Collection). In a separate appeal to Irish-America, Hughes used more 'traditional' rhetoric and made several references to republican martyrs and campaigns of days gone by. He would end by saying: 'It is now we must push like never before against the Sasanach [Englishman] and it is now we must demonstrate to him the power of the Irish nation and her exiled children in America.' 'Appeal to America', *Irish People* (1 Nov. 1980).
- 31 'To All Action Groups (Commencement of Hunger Strike)', National H-Block Committee, 29 Oct. 1980 (Linen Hall Library Northern Ireland Political Collection).
- 32 'Expose Hunger Strike "Lies" - Bradford', *Belfast Telegraph* (31 Oct. 1980).
- 33 'Fianna Fail Repudiate Attack Against Mrs. T', *Belfast Telegraph* (3 Nov. 1980). The comments were made at a Fianna Fáil by-election rally in Letterkenny, County Donegal. De Valera's comments were all the more controversial because she was the granddaughter of the late Éamon de Valera.
- 34 The official line of Fianna Fáil, as expressed by the Taoiseach himself, was

- that 'The Government have on a number of occasions made known their concern about the humanitarian aspects of the H-Block situation and, immediately before the present hunger strike, conveyed to the British Government their anxiety over its serious implications. The Government will continue to keep in close touch with developments and are prepared to support any initiative which would offer a reasonable hope of ending the present dangerous situation'. Dáil Éireann Debate, vol. 324 (11 Nov. 1980). Ceisteanna – Questions. Oral Answers. – H-Block Protest
- 35 Hansard, HC vol. 992 col. 142 (1980).
- 36 Hansard, HC vol. 992 col. 142 (1980).
- 37 Chris Ryder, *Fitting Fitt: The Gerry Fitt Story* (Belfast: Brehon Press, 2006), p. 353.
- 38 'H-Block Attack on Home', *Belfast Telegraph* (20 Nov. 1980).
- 39 *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (8 Nov. 1980). The editorial added: 'This necessity of building street protests of unprecedented size dictates, as an urgent priority, the setting up of even more than the seventy broad based local action groups. It also dictates that, in order not to alienate potential support during this building process, that all street protests be as disciplined and dignified as possible, with the natural temptation to riot in the North, against British troops and RUC gunmen, being resisted.'
- 40 Logue, 'Laying the Foundations for Peace', in Danny Morrison (ed.), *Hunger Strike: Reflections on the 1981 Hunger Strike* (Dingle: Brandon, 2006), p. 73.
- 41 'Report on Action Groups', National H-Block Committee, 8 Nov. 1980 (Linen Hall Library Northern Ireland Political Collection).
- 42 'Report on Action Groups', National H-Block Committee, 8 Nov. 1980 (Linen Hall Library Northern Ireland Political Collection).
- 43 'Report on Action Groups', National H-Block Committee, 8 Nov. 1980 (Linen Hall Library Northern Ireland Political Collection).
- 44 'Dublin Recalls H-Block Struggle', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (2 Nov. 2001).
- 45 'Circular – To All Action Groups', National H-Block Committee, 10 Nov. 1980 (Linen Hall Library Northern Ireland Political Collection).
- 46 'Circular – To All Action Groups', National H-Block Committee, 10 Nov. 1980 (Linen Hall Library Northern Ireland Political Collection).
- 47 'Circular – To All Action Groups', National H-Block Committee, 10 Nov. 1980 (Linen Hall Library Northern Ireland Political Collection).
- 48 'Leinster House Lobby', National H-Block Committee, 10 Nov. 1980 (Linen Hall Library Northern Ireland Political Collection).
- 49 *Irish News* (25 Nov. 1980).
- 50 'Dublin Brought to a Standstill', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (29 Nov. 1980).
- 51 'Dublin Brought to a Standstill', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (29 Nov. 1980).

- 52 'Dublin Brought to a Standstill', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (29 Nov. 1980).
- 53 A formal announcement was not made until 28 November. 'Press Release – Armagh Hunger Strike', Sinn Féin, 28 Nov. 1980 (Linen Hall Library Northern Ireland Political Collection).
- 54 Hansard, HC vol. 994 col. 27 (1980).
- 55 Gerry Adams, *Hope and History: Making Peace in Ireland* (Dingle: Brandon, 2003), p. 9.
- 56 'Propaganda War in US', *Belfast Telegraph* (28 Nov. 1980).
- 57 *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (22 Nov. 1980).
- 58 Chris Ryder, *Inside the Maze: The Untold Story of the Northern Ireland Prison Service* (London: Methuen, 2000), p. 214. The programme was called 'The H-Block Fuse' and would be broadcast on 24 Nov. 1980.
- 59 'No Policy Change If Maze Men Die: Alison', *Belfast Telegraph* (25 Nov. 1980). Around this same time, Peter Robinson put together a pamphlet entitled *Self-Inflicted: An Exposure of the H-Blocks Issue* (Belfast: Democratic Unionist Party, 1980). In reference to republicans and the hunger strike he wrote: 'They either realise that the general public has seen through their propaganda veil or they have found that their disgusting campaign has no moral appeal to anyone outside their own murder gangs and a new deception is needed to advance their bogus cause' (p. 10).
- 60 Hansard, HC vol. 994 cols 319–20 (1980). Thatcher added: 'There can be no such thing as a political prisoner. It was thought that this was one possible way of counteracting the IRA propaganda campaign' (McCartney's murder convictions would be quashed in 2007).
- 61 'Status – On One Condition', *Belfast Telegraph* (1 Dec. 1980).
- 62 Within the week, the National H-Block Committee's letterhead changed to the National H-Block/Armagh Committee.
- 63 Bik McFarlane, quoted in Campbell, McKeown and O'Hagan, *Nor Meekly Serve My Time*, p. 121.
- 64 'Press Release – Armagh Hunger Strike', Sinn Féin, 28 Nov. 1980 (Linen Hall Library Northern Ireland Political Collection).
- 65 Robert Adams, Norman Earle, William Mullan, Thomas Andrews, Samuel Courtney and Samuel McClean began their hunger strike on 12 December.
- 66 'Segregation – Now!' and 'Judas Lambs to the Slaughter', *Ulster: Voice of the UDA* (Nov. 1980).
- 67 'UDA Leaders Split Over Hunger Strike', *Belfast Telegraph* (8 Dec. 1980).
- 68 'UDA Reject "End Fast" Call', *Belfast Telegraph* (15 Dec. 1980). Dr Eames also said: 'It is vital that protest actions which are largely foreign to the history of the Protestant traditions in this country are not allowed to become pawns in the hands of those who wish to undermine, further endanger, or divide this community.' 'Bishop Calls For an End to UDA Hunger-Strike Protest', *Belfast Telegraph* (15 Dec. 1980).
- 69 'Information Bulletin – Irish Support Continues to Grow', National

- H-Block Committee, 4 Dec. 1980 (Linen Hall Library Northern Ireland Political Collection).
- 70 A press release issued by the National H-Block Committee later complained of Garda harassment of activists helping to build the 10 December march. It noted: 'People posterising Dublin city and distributing leaflets ... are being arrested under Section 30 of the Offences Against the State Act, detained in the Bridewell, searched for arms in the street. Posters are being illegally confiscated and torn down by uniformed Gardaí and S.D.U officers'. 'Press Release – Garda Harassment', National H-Block Committee, 4 Dec. 1980 (Linen Hall Library Northern Ireland Political Collection).
- 71 'Disciplined and Impressive March to the British Embassy', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (13 Dec. 1980).
- 72 'Trade Unions and the Hunger-Strike', *IRIS* 1(2) (Nov. 1981).
- 73 'Traders in H-Block Row', *Belfast Telegraph* (17 Dec. 1980). The report noted that the Committee 'passed a resolution condemning ... intimidation and said it was resolved to uphold the right to work and would seek the full protection of the law in the exercise of that right'.
- 74 'RTÉ and the Hunger Strikes', National H-Block/Armagh Committee flyer (Linen Hall Library Northern Ireland Political Collection).
- 75 Ray MacMáonais, *The Road from Ardoyne: The Making of a President* (Dingle: Brandon, 2004), p. 181. McAleese's first cousin, John Pickering, took part in the 1981 hunger strike.
- 76 Statement on Ending of Hunger Strike, National H-Block/Armagh Committee, 19 Dec. 1980 (Linen Hall Library Northern Ireland Political Collection).
- 77 Statement on Ending of Hunger Strike, National H-Block/Armagh Committee, 19 Dec. 1980 (Linen Hall Library Northern Ireland Political Collection).

SMASHING H-BLOCK

Smashing H-Block is a political history of the Irish republican struggle against criminalization from 1976 to 1982. This struggle, which culminated in the historic hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981, is widely regarded as a turning point in Ireland's 'Troubles', marking the 'last great wave of activism and mobilization within the nationalist population'. Unlike previous accounts of this period, this fascinating book focuses on the popular movement outside the prisons, challenging republican orthodoxy and stressing the importance of broad-based, grassroots movements in effecting political and social change. Ultimately, it was what happened outside the prisons during these years of protest that reshaped and revitalized modern Irish republicanism.

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH taken on the outskirts of Coalisland, Co. Tyrone, 17 February 1980. It shows one of the earliest marches organized by the National H-Block/Armagh Committee and features many of the anti-criminalization campaign's key activists. Soon after this march, John Turnly (second row, second left) and Miriam Daly (first row, first left) were assassinated. In January 1981 Bernadette McAliskey (first row, second right) survived an assassination attempt. Two months later, Frank Maguire MP (second row, first right) died, leading to the election of Bobby Sands. In May 1981, Fergus O'Hare (first row, third right) was elected to Belfast City Council on an anti-H Block ticket. Photograph reproduced by permission of Derek Speirs.



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