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SecretTHE LOYALIST STRIKE

I met in Belfast yesterday with the journalist whom I have seen recently in relation to Loyalist paramilitary activities. As on previous occasions, readers of this report are reminded of the need to keep its contents absolutely confidential.

My contact gave me the following account of events on 25 February leading to the volte-face by the two Unionist leaders.

He understands that, following Paisley's return from London, a meeting was held at 6.30 pm in Paisley's home in East Belfast. Present were Paisley, Robinson, and representatives of the UDA, UVF, Apprentice Boys and the Orange Order. A week previously, Robinson had set up a committee comprising the latter, under his own chairmanship, to make plans for the East Belfast end of the strike. (The UDA had, in the meantime, decided in favour of a strike.) He had promised to bring this Committee to meet Paisley on the latter's return from London and to discuss with him what action should be taken in the light of the Thatcher meeting. The meeting (the account of which my contact has from one of the participants) began in friendly terms but quickly turned acrimonious. Paisley felt that he and Molyneaux had brought back something from London which could be represented as a concession by Mrs. Thatcher. Robinson replied that "what you've got is not enough" and, pointing to the others present, said: "These boys want a strike". There ensued a series of heated exchanges on this subject, with Paisley against a strike and Robinson very much in favour (the others present, it appears, let Robinson do most of the talking for them). Robinson proposed that representatives of the committee address the joint working party's meeting in Glengall Street at 8 pm. Paisley agreed and they did so. My contact had no details of the discussions there but drew the conclusion that "Robinson and the paramilitaries must have gained the upper hand there".

Molyneaux's position is not clear. Last week, Paisley said on BBC radio that "Jim Molyneaux favours a strike but I don't". No other evidence is available, however, to support this. It is also not yet clear what position McCusker has been taking in the discussions.

My contact feels that Paisley committed a major blunder in London. The line agreed in advance had been that the Unionist leaders would propose a round-table conference provided the Agreement were "frozen". As things turned out, they agreed to reflect on a British proposal for the former minus their own precondition. While this might have been expected of Molyneaux, who tends to be rather "submissive" in the presence of Mrs. Thatcher, it was certainly uncharacteristic of

Paisley. This blunder probably arose because Paisley has been trying to lower his own profile recently, and to let Molyneaux take the lead in an effort to preserve Unionist unity. (Similar deference may have been responsible for the fact that the strike announcement yesterday afternoon came from Molyneaux alone). In my contact's view, Paisley has in consequence lost ground to Robinson.

It is believed that Robinson favoured a strike irrespective of the outcome of Tuesday's meeting. There has been some speculation that he is pushing the strike idea in an effort to wrest the DUP leadership from Paisley. In logistical terms, it should be relatively straightforward to mount a successful one-day strike in East Belfast, where there are only one or two main arteries and two or three major plants (Shorts, Harland & Wolff, Sirocco) whose workforces have been traditionally sympathetic to strike action. Robinson's intention, in fact, is that East Belfast should be the "model area" in organisational terms and his own role central to the success of the strike.

As against that, however, there are aspects of the strike plan which have clearly not been thought out. The document setting out this plan (a copy of which I was given - summary accounts have already appeared in the media) speaks of a complete news blackout, for example, yet it is hard to see how the strike will make any kind of impact without media coverage. My contact presumes that this policy will be revised by Robinson or Sammy Wilson before next Monday. Another indication of careless preparation is the relegation to the final page (third and fourth last points under the heading "Other matters for consideration") of the items, "Security forces' reaction" and "Attitude to (i) UDR/Army; (ii) RUC".

The document's contents may be summarised as follows:

The intention is that "Ulster will come to a stop, be isolated from the outside world, with nil or minimum communication or news coverage".

The strike's major objectives will be to close the two airports, Larne harbour, internal transportation, government and local government buildings, factories, offices, shops, schools, pubs and clubs, etc. There will be a "reduction in electricity output" from 7 am - 7 pm. There will be agricultural machinery 'convoys' to selected centres, motorcar 'convoys' to shut motorways and major roads, pickets on 'major targets' as well as poster and leaflet distribution. Among the matters "yet to be considered" (N.B. the document is now 10-14 days old) are: care of the elderly/infirm, the distribution of emergency passes, marshalling and identification, pre-protest press and media briefing, attitude to the security forces and clergy involvement.

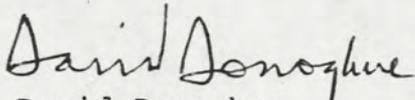
My contact understands that the power workers have not yet agreed on a common line in regard to the strike. The workers

at two of the power stations are believed to have come out in favour of strike action but those at the other two have yet to make up their minds.

In my contact's view, the strike will be enforced with widespread intimidation, euphemistically signalled in the strike document's reference to the "inconvenience which will be caused to those who do not respond positively to the leader's call".

There is some talk that Robinson favours following up on next Monday's strike with a indefinite strike which would begin later on in the month. He favours March for this as the continuing cold weather would give a power stoppage more "bite". The OUP, on the other hand, are believed to favour May, for precisely the same reasons - they want a strike, but without "bite". (They are also conscious that two previous strikes took place in the month of May).

The "gut feeling" which my contact has picked up, however, is most ordinary Loyalists do not want a strike even for one day, let alone for an indefinite period. An indifferent public response to Monday's strike could seriously weaken the position of "firebrands" such as Robinson and enable Paisley to reassert his authority. It would also have implications for the "firebrands" within the UDA, leaving Tyrre (whose constructive remarks on Tuesday in support of constitutional politicians and devolution earned him "a lot of hostile phone calls" yesterday morning) with more room for manoeuvre.


David Donoghue

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