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NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

PROTESTS AND SECOND HUNGER STRIKE - WEEKLY BULLETIN

1. During the first hunger strike a weekly bulletin was circulated giving a summary of the preceding week's events in the prisons, in the Department, in community and political life. It is intended to repeat this exercise in connection with the second strike. As before, the bulletin will be a joint production involving Prisons Administration Division (1), Belfast, Liaison Staff (Belfast) and Political Affairs Division (Belfast). Each Division will, of course, continue day-to-day and operational reporting with a generally more limited circulation. The format of this bulletin will be essentially the same as last time but it will now be issued on Thursdays and not Fridays as previously. This is to ensure that all of our distant recipients should have their copies before the weekend. The period covered in this bulletin is from before the strike to 0900 hours on Thursday 5 March.

PRISON DEVELOPMENTS

2.1 Maze Hunger Strike On Sunday 1 March, Robert Gerard Sands, OC. of the PIRA prisoners at Maze, refused breakfast and announced that he was now launching a second hunger strike. His determination to do so had been known since early January but, presumably for tactical reasons, he had delayed his action for some time. On 5 February a statement attributed to the Maze and Armagh prisoners had given advance public warning of the onset of a new strike:-

"Hunger strikes to the death, if necessary, will begin from March 1, the fifth anniversary of the withdrawal of political status in the H Blocks and Armagh jail".

In this were the usual allegations of government renegeing, of increased harassment and general intransigence. The most significant passage, however, was:-

"We are demanding to be treated as political prisoners which everyone recognises we are".

The National H Block Committee confirmed this with their own statement which as reported by the Irish News included the lines:-

"Britain must somehow be made to realise that it is not the kind or colour of prison clothes that matters but that the whole process of criminalization must be ended".

In the statement issued to coincide with the start of the strike the same message was repeated:-

"We have asserted that we are political prisoners and everything about our country, our arrests, interrogations, trials and prison conditions show that we are politically motivated ... As further demonstration of our selflessness and the justice of our cause a number of our comrades, beginning today with Bobby Sands, will hunger strike to the death unless the British Government abandons its criminalization policy and meets our demands for political status."

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At the same time it was made clear that women at Armagh would not be joining the strike but that further men would 'volunteer' to join Sands at unspecified times. We have information to suggest that 3 have been selected for this - Joseph Patrick O'Hara (INLA), Raymond P McCreesh and Francis J S Hughes.

2.2 Hunger Striker Sands is currently still in H.3. His weight today is 9st 10lbs (62 kgs) representing a loss of 4.4lbs (2 kgs) since Day 2 (the first day of medical examination) when he weighed 10st 11lb (64 kgs). Sands has co-operated fully with medical and prison staff and is being medically examined daily. He continues to drink only salted water. He was moved on 2 March to a single clean cell and at his own request has been provided with furniture.

2.3 Visits to Hunger Striker. Before the start of the strike Sands had special visits from 2 nuns and from Father Faul; pastoral visits by prison chaplains have taken place on each day since 1 March. On 3 March David Beresford (Guardian) and Brendan O'Cathaoir (Irish Times) saw Sands on a "family" visit. They were required to sign an undertaking that the visit would not be used for journalistic purposes, did so and then claimed on leaving that they would not abide by this.

3.1 Maze Protest. Numbers of dirty protesters declined steadily after the end of the first hunger strike when they stood at 466 but then in the period before this strike began levelled off at just over 410 (still some 60/70 above the average level last year). On Day 1 of the hunger strike the number was 411 and today is 413. Since Day 1, 3 have joined and 1 has left. On 3 March, 9 republican prisoners began a no work protest in support of the hunger strike; this fell back to 8 today.

3.2 Maze Clean Protest. In contrast to the previous strike, when large numbers joined the dirty protest, all republican protesters announced on 2 March their intention of going on to a clean protest. On the accompanying press statement they claimed that this was to -

"highlight the main areas of our demands which are not about cell furniture or toilet facilities but about the right not to wear prison uniform in the H blocks and, in both the H blocks and Armagh Prison, the right not to do prison work and the right to free association with fellow political prisoners (which includes segregation from loyalists). ... Nevertheless as from today we are prepared to run that gauntlet [assaults by prison officers!] to highlight the hunger strike and the issues behind our demands for political status".

So far 234 prisoners have been moved into clean cells which they have not fouled. Most have taken the opportunity to wash to have their hair cut and to shave. All have been given clean blankets and mattresses. At present none have asked for furniture and none has yet been issued to them. It is hoped to have all the prisoners moved into clean cells by the weekend.

4. Armagh Protest The Armagh dirty protest continued at the same level after the end of the first hunger strike. As with the Maze protest the women ended the dirty aspect on 2 March and all 28 have been moved to clean cells.

5. Prisons Assessment The prisoners' tactics in connection with the latest hunger strike are very different from previously. Only one serious candidate for 'death or victory' is being fielded; those to join the strike must at this stage be considered 'supporters'. Similarly the action of the prisoners in abandoning the dirty aspect of their protest contrasts with the increase in prison disruption brought about last time. Their motives for their actions are clearly mixed; the move has obvious presentational value as a 'de-escalation' though so far propoganda has made clear that it is a tactic to concentrate interest in the hunger strike. Perhaps also the dirty protest has become something of a liability, particularly in the light of such comments as those made by Bishop Daly. It will also undoubtedly be easier to keep up numbers of protesters on a clean protest. The rationale for a second hunger strike itself, when the first failed, is clearly obscure but it must reflect the degree of importance which imprisoned members of PIRA at least attach to winning political status. This time the humanitarian pretence has been dropped completely and the issue has been repeatedly and unequivocally quoted as "political status". To gain support for this we know from intercepted letters that protesters are writing en bloc to their relations and a variety of community leaders both at home and abroad. The message in all of these is the same - British renegeing, intransigence, renewed brutality and no option left but once again to resort to a hunger strike.

Finally it may be noted that all forms of loyalist protest have ceased, though if this group thinks that concessions are in the offing there is little doubt that a loyalist protest/token hunger strike will rapidly appear.

DEVELOPMENTS WITHIN NIO

6. Correspondence Nothing like the previous upsurge of correspondence has taken place as yet though we know the propogandists are working to generate this. Interest is still centred in the circumstances surrounding the ending of the last hunger strike and subsequent events.

7. Meetings The Secretary of State discussed the impending hunger strike with Cardinal O'Fiaich and Bishop Daly on 18 February and with Oliver Napier on 25 February; Mr Alison likewise met the Peace People on 19 February. After the start of the hunger strike the Secretary of State met Rev Sydney Callaghan on 2 March.

DEVELOPMENTS WITHIN NORTHERN IRELAND

8. The Campaign On Sunday 1 March an H Block march in West Belfast attracted some 3,800 persons and passed off peacefully. Most of the marchers were young people aged about 17-20, and there were 7 persons dressed in paramilitary uniform. Amongst the speakers was the mother of hunger striker Robert Sands. Jim Gibney (PSF and National H Block/Armagh Committee) demanded that all public representatives should withdraw for the duration of the strike and called for a boycott of the 1981 census. Support from trade unionists was demanded. It is notable that this event (which took place in very bad weather) attracted less than half the number who attended the first big H Block march in Belfast at the start of the 1980 hunger strike.

9. Bishop Daly's statement of 1 March attracted an immediate response from PSF in Belfast, who accused him of making an "unwarranted attack" on prisoners' support groups and playing into the hands of HMG. A statement from 'Belfast Youth against H Block' maintained that they and the National Committee believed in mass peaceful demonstrations and argued that groups such as theirs provided a safe channel for youth to express opposition to HMG, rather than resorting to terrorism.

10. It was announced that Brendan McFarlane is to succeed Sands as self-styled 'OC' of the Provisional prisoners at the Maze.

11. Political Developments The ending of the dirty protest received a general welcome from the SDLP, Alliance Party and the Republican Clubs - the Workers' Party, the latter commenting that the decision presented "a new opportunity for the Government to show flexibility and tolerance in dealing with the prisoners". The DUP however commented that the move was merely a ploy to which the authorities should not respond. The Secretary of State also welcomed the move in a statement to the House of Commons on 3 March. However he re-emphasised that the Government would not 'give way on the issue of political status under pressure of further protest action whatever form this takes and whether it is inside or outside the prisons! While the statement was generally welcomed in the House several MPs, notably Mr Concannon and Mr Molyneaux, made clear they did not wish to have frequent statements which might give unnecessary publicity to the hunger strike.

12. Dr Edward Daly, RC Bishop of Derry, made a significant speech on 1 March. He said that while there was room for more flexibility on the part of HMG, he did not believe it to be "morally justified to endanger life by hunger strike or to risk one's mental - physical health by living in cells fouled by one's own excrement". He advised people not to support hunger strike marches and rallies unless the organisers have "made known publicly their rejection of murder and bombing.

DEVELOPMENTS OUTSIDE NORTHERN IRELAND

13. Irish Republic At a press conference in Dublin on 2 March, the National H Blocks/Armagh Committee announced that they were conducting a peaceful, single-issue campaign in support of the resolution of the hunger strike and blanket protest, which could not be viewed in isolation from the political situation in the North. The campaign would centre on the efforts of the 250 local action groups - Fr Pearce O'Doyle, the Committee's chairman, said in response to Bishop Daly's statement that his Committee were not judges of the morality of the hunger strike and emphasised that they tried to keep all their protests peaceful. O'Doyle played up as "very positive", the Bishop's observations about the need for prisoners to wear their own clothes at all times and the alleged inflexibility of HMG. Gerry Adams (PSF Vice President) warned that as tension rose during the hunger strike and people went on the streets, outside influences, including the Bishop and even the Committee itself, would become completely irrelevant.

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14. Overseas On 1 March, organised by NORAIID, a reported 3,000 persons demonstrated in New York during the Prime Minister's visit. Their purpose was partly to notify American public opinion of the start of the hunger strike.

MEDIA

15. On 1 March 1981, the Sunday World reported that Sands was going against the wishes of the Provisional leadership, who believe HMG will stand back and let him starve to death. However, constant persuasion over the last 3 weeks by senior Republicans had convinced women in Armagh jail not to join the fast at this stage.

16. Bishop Daly's statement on 2 March received front page coverage in most Irish newspapers. Reports of the previous day's Belfast march in support of the H Blocks took second place to this.

17. The ending of the dirty protest was the main H Block story on 3 March, with Fr O'Doyle's statement that he was personally against the hunger strike also receiving substantial coverage. The leader in the Irish Press saw the ending of the dirty protest as "an olive branch to the prison authorities and the British Government", and thought that "the gesture has been made and (HMG) would be wise to respond to it". It suggested allowing to start with, prisoners to wear their own clothes. The Irish Independent, on the other hand, dismissed the Provisionals both inside and outside the Maze, by saying that the public is more occupied with other matters, and that the Provisionals are superfluous and in danger of being by-passed by history.

18. The Irish Times on 5 March carried an interview with Bobby Sands by Brendan O'Cathaoir that he expects to lose his life for the principle of "political prisoner status". The article was not altogether unhelpful: it said that visiting facilities at the Maze were more humane than at Portlaoise!

19. An Phoblacht (28 Feb) emphasised that the hunger strike is specifically for political status; no mention was made of any of the "5 demands". Comfort was sought from the miners' recent impact on government policy and called on supporters to mobilise "into a political force which threatens the balance of power in Ireland". But mention was also made of the efforts made by the Republican movement to dissuade the prisoners from their action.

20. Press Office The Information Service has prepared 2 new leaflets for issue at the appropriate time and the Press Office continues to deal with media interest in the protests. Bob Erlandson, a journalist with the "Baltimore Sun", visited the Maze Prison on Friday 27 February 1981. Future visits by the "Sunday Times" and ITVs "TV Eye" are under consideration.

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21. Overall Assessment As already noted above the prison campaign is taking a different course this time. The prisoners have given up dissimulation to the purpose of their actions - political status is now the issue - while at the same time making **these** actions less unpleasant for themselves. It is not clear how far this may reflect confusion among the prisoners as to how best to pursue their campaign but the fact that a second hunger strike has started so soon after the failure of the first must show clearly their determination - if not desperation. Just how the campaign will develop inside the prison is at present unclear other than by the heralded addition of "supporter" hunger **strikers**. Outside the prison, too, there are significant differences in the course of the campaign so far. It seems likely this time that INLA and PIRA will continue violence at whatever level they can sustain. Although - and clearly in response to Bishop Daly, the Nation H Block Committee has announced that it wishes to keep its protests peaceful, a higher level of civil disorder cannot be ruled out particularly in the later stages. As the last campaign must have been a considerable drain on the Committee's resources it remains to be seen if they will try to mount as extensive a campaign overseas as they did previously. Finally, from feelings of déjà vue, if nothing else, community interest is evidently at a low ebb and comparatively little activity is yet in evidence.

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For recipients see list attached.

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