

Comment

The writer of this month's *Comment*, Fr Desmond Wilson, is not a popular man with any of the groups that struggle for domination in Northern Ireland. His work among the dispossessed of West Belfast and in the establishment of workers' co-operatives, especially his tendency to tell the truth have brought him into conflict with the British, the Catholic hierarchy, Republican and Protestant forces as well as those content with slogans about peace. In the belief that his is one of the few voices worth hearing about what is going on in Northern Ireland we have asked him to comment on the recent hunger strike.

Editor

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The recent hunger strike in Ireland had tragic results because in Ireland and Britain there were two completely opposite views about what should be done about it. In Ireland the only honourable thing to do with a hunger striker is to give in to him; in Britain, it seemed, the only honourable thing was not to give in.

The Irish attitude is not so unreasonable as it may seem at first sight. Two thousand years ago Irish law recognised the hunger strike as a legal means of putting pressure on an opponent; even up to three hundred years ago in Ireland that kind of law was still the law of the people. The thinking was that if a person is strongly enough convinced of the justice of his case that he will fast for it, then there must be something in it, since people are no fools. So, if you do not give in, go on a fast yourself as a sign that you are as strongly willed in the matter as he. To slam the door on your hunger striker and refuse to admit the justice of his cause was unthinkable.

Because of this deep seated reverence in Ireland which its laws once acknowledged, failure to respond to a hunger striker leads inevitably to a sense not only of defeat but of rejection of one's own deep self, an impugning of one's integrity which is simply unbearable. The result of the government's refusal to respond to the hun-

ger strike was bound then to result in a worse relationship between many Irish people and the government than would have been the case had there been a response to the strike early on. This paradox can be understood in the light of the great difference in understanding of a hunger strike which Irish and English people have.

Certainly the effect of the hunger strike has been amazing. What other event during the past ten years in Ireland has engaged the attention of Pope, Cardinals, Prime Ministers, international press, foreign governments, and evoked their comment as well? Press reports in foreign countries often showed more understanding of, and sympathy for, the hunger strike than they had for any other event of the Northern Ireland tragedy. In Ireland there were tens of thousands of people who in the past would never have marched in the streets for anything, now strode defiantly past military and police not caring any more whether they were being photographed or not. There are few weapons a government can use in such a case, and brute force has been used *ad nauseam*; to all intents and purposes, unless the government could pull another trick out of the bag, the republicans had won not only the battle but the war.

For the republicans an interesting situation was arising. In local communities young men and women were quietly asking what they could do to help. To say that the recruiting agents for paramilitaries were going about their business is much too crude for what was happening. Some very intelligent and sensitive people were asking the question, and they were the last in the world likely to do anything rashly. What can the republican movement then do with so many willing helpers? During the hunger strike there was plenty to do, organising, demonstrating, painting murals, but afterwards, what then? In no way can a military movement accommodate people in those numbers; the only way a guerrilla army can operate in a country in which there is a spy at every corner is to have small elite units, each one sealed off from the others. Great numbers are, for the guerrilla army, an embarrassment.

For a political movement of another kind however, great numbers are exactly what you want. The tens of thousands who attended the funerals of the hunger strikers, the tens of thousands who voted for their representatives to get a seat in Westminster or Dáil Éireann, are tens of thousands of potential voters for the future, containing thousands of potential political workers. The possibility of a political movement for republicans which would be powerful enough to enable them to do away with their military campaign was coming into view.

No one should be in any doubt that people in paramilitary movements want an end to the war; it is a grim business taking

one's life in one's hands and never living in one's own home, knowing that in the end you may be tried, convicted and sent to jail not for something you have done but for something you did not do at all. But they are not prepared to end the war simply to go back to where they were in 1968, walking the streets for civil rights and getting beaten into the ground as their answer. This time round they want control, or a great share in it. Can a political movement be created towards this end which will generate such power that military means will become more and more unnecessary? There are some observers who believe this is possible and they get great hope from the possibility.

Members of the republican movement are now making up their minds what they should do. Should they continue a war which they believe they cannot lose but which also they cannot absolutely win against an opponent who feels much the same way on his side? Or should they strengthen the undoubted gains won during the hunger strike and create a political movement which will not require arms? There is no doubt where the pacifist answer lies; pacifists in Northern Ireland would, many of them, welcome a strong republican movement as a substitute for the present bloody deadlock, whatever the future may bring.

For the republicans it is not so simple. All during their history they have been scourged by "splits", dissensions in the movement on matters of principle. The splits have traditionally occurred between those who believe that only arms will suffice against the British government and those who wish for other, non-military, means; between the left and the right, between those who having won a seat in Parliament would occupy it and those who would boycott Parliament no matter how many seats they won. The possibilities of splits in the present situation are only too clear. If the war is abandoned, the people who believe this means defeat may form an organisation of their own; if the movement decides to contest elections they will have to decide the delicate and difficult business of abstention or participation in Parliament in the face of an almost inevitable split. And this, of all times, is a time for unity among those who wish for a United Ireland.

It would be wrong to suppose that the republicans have not the political wisdom to deal with such a complicated and difficult set of problems. The public pronouncements of government are that the republicans have no policies and no thinkers; the private opinion of politicians and even high ranking soldiers is that they have and that some of them are as alert and knowledgeable as any politician you are likely to get in the British Isles. The difference between government assessment of the republicans and government propaganda about them has been one of the tragedies of the

whole situation.

One has to be realistic about the reasons why a government holds out against a hunger strike in the way the British government held out against the latest Irish one. The strike was not welcomed or wanted by the republican movement outside the prisons, but once it had started it had to be supported. Supporting the hunger strike meant that a lot of the organising power of the republican movement, a lot of the energy, a lot of the resources, including money, had to be tied up for months doing things which, however necessary, detracted from the military campaign. For the government, a republican movement marching in the streets, thus revealing who its sympathisers were, and organising mural-painters and PROs, was less difficult to contain than a republican movement organising bombings and attacking soldiers. In a real sense the longer the hunger strike went on, provided public indignation could be contained, the more advantageous the government strategists would find it. Contrary to the propaganda, it was the republicans who wanted the strike to end, the government who saw advantage in it continuing. What the government failed to realise was that there was now building up a new and far more threatening political movement in which ordinary people expressed grim determination, through seething anger, that this was the last trick the government would play on them. The government, in effect, presented the republican movement with a public opinion victory, a chance to enter constitutional politics, a considerable following if they did, greater and saner discussion of the real issues than there had been for many years, and arguably, the beginning of the end of Westminster control of Northern Ireland. It was reckoned by some as almost a slow replay of the aftermath of the 1916 Rising.

In all this the Protestants of Northern Ireland were almost forgotten. Yet their prisoners also stood to benefit from any concessions the republicans might win. For many of them this was the first time they had really seen the republicans locked in close struggle with the government. On nearly all sides churchmen condemned the strikers with such vehemence that if Ireland were as clerically influenced as it is supposed to be the strike would have lasted not three weeks. There were complaints that the hunger strike had polarised the community more than ever; some would say however, that it merely showed how desperately polarised it was already so that even hunger strikes could not have made much difference. The level of fear among many Protestants rose, as they felt they could not trust either the government or their Catholic fellow citizens. Denunciations of one side by another have hardly ever been so strident.

Yet there has been some hope in the whole tragic situation. Any thoughts Westminster politicians may have had that they were dealing with people who would continue to be impressed by promises to "ask a question in the House" have been rudely upset.

People who have seen such power as that generated by the hunger strike and its consequences will not be fobbed off with false promises or empty ones. The guns may indeed be laid aside, and the political arguments may become real. We may be facing political campaigns of terrible conflict and potency.

Strange to say, the people of Northern Ireland will count *all* that gain.

Desmond Wilson

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