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Ireland

“Be patient and never to give up the struggle”

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Tommy McKearney was born in 1952 to a family with a long tradition in the Irish republican movement and raised in Moy, County Tyrone in the north of Ireland. When the insurrection against the Orange State and British rule broke out in the early 1970s Tommy, like so many of his generation and background, joined the Provisional Irish Republican Army. Tommy became a leading member of the IRA in his native Tyrone in the 1970s. The McKearney family paid a terrible price in the war; three of Tommy's brothers, Sean, Padraig and Kevin, were killed in the course of the Troubles.

Imprisoned in 1977 for alleged IRA activities Tommy participated in the H-Block prison struggle including the blanket and dirty protests. In 1980, Tommy went fifty-three days without food as part of the first hunger strike led by Brendan Hughes. While in Long Kesh Tommy and other prisoners developed a left-wing critique of the Republican movement and, leaving the Provisionals in 1986, formed the League of Communist Republicans with like-minded prisoners (those interested are encouraged to read Liam O'Ruairc's history of the League for a fascinating look at this oft over-looked episode from the Troubles).

Released from prison after serving sixteen years in 1993, Tommy became one of the most principled and far-sighted critics [1] of the Peace Process and the Good Friday (1998) and Saint Andrew's Agreements (2006). Rejecting any return to war and advocating a strategy of working class mobilization, Tommy was a founding member of the Irish Republican Writers Group which sought to foster debate within the Republican movement over course of the Peace Process and the future of Irish republicanism.

To help foster that debate, Tommy helped to found and co-edited the highly respected journal Fourthwrite (now an online publication). A socialist and an internationalist, Tommy has since become an organizer of the Independent Workers Union, which seeks to organize Irish workers north and south, native-born and immigrant, outside of the duplicitous 'Social Partnership' arrangements between the mainstream trade unions and the capitalist Irish government. In 2011 Tommy published a highly regarded book, *The Provisional IRA From Insurrection to Parliament*, in Pluto Press. In the book Tommy follows the path of the Provisional movement, analyzes its strengths and weaknesses, its history and aims all the while seeking to promote a working class alternative to the current cul-de-sac republicanism in Ireland has found itself in. Unfortunately, reactionary visa restrictions prevent Tommy from visiting the United States, so a book launch here has not been possible. However, all those involved or interested in the Irish revolution and the Irish solidarity movement in the US would do well to read Tommy's work. The book is now available in shops in the United States and online.

Following is an interview with Tommy (the links are the editors, not Tommy's, and meant to provide useful background to the issues, organizations and events raised in the discussion). Following the interview is a fascinating and very worthwhile talk Tommy gave in 2009 to a gathering of young Irish revolutionaries around the group *eirigi* on the working class, James Connolly, Irish republicanism and the 1916 Easter Rising. In the talk he firmly places the working class, in Ireland and internationally, into the context of the struggle for Irish national liberation and socialism. Many thanks to Tommy for his time and generosity in making this interview possible.

Interview with Tommy McKearney

Q: In your book you write of the ending of the recent conflict: 'However, as the Orange state was being buried, it was, by degrees, giving way to a sectarian state.' Given the sectarian nature of the Northern state

how should socialists and democrats approach such a state? How does our political hostility to sectarianism relate to a state built on such sectarianism?

TM: The new sectarian state is, nevertheless, an improvement on the old ‘Orange state’ if only because there is now no longer any material advantage in being a member of what once was the privileged Protestant working class. Speaking objectively – admittedly a difficult thing to do in Northern Ireland – this means that there is no barrier of self-interest preventing the promotion of class based left-wing politics in this region.

Of course, just as civil rights legislation in the 1960s didn’t lead to class based politics in Mississippi, an end to Orange domination will not lead inevitably to socialist politics in N. Ireland. Socialists and progressives have to continue to point out the democratic deficit that is in N. Ireland and support demands for a transformation of the state.

Q: As a former prisoner and hunger striker, what are your thoughts on the situation republicans face in prison right now?

TM: For a start, all prisoners – political or non-political – deserve decent and humane treatment from their gaolers. There is little doubt that the Northern Ireland prison regime is a flawed and outdated service that is clinging on to perks and privileges that depend on the existence of a state of high alert in the prison.

As always, it is the ruling political authority that must take ultimate responsibility for prison conditions and irony of ironies; with policing and justice powers devolved to the Sinn Fein/DUP led local government coalition, the Sinn Fein party shares responsibility for conditions in Maghaberry prison.

Prisons everywhere are a barometer of a society’s level of development and the huge prison population in the US is a sad reflection on that country’s lack of well-being. Most recent swift increases in US prisoner numbers coincided with the enormous transfer of wealth from middle to top that came from the Reagan led neo-liberal agenda. The privileged elite found it necessary to contain the inevitable unrest and discontent by criminalising and imprisoning it and thus the increase in numbers.

The answer – as the cause – lies outside the prisons. An old gaol maxim is that the only real victory a prisoner wins is when he walks through the gate or gets over the wall. Hunger strikes and other prison protests have no impact if not supported by those outside the prison. Decent, progressive America must loudly identify the excessive use of imprisonment for what it is, and campaign against it as it has against imperialist adventures abroad and legalised robbery at home.

Q: The hunger strikes of 1980-81 were a seminal moment in the history of the Irish liberation movement. You yourself spent [53 days on hunger strike in 1980](#); what did that era teach you about political organizing?.

TM: The biggest lesson from the hunger-strike period has to be the risk of having a mass movement captured by bureaucrats and apparatchiks. This is always a problem in the absence of a well-informed and radical cadre willing to challenge the drift towards centrism.

There is also the need to be clear about the nature of the core demands of a popular upsurge. If the core demand/s are not inherently radical and can be monopolised by a centrist tendency, the original mass movement may ultimately reinforce the status quo ante. The hunger-strike was about prisoners and those who controlled the loyalty of the prisoners were able to exert control over the mass movement.

Q: What are your thoughts on [Ed Moloney's](#) 'Voices from the Grave'? And the [Boston College controversy](#)?

TM: I believe that the research project led by Anthony McIntyre was a good and useful piece of work and something that Anthony carried out diligently and with integrity. On reflection, it may have been better if the embargo had been for something like 50 years instead of the life of the interviewee but it's easy to be wise after an event.

I thought the book [“Voices from the Grave”](#) was an interesting work but its overall message was a little spoiled by the obsessing with Brendan Hughes' critique of Gerry Adams.

The [Boston college controversy](#) is a shame on both the British and US authorities. It is highly unlikely that the contents would ever stand up in court as evidence in the first instance. Moreover, what on earth is the US government trying to do risking unpicking a settlement that they have boasted about brokering?

Q: For many years Ireland was a country that workers emigrated from, since the late 1990s the trend was in the opposite direction with immigrants coming to Ireland. Recently, with Ireland's severe economic crisis, emigration is again plaguing Ireland's young. What's happening with immigrant rights in Ireland? What has the return of emigration meant?

TM: Most immigrants to Ireland are citizens of the European Union and therefore have, in theory at any rate, equal rights with people born in Ireland. There is a difficult to measure undercurrent of resentment against “foreigners” but it has not often manifested itself in the open. What really we are missing are workers' rights that would protect migrant and indigenous alike and help prevent the exploitation of vulnerable migrant workers in low paid “sweat-shop” jobs and this is all the more important at a time of high emigration.

Emigration from Ireland has a deeply corrosive impact on society. For the most part it is the young and energetic that emigrates from any country and this is also the case in Ireland. Losing a significant percentage of a generation deprives that country of a crucial amount of aggregate social and material product and accelerates the downward economic cycle. Emigration removes the age cohort most likely to disrupt the status quo (hence the emphasis by Irish Governments and right-wing Irish Americans to promote Morrison visa initiatives – contemporary equivalent of 19th century “assisted passages”). Emigration leaves a country old, tired and demoralised and that is where we are heading in Ireland if we can't change the current drift.

Q: You write that after the 2011 general election in the south there was a debate in Sinn Fein over whether to 'concentrate on a left-wing strategy, or whether to move on to the space formerly occupied by Fianna Fail.' What has been the progress of this debate? How did the [campaign of Martin McGuinness](#) for Irish President reflect that debate?

TM: As far as I can see, the debate never went beyond a few rhetorical questions that led back to the pre-ordained decision to displace Fiann Fail. No party with its economy spokesperson talking about building an economy on small and medium enterprises and condemning any suggestion of raising corporation taxation can genuinely claim to be socialist.

Q: In late 2010 the [United Left Alliance](#) came together to contest the February 2011 general elections in Ireland, winning five seats. What is your assessment of the ULA?

TM: The ULA is a positive and progressive development. The fact that organizations of the left have come together at any time is good and that these groups are doing so at this time of capitalist crisis is heartening and encouraging.

The ULA has also given some needed visibility to the left through its articulate and high-profile spokespersons such as Richard Boyd Barrett and Joe Higgins.

Q: The United Left Alliance has continued to debate its future role in Irish politics; whether to become a party, etc. Can the ULA become political alternative for the Irish working class?

TM: There remain some significant working class elements outside of the ULA. The working class Irish republican constituency, the Labour left and Communist Party influenced groups (much larger than CPI membership) would need to be involved in order to make a really potent alternative. There is a history of suspicion and rivalry between these groups and it would not be easy to bring them together but objectively speaking – that is a task demanding addressing and resolving. The ULA is well placed to act as a focus or catalyst to assist this development. At the same time, any move made by the ULA in this direction has to be reciprocated and that is a task for us all.

Q: As you know, the 'Occupy Wall Street' movement has captured the imagination of many, not just here in the United States, but around the world including in Ireland. In Dublin activists are continuing [Occupy Dame Street](#). What do you think of the Occupy movement?

TM: The Occupy movement is [something of immense significance](#). It may or may not achieve immediate success and indeed it may falter and dissipate completely in its current form. The real importance of this movement is that it has signaled a change of mood in the mind of multitudes across the globe. If the Occupy movement stumbles in the short term, it will, nevertheless, have helped launch a new phase in the struggle against capitalism.

Q: How did you come to identify as a socialist? Has your definition of socialism changed over the years?

TM: I can't really remember when first began to believe in socialism. I was a teenager in the 1960s when it was a reasonably fashionable thing to be a leftist. This was helped in my case by the reality of being a Catholic in N. Ireland where the resistance to the state was being organized by left republicans and socialists. The real change came for me in prison when I had time to reflect on socialism and began to grasp the difference between Utopian and Scientific socialism.

Apart from my early juvenile infatuation with Utopian socialism, my definition of the principles has changed little. What has changed though is my view of the means for bringing socialism into being. I'm much more skeptical of the 'Leninist' party organization than I once was but that's an organizational matter not a definition of the meaning which to me remains control by the working class of the means of production, distribution and exchange.

Q: For several years now you have been an organizer for the [Independent Workers Union \(IWU\)](#); what has the IWU taught you about organizing?

TM: To be patient and never to give up the struggle. Perhaps the biggest lesson is not to try and replicate the role of other conservative unions just because they are large and apparently well resourced. There is huge need to look beyond the established norm and persist with building what is needed rather than what appears convenient.

Also, be tough on membership criteria. Be careful about allowing people abuse your ideological commitment and your desire to recruit at all costs. Some folk who have no loyalty or regard to organized labour, try to use a new union to settle their immediate issue and thereafter don't even take out a year's subscription. This is very unfair to other loyal members and ultimately is very counter productive.

“Be patient and never to give up the struggle”

Ireland’s mainstream unions and members have had two decades of social partnership (i.e. a corporatist deal between state, employers and unions) that ultimately only benefited capital but gave some short-term advantages to skilled workers and public sector employees. As a result, both union leaderships and members grew used to a cosy arrangement that required little militancy and/or grass roots organization. This has led to a situation where the unions, leaderships and members, are ill prepared both mentally and organizationally for struggle. They now know that they are in difficulty but are sitting helplessly on their hands, waiting for someone else to help them.

Q: What Irish activists of the 60's/70's generation do you admire most? What activists of the 00's generation do you most admire?

TM: Undoubtedly the activists from the 1960s/70s that I most admire are Bernadette McAliskey and Eamonn McCann. I'm not including my IRA comrades in this list since I feel that they were part of an insurrectionary organization rather than individual activists. Those I admire most at the moment are the young people of the [eirigi](#) and Irish Occupy movements. They have a leftist outlook and are active in promoting their cause.

Q: You have been involved in the struggle for socialism and democracy in Ireland for over 40 years. The war you and your comrades fought resulted in far less than many had hoped. You, your family and comrades have paid a tremendous price for your activism; when you look to the future with hindsight are you optimistic or pessimistic (or both) when, surveying the current realities, you look to the future.

TM: Capitalism is in systemic crisis and young people from Oakland to Athens to Moscow to Damascus are on the streets. How could one be pessimistic? All the powers of the old world are in alliance – IMF, Yankee presidents, German chancellors, French bankers and British ministers are again fearful of the spectre awaiting them.

This interview was first published in [Against the Current](#).

[1] [Problems Of Peace](#).