

REVIEWS

Brian Hanley and Scott Millar, *The Lost Revolution: the story of the Official IRA and the Workers' Party*

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The history of the radical and revolutionary left in Ireland has received relatively little attention. Mike Millotte on the Communist Party, David Lynch on the Irish Socialist Republican Party, George Gilmore and Peadar O'Donnell on the Republican Congress and the writers and activists in the Irish Labour History Society are all that come to mind. The publication of *The Lost Revolution*, a history of the Official IRA and the Workers' Party by Brian Hanley and Scott Miller is therefore a welcome addition to the history of the Irish Left.

The Workers' Party played a significant role in the shaping of modern Ireland. In 1989 the party had seven seats in Dáil Éireann, one seat in the European Parliament, a membership of 3,000 and a weekly newspaper selling 25,000. But within three years the organisation had torn itself apart in a bitter split. Tomás Mac Giolla in the immediate aftermath of the split denounced those who, in pursuit of personal ambition had 'betrayed' the Workers' Party; 'It took twenty-five years to build into a great and effective party and it has been smashed from within in a week' (p. 587). Never the less, the Workers' Party was an invaluable training ground for a generation that went on to take leading positions in the Labour Party, the Trade Union movement and the Irish media.

The Lost Revolution is an old-fashioned grand narrative that strains to overcome the difficulty of trying to sustain four parallel narratives - North and South, the military and the political. In general, the authors shy away from analysis, favouring a chronological presentation of the facts. *The Lost Revolution* has been criticised for being on the one hand, a revisionist history, and on the other, a '600- page blizzard of innuendo and pub talk' (*Irish Independent*). Critics have also suggested that the authors fail to engage with the history of the Workers' Party in a critical or analytical way. I am not sure if this is entirely fair. The book recounts the history of the party drawing on the personal recollections of the central protagonists, party records, newspaper, and documentary evidence. The recent death of Tomás Mac Giolla illustrates how important it is to preserve the first hand accounts of our history. The decommissioning by the Official IRA of its arms in February 2010 also reflects the end of that phase of the party's history and the importance of collecting the accounts of those centrally involved. *The Lost Revolution* is a record of the most successful and influential radical left-wing organisation in Irish history. This book is also a manual for anyone interested in building such a movement today.

The origins of the Workers' Party lie in the failure of the 1950s border campaign when many of those who later became prominent in the movement began to reassess the relationship between the political and military struggle. Just as the Fenians were forced to reconsider this relationship after the abject failure of the

1867 revolt, the failure of the 1956-62 border campaign shaped a new generation of Sinn Féin activists. A number of volunteers who in later years came to prominence in the Workers' Party were shaped by the experience of failure. Over the next ten years Cathal Goulding, Sean Garland and Tomás Mac Giolla shifted the focus of the organisation from a purely military and nationalist perspective towards agitation on social and economic issues. Despite their initial hostility to atheistic communism a section of the Sinn Féin leadership was influenced by Marxist ideas, especially with the arrival of Roy Johnston and Eamon Smullen, both of whom had been members of the Communist Party in England.

The launch of the Economic Resistance Campaign in 1966 was a key moment in the political evolution of Sinn Féin from a narrow inward looking nationalist movement, with all the splits and arguments along the way, into the Workers' Party, which remarkably they achieved in less than twenty years. But it's difficult to escape the past. They managed it by turning their past on its head and one of the defining characteristics of the Workers' Party became an abiding hatred of nationalism and in particular Provisional Sinn Féin. They denounced the Provisionals with all the vigour and hatred of the repentant sinner. But in abandoning nationalism they also abandoned the best elements of the republican political tradition. In time, this corrosive element in their politics led some members of the Workers' Party into collaboration with the Northern State, the RUC, and to act as informers. The logic of this position also led some leading members in the North to follow the lead of Conor Cruise O'Brien into the embrace of Ulster Unionism.

Members of any organisation with ambitions to build a party with the reach and influence of the Workers' Party would do well to read this book. In fact, chapter seven, 'Towards the Revolutionary Party', should be compulsory reading. The party was built through agitation both on a local and a national level. Fish-ins to open up access to the rivers for everyone, free access to popular beaches, the campaign against the unfair tax burden on the PAYE worker, all hit a chord in the early seventies. The campaign to end ground-rent, and particularly the launch of the Dublin Housing Action Campaign in which many of their members were leading activists gave the party a local base and a national profile. The Housing Action Campaign organised direct action by occupying empty homes and moving homeless families into them - tactics they had learnt from the Civil Rights movement in the North a few years earlier. Their aim was to bring 'class war to the streets of Dublin' (p. 259). Though without any electoral representation they set up local advice centres which allowed them to key into the concerns of a large section of Irish society who were generally ignored by the political establishment. Their paper, the *Irish People* was sold in every factory and housing estate where they had a presence. The *Irish People* picked up on local stories about housing, trade union activity, or corruption in public life that the establishment papers ignored and soon earned a reputation and readership that went beyond their own supporters. The strategy was to use local agitation and the paper to 'keep regularly in contact with people and change them into voters, then supporters, then members' (p. 257). In 1973 their election slogan was 'people before profit' proving retrospectively that is very little that is original in Irish politics.

By the mid-seventies the Industrial Department, which was responsible for economic policy and trade union activity, was the driving force behind the growth and influence of the party. Under the direction of Eoghan Harris and Eamon Smullen the Industrial Department was almost a party within a party and not answerable to the leadership or the membership. Harris and Smullen argued for a party style, organisationally and politically, modelled on that of the Soviet Union and East Germany. They adopted the worst of the Stalinist tradition. Their relationship with and fraternal visits to North Korea marked the high Stalinist period of the party. This included a party branch of secret or undeclared members who held influential positions in the trade unions and in the media, especially in RTÉ. While formally a democratic centralist party, in reality party decisions and discipline was rigidly implemented from the top down. They became obsessed by political heresy - 'ultra-leftists', Trotskyists, and worst of all the 'Trotskyite-Provo' who had to be rooted out of the party and public life. Despite a brush with Eurocommunism in the late 1970s the party maintained a strict adherence to the Moscow line. This was one of the factors that eventually led to the implosion of the party a little over a decade later. They embraced Stalinism, as it was about to collapse internationally.

The electoral success of the party in the South in the 1979 local election, winning nineteen seats, led to tensions in the organisation over the role of the Official IRA, which though on ceasefire since 1972, was still active in 'fund-raising' activities for the party and 'defending' their members in the various feuds with the Provisional IRA and the INLA. In the last phase of its transformation from Sinn Féin to Sinn Féin-The Workers' Party to the Workers' Party the Official IRA was pushed into the background. From this time on the party publicly denied its existence. But it had not gone away. The Official IRA was now referred to as Group B, and along with the Industrial Department, became a shadowy and secret section of the party. Electoral success put immense financial strains on the organisation, and by the mid-1980's over half of the party's income was provided by the activities of Group B - bank and post office robberies, and counterfeiting official documents. These activities brought them into contact with some criminal elements in Dublin, which discredited the party and its supporters. In the North their 'fund-raising' activities resulted in the organisation developing a damaging relationship with the RUC who were prepared to tolerate their illegal activities in return for information about members of the Provisional IRA. The leadership turned a closed eye to the activities of Group B; and many of the careerists who had jumped on the party's bandwagon preferred not to know where the money was coming from. But the very success of the party meant the activities of the Official IRA/Group B came in for public exposure and scrutiny.

The problems of transforming an organisation that has a military structure and ethos into a social democratic organisation should not be underestimated. Today, Provisional Sinn Féin face the same problem. And the tensions, splits, and defections arising from this are apparent. The Workers' Party was unable to solve that problem and it is problematic whether Sinn Féin can either. However, organisational problems can always be overcome. It was not the secret groups, the lack of internal democracy, or their abiding hatred of the Provisionals that destroyed the Workers'

Party. Difficult as those problems were, they could have been resolved. It was politics! They embraced a Stalinist version of socialism, and the collapse of the Eastern European states in the late 1980s left them ideologically bankrupt. The conclusion drawn by Harris, Gilmore, and De Rossa, amongst others, equated the end of the Soviet Union with the collapse of the socialist project internationally. From there, it was just a short few steps into the Labour Party, or more dramatically the Unionist Party, and the opinion pages of the *Sunday Independent*. In abandoning the worst practises of the Workers' Party they also abandoned the best elements - its activist base, a campaigning style of politics, and even in the party's distorted form, the idea of socialism from below. Instead, electoral politics took centre stage, the concerns of the activists were ignored; their job from then on, was to get the careerists elected. In effect the Workers' Party was absorbed into mainstream politics and therefore had little reason to continue as a separate party.

I have concentrated on the rise and fall of the Workers' Party in the South, but this book deserves a more extensive review of the politics of the Official movement in the North. Hanley and Miller have done the heavy digging - now it's up to others to build on these foundations and develop a political critique of a movement that spectacularly failed to build on the hard work and dedication of their members and supporters.