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# 'The moral rearmament of imperialism': the Revolutionary Communist Party, the Northern Ireland conflict, and the new world order, 1981-1994

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## ABSTRACT

Through four thematic sections, this article explains why, from its inception in 1981, the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) espoused 'unconditional support' for 'Irish freedom', and why this position changed in the 1990s. Illuminating a particularly functional mode of radical solidarity, it argues that British leftists engaged with the Northern Ireland conflict to articulate their revolutionary praxis. Advocating 'unconditional support' enabled the RCP to challenge reformism on the British left and nationalism in the labour movement. As the article's second section demonstrates, such specific left-wing anti-imperialism irked Provisional republican leaders, who demanded a more substantial, inclusive solidarity movement in Britain. The article's third section elucidates how the Cold War's denouement from the late 1980s deepened strategic and ideological differences among radicals. Seeking to replicate peace processes in Israel-Palestine and South Africa, Provisional republicans envisaged a negotiated transfer of power in the 'new world order'. By contrast, lambasting western intervention in the Gulf and the Balkans, RCP theoreticians lamented the 'moral rearmament of imperialism'. The nascent republican peace strategy of the 1990s conclusively exposed deep-rooted tensions within the RCP's peculiar solidarity. For disillusioned cadres who had endorsed republicanism only insofar as it threatened the British state, republicanism's new constitutionalism represented capitulation.

## KEYWORDS

Irish republicanism; Northern Ireland conflict; Revolutionary Communist Party; British left; solidarity; new world order

## Introduction

Although it officially existed for only two decades, and its core membership never surpassed 200, the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) left a curious imprint on British politics. By 2020, Oliver Kamm of *The Times* could remark that the former party network had 'completed an extraordinary infiltration' of 'British public life' ([capx.co/the-extraordinary-journey-of-the-revolutionary-communist-party-is-a-lesson-in-politics/](https://www.capx.co/the-extraordinary-journey-of-the-revolutionary-communist-party-is-a-lesson-in-politics/)). Although Kamm exaggerated, his comments indicated how the RCP, which had emerged from schisms among British Trotskyists in the late 1970s, had formulated a distinct and often controversial critique.<sup>1</sup>

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With their origins in the Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG), which formed in 1974, most of the RCP's founders in 1981 could trace their political lineage to a milieu which had been expelled from the International Socialists in 1973. The RCG's foundational text, *Our tasks and methods* (1975), charged the radical left with acquiescing in the 'nationalism' and reformism of the official labour movement. For the RCG, nationalism in the British working class and its institutions constituted a significant obstacle to class politics.<sup>2</sup> Writing in 1975, a leading cadre identified 'economism, chauvinism and left-reformism' as 'the trends in the labour movement' upon which the RCG would 'have to focus its attacks'.<sup>3</sup> Independent working-class politics, it followed, would not emerge spontaneously from trade union militancy: a vanguard was required to train a revolutionary cadre in the working class.

Forming after a split in the RCG in 1976, the Revolutionary Communist Tendency (RCT)—which began styling itself as the RCP in May 1981—determined to supplant nationalist reformism with revolutionary internationalism. Workers who saw themselves as 'British first and workers second' would not identify their independent class interests.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, from the outset, the RCP prioritised campaigning work which would 'strengthen workers' resistance against appeals to put Britain first' (*the next step*, December 1981). Addressing the party conference of October 1982, its de facto leader, Frank Furedi, a lecturer in sociology at the University of Kent, explained why the RCP emphasised Irish solidarity. Any British worker who called for the defeat of British imperialism, Furedi argued, 'would of necessity have had to overcome illusions in the state, adherence to nationalism and loyalty to the official labour movement'.<sup>5</sup>

The RCP's formative texts adumbrated a dedicated cadre organisation, chiefly comprising full-time activists. Cadres were detailed to build a revolutionary vanguard in the working class. Targeting 'advanced'—that is, class-conscious—workers, they would foster an independent revolutionary outlook which went beyond the limits of what Lenin termed spontaneous, or trade union, consciousness.<sup>6</sup> Only a revolutionary vanguard organising around a clear programme, the RCP's founders stipulated, could transform 'anti-capitalist potential' into 'independent class politics'.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the 1980s, railing against, *inter alia*, the radical left, the Labour Party, trade union bureaucracy, and 'Stalinist' regimes worldwide, the RCP attracted a network of several hundred affiliated 'supporters',<sup>8</sup> many of whom joined through the forty-five university and polytechnic branches established by 1984 (*the next step*, September 1984). Attaining a considerable public profile after its foundation in 1988, the party's house magazine, *Living Marxism*, articulated the RCP's challenge to left-wing orthodoxies. During the 1990s, *Living Marxism* attracted substantial interest as a provocative political and cultural forum with a circulation between 10,000 and 15,000 (*Guardian*, 21 February 2000).<sup>9</sup>

After declaring class politics moribund in the early 1990s, the RCP dissolved in 1996, and *Living Marxism*, rebadged as *LM*, closed in 2000 after a well-documented libel case.<sup>10</sup> Yet many former activists remained prominent in media, academia, policy-making, and business. Subsequently, maintaining an informal network, activists formed the influential internet magazine *spiked* in 2000 and founded the Institute of Ideas, a public forum convening regular debates and an annual Battle of Ideas festival (*LM*, April 2000). After attending the Battle of Ideas in 2009, the author Jenny Turner became intrigued by the enduring milieu of former RCP members: 'who are these people, what on earth do they think they're up to?' (*London Review of Books*, 8 July 2010). Especially since 2019, when

four activists associated with the RCP or its offshoots stood for the Brexit Party in the European Union elections, former cadres' trajectories in academe, media, and policy-making have piqued media interest (*Guardian*, 23 April 2019; *Spectator*, 15 May 2019).

Throughout the RCP's lifespan, Irish republicans—principally constituted in the Provisional movement, comprising the IRA and Sinn Féin—continued a guerrilla warfare and political campaign which they had waged against the British state since 1970. Sustaining their struggle throughout the late twentieth century, republican militants adapted their methods considerably. From 1981, Sinn Féin experimented with electoral interventions, and five years later dropped its traditional policy of abstentionism from the Dublin parliament. In January 1989, the *ard fheis* (annual conference) mandated Sinn Féin to seek a 'pan-nationalist' consensus for 'self-determination', engaging with the constitutional nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). Inviting international agencies, including the United Nations (UN) and European Economic Community (EEC), to arbitrate on British rule, the party's policy document *Towards a lasting peace in Ireland* (1992) implied that Sinn Féin could negotiate the British government out of Ireland. In the belief that a military cessation could expedite vital peace talks, the IRA called an historic ceasefire in August 1994.<sup>11</sup>

For more than a decade after the RCP's inception in 1981, 'unconditional support' for 'Irish freedom' was a campaigning priority.<sup>12</sup> If British workers were to identify their independent class interests, anti-imperialist opposition to British rule in Ireland was imperative.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the 1980s, the party's front organisation, the Irish Freedom Movement (IFM), regularly coordinated demonstrations and conferences, urging British workers and their trades unions to take sides against Britain in 'the Irish war'.<sup>14</sup> By the end of the 1980s, the IFM was the largest radical solidarity movement in Britain, with an annual August march in London typically attracting an estimated 3,000 demonstrators (*Green Left Weekly*, 4 September 1991), encompassing activists beyond the RCP's traditional hardcore (*Workers Press*, 26 July 1986; *The Leninist*, 13 July 1992).<sup>15</sup> By 1990, the IFM constituted twenty branches across Britain (*Irish Freedom: Bulletin of the Irish Freedom Movement*, May-June 1990).

The IFM finally dissolved in 1994, when the Provisional IRA called a ceasefire. While the majority of republicans hailed the cessation as a pragmatic advance—Sinn Féin's president Gerry Adams lauded the IRA's 'bold and decisive initiative' (*Ireland Information Fact File*, October 1994)—the IFM scorned a 'sham' peace process (*Irish Freedom: Bulletin of the Irish Freedom Movement*, Summer 1994). The RCP's doctrinaire anti-imperialism could not countenance a republican movement which seemed to reconfigure Irish independence as a mere aspiration to be bartered with Westminster and Northern Ireland's unionists.

The RCP's 'unconditional support' merits attention for its rationale, claims to uniqueness, and subsequent controversy. Billing its 'unconditional support' as a defining feature of its ideological independence and strategic rectitude, the RCP considered the British left's positions on Ireland entirely unsatisfactory.<sup>16</sup> Correspondingly, the party prioritised its campaigns on 'the Irish war' deliberately to expose the perceived stranglehold of nationalism and chauvinism in the British working class and its political institutions. For the RCP, asserting an uncompromising anti-imperialist position on Ireland was integral to its determination to transcend past working-class defeats and construct anew a revolutionary vanguard. The RCP's position on Ireland has been central to hostile contemporary commentary. When the Conservative government nominated Claire Fox for a peerage in 2020, the news media in Britain and Ireland underscored Fox's past

association with the party and its 'unconditional support' for Irish republicanism (*Irish News*, 3 August 2020; *Belfast Telegraph*, 8 August 2020; *Sunday Times*, 16 August 2020; *New European*, 8 October 2020; *Warrington Guardian*, 8 October 2020).

Scrutinising the RCP's 'unconditional support' for Irish republicanism, this article begins by illustrating a particularly purposive dimension of British leftists' solidarity. For the RCP, as for other British radicals, the Northern Ireland conflict functioned as a site for refining and amplifying their own revolutionary praxis, and for critiquing rival leftists. 'Unconditional support' served to challenge reformism on the British left and nationalism in the labour movement. The RCP's mode of solidarity was much more contingent and complicated than its outward appearance might suggest. As the second section of the article demonstrates, the RCP's specific emphasis upon class-conscious anti-imperialism irked Provisional republican strategists, who demanded instead a more substantial, inclusive solidarity movement in Britain.

The article's third section contrasts Provisional republicans' and RCP theoreticians' interpretations of global political realignments from the late 1980s. In the process, it highlights how international upheaval problematised these milieus' ideological and strategic differences. Precipitating confusion and contestation for radical activists, the emerging new world order challenged militants anew to choose between reform and revolution, between gradualism and absolutism. For Provisional republicans, peace processes in Israel-Palestine and South Africa, for example, vindicated a gradualist, pan-nationalist negotiating strategy; for RCP veterans, conflicts in the Gulf and the Balkans confirmed the 'moral rearmament of imperialism' and the demise of independent class politics.

The republican peace strategy into the early 1990s, the article concludes, irreparably strained the RCP's peculiar solidarity. Hailing a constitutional, negotiated path to Irish unity, Provisionals claimed that their tactically eclectic campaign was edging towards a domestic transfer of power. For disillusioned RCP cadres, who had aspired to overthrow capitalism—and endorsed republicanism only insofar as they perceived it fundamentally challenging the state—republicans had compromised and capitulated in the 'new world order'.

## The functions of 'unconditional support'

In a synoptic analysis in this journal, Marc Mulholland acerbically noted that while British leftists generally sympathised with Irish republicans' objectives, the conflict in Northern Ireland from 1969 'reeked rather too much of revolution in the raw' for radicals to treat it as a 'major issue'.<sup>17</sup> The RCP constituted a notable and self-conscious exception to Mulholland's rule. Relative to its counterparts on the radical left, the RCP's 'unconditional support' for 'Irish freedom' was unusual, if not unique (*Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!* October–November 1994; *Red Action*, Autumn 1994).<sup>18</sup>

The RCP's analysis of Ireland drew upon the orthodox, anti-imperialist strand of Irish Marxism, typified by Michael Farrell's book *Northern Ireland: the Orange state* (1976).<sup>19</sup> Until the late 1970s, at least, the Farrellite analysis characterised the dominant Marxist interpretation of the Irish question.<sup>20</sup> The RCP held that British imperialism denied self-determination to Ireland's populace en masse.<sup>21</sup> In Northern Ireland, the argument ran, in return for advantages over the Catholic community—most notably in relation to

employment and housing—Protestant workers allied with the British crown and the unionist bourgeoisie. Party theoreticians did not endorse the strain of republican thought which implied that Northern Ireland's unionists suffered national 'false consciousness'.<sup>22</sup> Rather, they regarded Protestant workers' loyalism as a rational recognition of their sectional material interests and 'limited but definite advantages' under the union.<sup>23</sup> Since their community's privileges derived from the union, Protestant workers could not act independently as a class until British imperialism was defeated (*the next step*, September 1981).

In its singular emphasis upon forcing a British withdrawal, the RCP echoed the republican orthodoxy which averred that loyalism would melt into air when British rule in Ireland ended.<sup>24</sup> Activists could not countenance persuading unionists: 'we cannot tolerate their obstruction'.<sup>25</sup> Prioritising the defeat of British imperialism, the RCP diverged entirely from those leftists, such as Militant, which considered the republican insurgency the cardinal obstacle to class unity between Catholic and Protestant workers in Northern Ireland.<sup>26</sup> Framing the conflict as a straightforward confrontation between Irish republicans and British imperialism, RCP cadres wilfully regarded one million northern unionists as a temporary irrelevance.

Noting the Republic of Ireland's reliance upon foreign capital, RCP theoreticians identified British imperialism as the scourge of Ireland north and south (*Hands Off Ireland!* December 1976). Compelled to open its ailing economy to foreign investment, the Dublin government exercised only 'phoney independence'.<sup>27</sup> Partition, one member of the Political Committee opined, had enabled Britain to maintain 'indirect' domination in the 'Twenty-Six Counties': to secure its own precarious position, the southern ruling class repressed republicans who destabilised the state (*the next step*, March 1984). Positioning the Republic of Ireland's bourgeoisie as the clients of British imperialism, the RCP aligned with the prevailing republican assessment: writing from Long Kesh in 1977, Gerry Adams declared the Dublin government 'subservient to imperialism', and expounded 'social revolution in all-Ireland ... Brits Out, North and South' (Gerry Adams to *Irish News*, 5 March 1977).

Following Lenin's taxonomy, the RCP understood imperialism as an historically specific stage of capitalist development.<sup>28</sup> In the imperialist epoch, monopoly and state intervention replaced free competition. Economic growth became especially uneven and volatile.<sup>29</sup> Especially during a recession, imperialist powers sought to extend their territories, but could only offset and delay the tendency towards crisis.<sup>30</sup> Since imperialism represented, for the RCP as for Lenin, the 'highest stage of capitalism', anti-imperialism was integral to the politics of the revolutionary vanguard.<sup>31</sup> The RCP's founding cadres in the late 1970s stipulated that British workers could not attain class independence until they opposed holistically British imperialism. Accordingly, in 1980, one of the organisation's first major conferences declared its strategic priority: strengthening anti-imperialist politics in the British working class (*the next step*, June–July 1980).

For the RCP, since chauvinist illusions in the state prevailed in the British working class, protests against British rule in Ireland contained a revolutionary dynamic insofar as they fundamentally threatened the British state and working-class illusions therein. Like their erstwhile comrades in the RCG, RCP cadres dismissed the Troops Out Movement's (TOM) approach to solidarity as superficial reformism.<sup>32</sup> A minimalist demand for British troop

withdrawals, the RCG Political Committee contended, failed to tackle 'the dominant chauvinist position' in the working class (*Hands Off Ireland!* December 1976). Although the RCP had its origins in an acrimonious split from the RCG in the late 1970s, both organisations regarded 'unconditional support' for Irish freedom as a campaigning priority to challenge the 'pro-imperialist . . . stranglehold' in the British labour movement (*Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!* January-February 1981).

Far from avoiding discussion of republicans' 'revolution in the raw', the RCP accentuated its Irish solidarity work precisely *because* the Northern Ireland conflict was so divisive in the British working class, as a rancorous exchange in 1981 between founding RCP cadre Mike Freeman, a medical graduate, and Socialist Workers Party (SWP) veteran Chris Harman attested. Writing as editor of *Socialist Review*, Harman argued that British leftists who challenged the working class to campaign for Britain's defeat in Northern Ireland could only alienate potential sympathisers:

Ireland is not a radicalising factor in Britain which leads people to question other aspects of capitalist society: rather it is only when people have questioned these other things that they begin to understand the significance of what is happening in the Six Counties (*Socialist Review*, January 1981).

Conversely, for the RCP, Northern Ireland's political proximity and potency made it a vital campaigning priority. British workers could not act independently as a class without supporting republicans' 'anti-imperialist struggle' against the British state, Freeman argued.<sup>33</sup>

For the RCP, unconditional support for Irish freedom functioned as a critique of the perceived reformism and statism of the Labour Party and trade union leadership. Central to the RCP programme was the diagnosis that 'labourism'—signifying the policies of the Labour Party and the trade union 'bureaucracy'—nullified workers' radical potential.<sup>34</sup> During the 1970s, inspired by left-wing Labour MP Tony Benn, the Labour left, with support from the CPGB and trade union leaders, pioneered the Alternative Economic Strategy, proposing protectionist state controls on imports, exports, and finance, and a major nationalisation programme.<sup>35</sup> The Alternative Economic Strategy, RCP founder Frank Richards (Frank Furedi's nom de plume) argued, promoted 'class collaboration' and exhorted workers to 'accept responsibility for the state of the capitalist economy'.<sup>36</sup>

Formulating a position on the conflict in Ireland enabled British radicals to render and distinguish their own revolutionary theory and strategy, and to critique alternative left perspectives. For the RCP, anti-imperialist revolutionary defeatism was a prerequisite for class consciousness in Britain, where workers would remain 'unable to defend their class interests as long as they accept their bosses' policies on Ireland'.<sup>37</sup> 'Unconditional support' for Irish freedom originated in a theoretical conviction, following Lenin's dictum: 'the English working class will never be free until Ireland is freed from the English yoke. Reaction in England is strengthened and fostered by the enslavement of Ireland'.<sup>38</sup> Following Lenin's conception of revolutionary defeatism, the IFM posited that Irish anti-imperialism merited support to the extent that it presented a mortal threat to the British state (*Living Marxism*, August 1989).

The RCP's interpretation of Leninist anti-imperialism—supporting the oppressed nation against the oppressor, irrespective of the liberation movement's political programme and composition—was acutely controversial on the British left. Rival leftists



accused the RCP of tailing the republican movement and evading responsibility for inculcating Irish militants with proletarian internationalism. For the Communist Party of Great Britain's (CPGB) factional paper, *The Leninist*, the RCP's 'unconditional support' meant 'automatically' lauding the British state's enemies, from the 'Argentinian fascist junta that butchered thousands of progressives' to the 'petty bourgeois' Irish republican movement (*The Leninist*, July 1984). It was incumbent upon British radicals, *Leninist* cadre Alan Merrik insisted, to 'confront' the republican leadership's narrow nationalism and to foster 'independence' on the republican left (*The Leninist*, 27 December 1987). The Trotskyist organisation Workers Power similarly repudiated the RCP's position, advocating more critical support to cultivate a revolutionary vanguard in the Irish liberation movement.<sup>39</sup>

Fulminating against the Provisionals' politics, some British leftists insisted that it behoved revolutionaries to critique the petit-bourgeois nationalism of the republican movement. Repudiating the RCP's 'unconditional support', the Spartacists, for example, charged the RCP with 'tailing ... petit-bourgeois Green nationalism' (*Spartacist Britain*, July-August 1983). Simon Pirani of the WRP, meanwhile, scorned the Provisionals' vision of a 'gradual transition to socialism' as a deviation from the 'Marxist theory of Permanent Revolution' (*Workers Press*, 3 October 1987).

The RCP intended its campaigns on Ireland to expose the trade union bureaucracy as an impediment. Picketing courts and police stations, the Smash the Prevention of Terrorism Act Campaign aimed to build 'clear class opposition to British imperialism'. In September 1981, the RCP organised the Workers March for Irish Freedom, concluding at the Trades Union Congress (TUC) annual conference in Blackpool. Highlighting the TUC's failure to support the Irish republican hunger strikers, leading cadre Fran Eden told the local media in Preston that marchers were determined to breach the pro-imperialist consensus in the labour movement (*Lancashire Evening Post*, 5 September 1981). The campaign gained only limited traction in the labour movement, winning formal endorsement from only two trades councils nationwide (*the next step*, September 1981). Nevertheless, the RCP's campaigns had already attracted considerable attention in the trade union hierarchy: in February 1981, the TUC threatened all 440 British trades councils with disaffiliation if they endorsed the RCP's position on Ireland (*Belfast Telegraph*, 23 February 1981). Senior Labour figures were aware of the RCP's rationale for invoking the Irish war: in Sheffield, council leader David Blunkett noted that the RCP regarded his party as its 'main enemy' (David Blunkett to David Douglass, 8 June 1983).

A coterie of RCP activists enjoyed isolated successes in defying TUC diktats. As honorary secretary of Tameside Trades Council, Dave Hallsworth persistently agitated for union colleagues to join IFM events. In 1983, when Hallsworth arranged an IFM film screening at Tameside, a senior TUC official banned the event and accused Hallsworth and his comrades of 'irresponsible' behaviour 'not worthy of genuine trade unionists' (*the next step*, April 1983). Similarly, Hammersmith National and Local Government Officers' Association (NALGO) president and RCP veteran John Fitzpatrick repeatedly campaigned for the union branch to discuss the Irish conflict. When Fitzpatrick, a lawyer by profession, eventually won a vote to convene the contentious debate in 1988, his celebrations underlined how the RCP had relished the opportunity, via the Irish conflict, to critique labourism and its limitations: 'for the first time in years we have drawn hundreds of members into a full discussion on Ireland' (*the next step*, 29 April 1988).



The perceived strength of nationalism and social-chauvinism in the British working class prevented RCP cadres from publicly criticising republican politics or tactics. In an atmosphere of anti-Irish hostility, the argument ran, rebuking republicans could only galvanise nationalist prejudices in Britain.<sup>40</sup> Delineating this principle in the party's foundational stages, Mike Freeman argued in 1981 that 'any criticism of the IRA only gives succour to the forces of British chauvinism' (*the next step*, February 1981).

This dimension of 'unconditional support' put the RCP at odds with a range of British leftists which had attached qualifications and caveats to their general support for Irish independence. As Mulholland has demonstrated, while many British leftists endorsed republicanism's militant content and connotations, radicals were often reluctant to express explicit support for the IRA, lest they alienate patriotic sentiment in the British working class.<sup>41</sup> While the majority of British leftists aspired to Irish unification, several radical organisations criticised the IRA's tactics. Through the 1970s, the International Socialists, for example, had supported the Provisionals 'insofar as they protect the Catholic population', but insisted that 'rejection of socialist politics' prevented republicans from building the all-Ireland working-class solidarity required to defeat British imperialism (*International Socialism*, June 1974). As a successor to the International Socialists, the SWP also asserted that the Provisionals' militarism obscured the need to forge class unity. The SWP abstractly endorsed the republican 'right of self-determination', but stipulated 'this does not mean that we necessarily support the politics of the Provisionals, nor that we consider them socialists, nor that we support all the tactics they use'.<sup>42</sup> For the CPGB, the IRA campaign could only alienate the Protestant working class and obstruct class unity.<sup>43</sup> The Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), meanwhile, broadly endorsed the republican struggle, but in 1978 criticised republican bombing campaigns in Britain.<sup>44</sup>

Other sections of the British left, especially those which promoted entryism in the Labour Party, more explicitly regarded the republican campaign as a barrier to class unity in Northern Ireland. Operating primarily through the trade union movement, Militant was among the most emphatically anti-republican sections of the British left. From the outbreak of the conflict, Militant declared that republican 'individual terrorism' could only exacerbate state repression (*Militant*, 2 September 1994). Moreover, Militant contended, republican 'sectarian atrocities', such as the bomb which killed twelve people in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh, on Remembrance Sunday in 1987, further frustrated the possibility of establishing working-class unity (*Militant*, 13 November 1987). For ideologues such as Peter Hadden, the solution to the conflict lay in a socialist united Ireland in a federated British Isles.<sup>45</sup> *Socialist Organiser* entryists in the Labour Party were still more hostile to the IRA campaign: after the Enniskillen bombing, *Socialist Organiser* editor John O'Mahony wrote an open letter to Gerry Adams, condemning the 'grossly and explicitly sectarian' attack and demanding an end to the armed campaign (*Socialist Organiser*, 12 November 1987).

For the RCP, socialists who offered only qualified support for Irish independence, or dictated tactics to Irish republicans, epitomised radicals' failure to challenge British imperialism.<sup>46</sup> Identifying nationalism and labourism as major obstacles to the self-emancipation of the working class, RCP cadres abhorred leftists who attached caveats to their support for Irish self-determination, or who espoused 'critical' support for the Labour Party (*Socialist Worker*, 5 August 1978; *the next step*, December 1979).<sup>47</sup> Unlike the strategy of the CPGB, for example—whose members were estimated to represent 10% of

trade union officials in the mid-1970s<sup>48</sup>—the RCP sought to confront the labour movement bureaucracy. Invoking divergent stances on Ireland was a key mechanism in this critique of the left: for RCP activists, labourism's record on Ireland was a hallmark of its essential moderation and statism. When Sheffield City Council refused to allow the IFM to use the City Hall exterior for a rally in 1984, IFM organiser Keith Tompson unsuccessfully challenged Labour council leader David Blunkett to a debate on Northern Ireland (*Star*, 13 January 1984).

Despite its polemical challenge to the British left, the RCP's 'unconditional support' was not an immutable commitment. The refusal to criticise publicly the republican movement rested upon chauvinism being the prevailing sentiment in British politics. Once anti-Irish prejudice receded in Britain, the RCP could censure the republican movement for its fundamentally limited nationalism. Freeman's foundational statement asserted that when 'large numbers' of British workers celebrated the republican campaign, 'then there will be a time to criticise the programme of Provisional Sinn Féin' (*the next step*, February 1981). While activists campaigned on Ireland as a wedge issue in the working class, 'Irish freedom' was not, in itself, a strategic terminus. As a senior cadre told an internal party discussion in 1981, revolutionaries' ultimate objective was to establish an independent Marxist alternative to the republican movement: once British workers en masse demanded Irish freedom, the RCP would aim to supplant Sinn Féin ([ucpi.org.uk/publications/special-branch-report-on-an-internal-conference-of-the-revolutionary-communist-tendency-to-discuss-forthcoming-policies-and-actions/](http://ucpi.org.uk/publications/special-branch-report-on-an-internal-conference-of-the-revolutionary-communist-tendency-to-discuss-forthcoming-policies-and-actions/)).

'Unconditional support' did not imply specific approval for particular republican policies or actions. The Leninist distinction between Irish republicanism's 'form' and 'content' enabled the RCP to endorse republicanism's anti-imperialist *content* rather than its tactical or political *form*. Detailing this intricate position, an internal document circulated to party members and supporters in 1986 distinguished between the struggle's 'inner essence' and 'the movement leading it'. The RCP did not sloganise specifically for the IRA, and 'reserved the right' to criticise the republican movement if and when party theoreticians deemed that republicans ceased to threaten western imperialism. The corollary of the party's indifference to the *form* of republican struggle was an unsentimental assessment of the Provisionals' armed struggle. The RCP differentiated between specific guerrilla actions—such as 'planting a bomb in a Birmingham pub ... a stupid thing to do'—and the broader revolutionary dynamic of an anti-imperialist campaign (1986: reprinted in *the next step*, 20 November 1992).

Public-facing 'unconditional support' coexisted with private criticisms of the republican movement's 'petit-bourgeois' programme.<sup>49</sup> As British revolutionaries training a vanguard, the RCP regarded the republican movement as a nationalist alliance which would ultimately settle for a national transfer of power without necessarily transforming class relations. Reviewing Sinn Féin's erstwhile socioeconomic programme *Éire Nua*, Mike Freeman noted republicanism's 'middle class traditions', and when Sinn Féin extended its electoral experiments through the mid-1980s, Freeman criticised 'opportunist' tendencies in the movement (*the next step*, February 1985).<sup>50</sup> Conversely, celebrating electoral demonstrations of popular support, Sinn Féin's Director of Elections, Owen Carron, insisted the council campaigns of 1985—in which the party won fifty-nine seats in Northern Ireland—did not imply 'reformism or clientelism' and would 'further the Republican struggle' (*Fermanagh Herald*, 27 April 1985).

While cadres seldom publicly criticised republicans in the 1980s, the RCP leadership openly declared that it had no illusions in the Provisionals' ambiguous political ecology. The Political Committee's position, endorsed at the party's annual Preparing for Power conference in 1985, bears quoting at length:

As the IRA has pointed out, it is not a Marxist organisation ... The Revolutionary Communist Party's support for the republican movement has nothing to do with its politics. We support the republican movement because it is leading the fight against British rule in Ireland ... We would support the republican movement if it was led by a collection of Catholic priests and nuns, so long as it was leading resistance against British domination ... The RCP will continue to give unconditional support to the republican movement irrespective of its programme, its strategy, or its tactics. As long as it remains the leading force in the struggle against British imperialism and the biggest threat to the stability of the United Kingdom, that's good enough for us (*the next step*, 2 August 1985).

### **'We would be very critical of the British left'**

While British leftists used the Northern Ireland conflict to hone and articulate their analyses, Irish republicans sought to instrumentalise British radicals. Envisaging a mass movement in Britain campaigning for withdrawal from Northern Ireland, leading Provisionals held small left-wing organisations in suspicion. In 1979, when the Provisionals' two weekly newspapers merged into an all-Ireland propaganda outlet, the inaugural editorial board repudiated 'anti-imperialist fronts' which could 'easily be dominated by mosquito groups who have few if any commitments [sic] (unlike Sinn Féin) to the workload' (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 12 May 1979). The Provisional leadership's demand for a wider movement in Britain contrasted sharply with the RCP's class-conscious anti-imperialism. In September 1979, an IRA spokesperson authorised by the Army Council dismissed as unrealistic discerning calls for solidarity which demanded that British sympathisers side outright with the republican movement: 'we would be very critical of the British left ... it is very difficult to see how a strong anti-imperialist movement in complete solidarity with us can be built in the British working class at the moment'. The Provisionals simply welcomed 'any kind of pressure on the British government' (*Hands Off Ireland!* November 1979).

In line with the Provisionals' demands, the TOM targeted the broadest possible movement to pressurise Westminster. Affiliation to the TOM was open to any individual or organisation supporting its two central demands for troops withdrawals and all-Ireland self-determination.<sup>51</sup> Echoing Sinn Féin activist Owen Carron's address to a British conference campaigning against plastic bullets, Leeds TOM campaigner Tony Harris asserted that a 'broad-based movement on a minimum platform' was best equipped to force the British government to modify its policy in Ireland. As Manchester TOM activist Geoffrey Whittle acknowledged in 1983, the organisation was open to 'right-wing' elements calling on Westminster to 'bring the boys home' from a supposedly tribal conflict in Northern Ireland (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 24 March 1983).

Although the TOM also incorporated smaller left-wing milieus, it primarily championed its strength and breadth. Tellingly, in a dispute with the IFM in 1983, Whittle emphasised the RCP's numerical marginality: for Whittle, the RCP's performance in the Bermondsey by-election of February 1983—'thrashed 97 to 38 by the Raving Loony Party'—rendered it

inconsequential in British solidarity networks (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 24 March 1983). While the TOM called for British withdrawal and all-Ireland self-determination, the Labour Committee on Ireland similarly lobbied the party and trade union leadership to change institutional policy and endorse withdrawal from Northern Ireland.<sup>52</sup>

For senior Provisionals, British advocates for withdrawal were only as valuable as they were politically mainstream and numerically significant. Concomitantly, the Labour left, as a substantial element of a major political party, and the TOM, with its considerable membership and presence in the trades unions, represented the most important British allies. Writing in 1980, Sinn Féin activist Ciaran Dowd announced that the Provisionals would accept a solidarity movement in Britain which advocated troops withdrawals from a chauvinist, self-interested perspective: 'Republicans cannot ignore the prospect of a movement saying "troops out" for its own chauvinist reasons ... Protest action is what is wanted, no matter what the basis'. Counselling the TOM to develop a '**non-exclusionary ... single-issue**' campaign, Dowd held that all strands of British political opinion could contribute effectively to the pro-withdrawal campaign (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 24 May 1980). The secretary of Sinn Féin's British office emphasised that the organisation was 'open to all anti-imperialists' (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 24 March 1983). For republicans who judged solidarity by its togetherness and scale, the radical left appeared inexplicably riven with factionalism. Noting in 1983 that the IFM, TOM, and RCG all held separate events in support of republican prisoners, a west Belfast Sinn Féin official questioned the motivations of British leftists who made 'the prospects of a broad front seem much dimmer ... how genuine are these people?' (*the next step*, April 1983).

Outside of the Provisional movement's leadership, some left-wing republicans were more selective about solidarity, and evinced greater sympathy with British radicals' discernment. For South Wales Sinn Féin representative Gerry MacLochlainn—a radical who explicitly positioned the republican campaign in 'a world struggle against imperialism' (*The Leninist*, December 1984)—the RCT's forebears in the RCG represented 'perhaps the first' British organisation 'genuinely trying to build an anti-imperialist, anti-chauvinist internationalist movement' (*Hands Off Ireland!* November 1979). The Provisionals constituted an especially heterogeneous movement, especially in relation to socialist politics. As Daniel Finn has noted, republicans were apt to adopt or eschew leftist rhetoric according to particular political contexts.<sup>53</sup> Republicans continually contested the interaction between national and social questions. For some activists, leftism was integral to their struggle for a 'thirty-two county *socialist* republic'; for others, left-wing politics distracted from the principal campaign for national independence.<sup>54</sup> A heated exchange at Sinn Féin's *ard fheis* of 1977 captured in microcosm the long-running controversy. For party president Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, the republican campaign was implicitly a campaign for the redistribution of wealth; senior Ballyshannon republican Anthony O'Malley-Daly, however, insisted that the Provisionals were 'not engaged in a class struggle, but a mass struggle' (*Republican News*, 29 October 1977).

While the RCP's 'unconditional support' attacked the Labour Party as an imperialist institution, Sinn Féin's president from 1983, Gerry Adams, identified the Labour left as an important solidarity connection. Liaisons with the government's official opposition allowed Sinn Féin to amplify their demands in London's municipal politics and

Westminster: 'We are making an effort to develop contacts with people with influence in the British Labour Party', Adams told *Magill* magazine in 1983.<sup>55</sup> Hosting Greater London Council leader Ken Livingstone in Belfast, Adams hailed Livingstone's capacity to unite 'disparate tendencies' on the Labour left (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 17 May 1984). The Sinn Féin president's enthusiasm differed substantially from the RCP's polemics, which regarded the Labour left as an obstacle to an independent Irish anti-imperialist movement (*the next step*, April 1983).

In contradistinction to the RCP's insistence upon anti-imperialism of an independent, class-conscious variety, Provisional strategists celebrated the political breadth of the demand for withdrawal. Welcoming a TOM delegation to Belfast in August 1984, Sinn Féin's Belfast chair, Joe Austin, lauded 'people from all walks of life and all parts of England, Scotland, and Wales coming here to show solidarity with us'. Such a spectrum of sympathy, Austin argued, would combat government 'misinformation' in Britain.<sup>56</sup> Fringe revolutionary groupuscules, by contrast, were of far less interest. Interviewed in 1986, Austin candidly declared:

The smaller Trotskyist parties don't really have either the personnel or are not in a position where they contribute in a meaningful way to bring about change. This isn't to be derogatory and it isn't to dismiss them ... but I mean they aren't that relevant to the current situation (*Workers Press*, 27 September 1986).

Sinn Féin's critical assessment of British leftists bifurcated ineffectual pontification and forceful practical action. For leading republicans, building a mass liberation movement was an imperative which could not accommodate British leftists' intractable strategic disagreements. Tellingly, Austin counterposed republicans, practical, pragmatic, and tempered in the flames of real conflict, against Trotskyists, who he portrayed as hide-bound by history and dogma and naïve to the realities of a war:

[O]ur economic and social direction ... is primarily one of needs for the Irish people. [Trotskyists'] tends to be one of a hypnotic look at what was happening in the 1913 or 1914 period in Moscow in Russia and trying to carbon copy that onto Ireland. We don't believe that that works ... We are also very detached from the incessant, internal struggles of the left. We don't have those problems ... The place to fight the revolutionary struggle is not in five-hour sessions, it's in the street where that struggle is going to be won or lost (*Workers Press*, 27 September 1986).

Major strategic differences notwithstanding, Sinn Féin maintained a working relationship with the IFM to the extent that the RCP front helped republicans to address pro-withdrawal elements in Britain. By the late 1980s, when IFM marches each August were the largest solidarity demonstrations in Britain, Sinn Féin habitually sent a speaker. In August 1988, for example, *ard comhairle* (party executive) representative John Doyle reassured a 3,000-strong crowd at the IFM march that Gerry Adams's talks with SDLP leader John Hume did not presage compromise (*the next step*, 19 August 1988). The annual August event aside, practical cooperation between the IFM and Provisionals in Britain was largely confined to personal connections. In Durham, for instance, local IFM organiser Mary McCaughey enjoyed a rapport with IRA prisoners Martina Anderson and Ella O'Dwyer: McCaughey coordinated pickets and publicity against strip-searching in the city's jail (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 12 January 1989).

Overall, however, the RCP's approach to the Northern Ireland conflict bemused and frustrated republicans who perceived intra-left contestation as petty sectarianism preventing mass mobilisation. Reviewing the IFM's handbook, a correspondent to the Provisionals' weekly newspaper lambasted its 'sneering comments' about the Labour left and TOM. For Cathal MacCormack, the RCP's determination to win British workers to 'unconditional support' was a quixotic approach which demonstrated 'little grasp' of 'political realities'. When IFM activists attacked 'progressive elements' such as the TOM and the Labour Committee on Ireland, MacCormack argued, they acted against republicans' interests:

The Irish Freedom Movement claims to be in solidarity with the Irish struggle for self-determination. The Irish Freedom Movement disregards the policies and wishes of Ireland's freedom fighters, the republican movement – indeed, it often unashamedly works against them – in favour of its own perceived ideas of what's good for the Irish people. Some would regard that as one of the worst forms of British chauvinism and imperialist thinking (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 24 September 1987).

### Contrasting assessments of a 'new world order'

Beyond their differing taxonomies of solidarity in Northern Ireland's conflict in the late 1980s, divergent assessments of global political upheavals and the new world order further widened strategic and ideological divergences between senior Provisionals and the RCP. For republican strategists, nascent peace processes in Israel-Palestine and South Africa constituted fillips for national liberation movements. Gerry Adams and his supporters in Sinn Féin interpreted these developments as vindications for strategic innovation, mass mobilisation among a wider base, and peace talks. Conversely, by 1990, the RCP Political Committee declared an historic nadir for revolutionary politics. Popular support for western intervention in the Gulf in 1991 and Bosnia in 1992 heralded the 'moral rearmament of imperialism' and a profound crisis for radical opponents of the status quo (*the next step*, 20 September 1991).<sup>57</sup>

The prospect of talks between historic adversaries in South Africa and the Middle East in the late 1980s sharpened the RCP's suspicions of petit-bourgeois liberation movements preparing for accommodation with imperial powers. RCP South Africa specialist Charles Longford's suspicion of 'moderate influences' in the African National Congress (ANC) leadership predated the ANC's negotiations with the Pretoria regime (*the next step*, 9 August 1985). Longford maintained that ANC strategists, who had built their struggle upon the militancy of the black working class, would settle for a stake in government, leaving the state's capitalist structures intact (*the next step*, 17 July 1987). Similarly, throughout the 1980s, the RCP had supported the Palestinian right to 'self-determination' on anti-imperialist grounds (*Living Marxism*, December 1988). However, after the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) accepted UN resolutions 242 and 338, implicitly recognising Israel, the RCP's Middle East specialist Daniel Nassim declared that the PLO's new faith in western diplomacy completed its 'steady drift to the right' (*the next step*, 16 June 1989).



As the Soviet bloc in eastern Europe fragmented in the late 1980s, RCP analysts momentarily celebrated the demise of Stalinism, and hailed the possibility of revolutionary renewal. Simultaneously, cadres more pragmatically declared the left to be in turmoil. The party's Political Committee encapsulated this bifocal analysis in 1990. While the collapse of Soviet influence in eastern Europe had 'cleared the decks for the projection of other alternatives', it had also 'disoriented the working class' and compounded 'a series of working class defeats'. Reimagining communism after Stalinism was an historic opportunity, but also a momentous task against an adverse balance of class forces (*the next step*, 2 February 1990). In this spirit of rather hard-headed optimism, the RCP's student organisation forecast that Stalinism's decline would 'create the conditions for putting revolution back on the agenda'.<sup>58</sup>

However, the RCP's momentary hopes for Marxist renewal after Stalinism soon gave way to a more sombre prognosis of socialism at an epochal nadir. Sebastian Berg's percipient analysis of the British left's responses to Soviet decline accurately reflects several processes within the RCP in 1989 and 1990.<sup>59</sup> Capitalism's imperial recrudescence supplanted party cadres' initial relief at Stalinism's collapse. In a seminal *Living Marxism* essay in 1990, Frank Richards argued that the turmoil of the Soviet Union and eastern bloc 'discredited ... any notion of a collective solution to the problem of capitalist society'. In typically metaphysical terms, Richards proclaimed that the left 'no longer exists ... traditional left-wing ideas and activities make little sense today'. Insisting that the situation was 'temporary', Richards urged the RCP radically to redefine its anti-capitalist critique (*Living Marxism*, December 1990).

The outbreak of war in the Gulf late in 1990 was more troubling still for RCP activists' assessments of the 'new world order'. They deplored western intervention in the region, and the degree of popular support which the invasion enjoyed. Campaigning for the 'victory of the Middle Eastern masses over imperialism', the party defended Iraq against 'Western aggression' (*Living Marxism*, September 1990). An editorial in party weekly *the next step* described the US-led coalition's attacks on Iraq during Operation Desert Storm from January 1991 as acts of 'barbarism' and 'imperialist aggression'—and the British populace seemingly acquiesced in the attempt 'to impose Western control over the region' (*the next step*, 18 January 1991). Reviewing the Gulf War's dismal significance shortly afterwards, Mike Freeman identified the western campaign as a 'turning point' towards 'overtly imperialistic policy'.<sup>60</sup>

The transformed global conjuncture after the Cold War added urgency to the RCP's anti-imperialism. Cadres who recoiled against the 'moral rearmament of imperialism' assigned yet greater significance to the Irish republican challenge to the British state. IFM organisers urged activists to join the annual march in London in August 1991

to raise the standard against all forms of Western intervention in the third world and all violations of national rights ... to oppose British imperialism in Ireland, the Gulf and around the world (*Irish Freedom: Bulletin of the Irish Freedom Movement*, July-August 1991).

The RCP leadership hailed Irish anti-imperialism with renewed vigour, given that national liberation movements which had advanced through the 1970s and 1980s were 'now on the defensive' (*Living Marxism*, August 1991). The following year, the IFM explicitly billed its August march as a demonstration against militarism world-wide (*the next step*, 10 July 1992).



For IFM activists, Irish republicanism appeared as a last stand against western imperialism. Discussing the new world order at the RCP's Towards 2000 conference in 1992, IFM organiser Alex Farrell positioned the republican movement as 'one of the few national liberation forces in the world still fighting'. For another veteran, economics graduate Phil Murphy, Ireland had 'won a new relevance because it represents one of the few active anti-imperialist struggles in the world' (*Irish Freedom: Bulletin of the Irish Freedom Movement*, Autumn 1992). Perceiving a profoundly counter-revolutionary global conjuncture, IFM leaders and party full-timers Eve Anderson, Fiona Foster, and Kevin Kelly lauded the republican campaign as a signal defiance of imperialism's renaissance:

The Irish struggle has assumed a new importance ... the fight for Irish freedom should serve as an inspiration to anti-capitalists. It demonstrates that it is still possible to mount a challenge against the new imperialism (*Irish Freedom: Bulletin of the Irish Freedom Movement*, Autumn 1992).

For the RCP, the most disturbing dimension of the Gulf War was that a western order lacking internal cohesion after the Cold War could deploy imperialist aggression to project its global hegemony.<sup>61</sup> The party launched its Campaign Against Militarism (CAM) in November 1992. Formed at a 1,000-strong London conference, CAM articulated the RCP's anti-militarist campaigning priority in an epoch of 'permanent warfare from the Gulf to the Balkans' (*Living Marxism*, October 1992). Admitting the 'weakness' of 'anti-imperialist' politics in the west since the Gulf War, CAM vowed to confront popular support for the west's bloody interventions in the Third World.<sup>62</sup>

The Provisional republican leadership evinced a much more sanguine assessment of conflict transformations in Israel-Palestine and South Africa. From the Provisional movement's formation in 1970, many of its cadres tended to regard their struggle as historically and politically unique and largely disconnected from events outside Ireland. Although republican prisoners often followed international affairs closely, for most Sinn Féin activists and IRA volunteers, national liberation struggles elsewhere were a rather nebulous source of general inspiration. Distantly observing other conflicts, leading Provisionals did not usually seek explicit tactical lessons, nor did they distil the external conjuncture in any especially evaluative way.<sup>63</sup> Interviewed in 1986, Sinn Féin's northern vice-chair Joe Austin equated the republican struggle generally with all conflicts where peoples sought 'freedom' through 'self-determination ... anywhere people decide to govern themselves free from interference from another country' (*Palatinate*, 30 January 1986).

For the Provisional leadership, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 empowered national communities aspiring to self-determination. Sinn Féin propagandists portrayed troop withdrawals from the Rhine as a 'major climb-down for British imperialism' (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 16 November 1989). Addressing the party's *ard fheis* in 1990, Gerry Adams claimed that the 'autumn of nations' in eastern Europe boded well for 'lasting democracy and self-determination' across the continent and beyond.<sup>64</sup> Drawing tenuous parallels between reunification processes in Germany and Ireland, Sinn Féin activists insisted, seven decades after partition, that the political upheaval of the early 1990s could yet transform Ireland. On the second anniversary of the Berlin Wall's demolition, Sinn Féin *cumainn* along the border organised a 'day

of action', reopening cross-border roads closed by British forces. Activists were invited to 'breach ... Ireland's Berlin Wall', in the hope that the political realignment of European nations might yet be replicated in Ireland.<sup>65</sup>

Meanwhile, the transition to democracy in South Africa seemed to vindicate republicans' increasing appetite for a negotiating strategy combining mass domestic mobilisation with overtures to international political actors. For the architects of Sinn Féin's 'pan-nationalist' initiative in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the ANC demonstrated that, with the support of a broad base, negotiations with historic enemies could end political stalemate and advance the liberation struggle. When the ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, called a ceasefire in 1990, *An Phoblacht/Republican News* hailed this 'courageous act of faith' and posited that political prisoners' imminent release suggested that the liberation campaign 'may be coming to a successful conclusion' (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 9 August 1990).

For Gerry Adams and Sinn Féin's erstwhile Director of Publicity, Danny Morrison, the peace process in South Africa underscored how progress might be piecemeal and incremental rather than sudden and comprehensive. As historian Kevin Bean has incisively noted, the Provisionals promulgated the ANC's trajectory as both an 'ideological master-narrative' imbued with 'moral authority' and as a template for the 'politics of transition'.<sup>66</sup> Imprisoned in the early 1990s, Morrison read ANC veteran Albie Sachs's *The soft vengeance of a freedom fighter* (1990).<sup>67</sup> Commending Sachs's memoir to Gerry Adams in October 1991, Morrison highlighted the need to 'confront hard decisions' and 'accept major but incomplete breakthroughs now', laying long-term foundations to achieve 'our ultimate goals'.<sup>68</sup> After the IRA ceasefire of August 1994—just three months after Nelson Mandela became South Africa's first president after the transition to democracy—Sinn Féin adopted Labi Siffre's anti-apartheid anthem 'Something inside so strong' as a triumphal theme song.<sup>69</sup>

In direct contrast from the Provisionals' buoyancy, when Nelson Mandela was released from prison in February 1990, the RCP Political Committee maintained that Pretoria was dealing with the ANC from a position of strength. With the anti-apartheid movement's Soviet sponsors in crisis, South African president F. W. de Klerk could 'moderate the leadership of the black majority' to accept only superficial adaptations to South Africa's system of government (*the next step*, 16 March 1990). After Mandela and de Klerk bilaterally agreed to continue power-sharing in 1992, Longford complained that the ANC had retreated from its historic objective of black-majority rule and the 'democratic principle at the heart of the liberation struggle' (*Living Marxism*, February 1993). Highlighting the South African peace process as a salutary example of how negotiations with a repressive regime led to the 'containment' of militant opposition, in January 1992 IFM organiser Vicky Rowan urged Sinn Féin to resist becoming embroiled in British statecraft at the negotiating table (*Living Marxism*, January 1992).

Provisional leaders regarded peace processes around the world almost by definition as climbdowns by hitherto untouchable repressive regimes. In this schema, the sheer act of negotiating with adversaries and international political actors implied that embattled guerrillas were making headway. After El Salvador's leftist militants comprising the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) signed a UN-sponsored peace accord in December 1991, ending a decade of conflict, Sinn Féin propagandists hailed the FMLN's

'massive victory' (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 7 May 1992). Despite El Salvador's right-wing military regime retaining overall governmental control,<sup>70</sup> *An Phoblacht/Republican News* celebrated the ceasefire and negotiations as evidence that the US had 'less clout than expected since the end of the Cold War' (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 9 January 1992).

After two decades of all-consuming guerrilla war against an unyielding power, republicans projected their fervent hope that the British government might relinquish in negotiation what it had not yet conceded in war. Into the early 1990s, enduring republican confidence in the IRA's military capacity undergirded the belief that the British state would eventually be worn down in a war of attrition. The IRA leadership's new year statement in January 1992 declared that Britain could not 'hope to contain, never mind defeat us': volunteers could yet 'intensify' the armed struggle (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 2 January 1992).

For the majority of the Northern Ireland conflict, Irish republicans seldom sought tactical or strategic lessons in struggles elsewhere. However, from the mid-1990s, senior republicans explicitly highlighted South Africa as an instructive case for militants seeking to transform a stalemate and redefine national democracy. A feature article in the movement's newspaper in 1995 quoted Gerry Adams on his hopes 'to learn' from the South African experience of 'developing a peace process'.<sup>71</sup> Stressing this didactic interpretation of the anti-apartheid movement lent Sinn Féin leaders authority when they advocated widening the movement's domestic base and invited international actors to endorse political transformation in Ireland. Interviewed shortly after the IRA ceasefire in 1994, Adams told a local newspaper in west Belfast's republican heartlands that the movement needed to imitate South African and Palestinian activists by inviting an 'outside element', such as the Irish-American lobby or the European Union, to 'move the situation' past conflictual 'stalemate' (*Andersonstown News*, 24 September 1994). For the IRA's Officer Commanding in Long Kesh, Seán Lynch, the 'success of the ANC's mass action strategy' illustrated how republicans must join forces with 'general nationalist supporters' to mobilise a broad front with 'clear grassroots support' and 'shape' the peace process (*The Captive Voice/An Glór Gaí*, Winter 1996). The peace process on which Sinn Féin embarked through the 1990s precipitated the final, conclusive breach between the Provisional movement and RCP radicals who had formerly declared 'unconditional support'.

### **The RCP and republicanism's strategic reorientation**

During the late 1980s and into the 1990s, the Provisional republican movement reoriented its strategy. Sinn Féin dropped its traditional abstentionism in relation to the Dublin parliament in 1986, and the following year mooted talks with John Hume's moderate nationalist SDLP. The turn to pan-nationalism in the late 1980s marked a significant change among republicans who had formerly castigated 'nationalists' as constitutionalist stooges of British rule in Ireland. At the end of the republican hunger strike in 1981, for example, prisoners had denounced the SDLP for 'cling[ing] tenaciously to their role of imperialist lickspittle'.<sup>72</sup>

Throughout the Provisionals' innovations in the late 1980s, the RCP leadership maintained its 'unconditional support', since it continued to regard Irish republicanism as a mortal threat to the British state. Even while diagnosing 'military and political impasse' in 1986, and pointing to the 'dangers' of electoral cronyism, Mick Kennedy reiterated the RCP's time-honoured position: 'For as long as the republican movement pursues the struggle against imperialism its freedom fighters are assured of our full support' (*the next step*, 14 November 1986). Similarly, when the *ard fheis* of 1989 ratified the 'pan-nationalist' initiative and exhorted the IRA to avoid civilian casualties, Andy Clarkson reminded British radicals that, at a time of enduring chauvinism in Britain, unconditional support precluded criticising republican tactics (*the next step*, 3 February 1989).

Even when IFM supporters questioned republicans' quasi-constitutional initiatives in the late 1980s, misgivings remained marginal and controversial. After a north London IFM supporter complained in 1986 that dropping abstentionism constituted a 'significant compromise' by Sinn Féin (*the next step*, 21 November 1986), a Birmingham IFM activist retorted that abstentionism was a dispensable 'tactic' (*the next step*, 28 November 1986). Only a minority of cadres tentatively expressed qualms about the Provisionals' new departures: in 1990, when Gerry Adams expressed his willingness to meet British Secretary of State Peter Brooke, Newcastle RCP supporter and sociology undergraduate Jon Bryan asked 'should we still give unconditional support?' (*the next step*, 4 May 1990).

After a series of highly controversial IRA operations in the late 1980s, Sinn Féin leaders came closer to censuring republican guerrillas than did IFM activists. In November 1987, the Provisionals bombed Enniskillen, County Fermanagh, killing eleven civilians and leading even Gerry Adams to express, 'on behalf of the republican people ... regret [and] sympathy' for the victims and their relatives (*Irish Press*, 20 November 1987). An IRA spokesman said the bomb was an unsanctioned 'mistake' and a 'major setback' for republicans (*Irish Examiner*, 11 November 1987). In dispassionate distinction, RCP Political Committee member Mick Hume reiterated that British radicals' responses could 'not be based on emotional revulsion at particular incidents of violence or terror' (*the next step*, 13 November 1987). *the next step's* editorial insisted that 'our attitude to the struggle in Ireland cannot be determined by any particular act of war' (*the next step*, 20 November 1987).

RCP cadres' criticisms of the Provisional movement's strategic direction emerged more publicly only in 1992, when Sinn Féin's *ard fheis* endorsed the leadership's policy document *Towards a lasting peace in Ireland*. Committing republicans to allaying unionists' fears of Irish unity,<sup>73</sup> the document invited the British government, UN, and EEC to find a 'peaceful resolution' to the conflict (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 20 February 1992). Situating *Towards a lasting peace* as a foundation for a 'process of national reconciliation' (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 27 February 1992), senior Provisional Martin McGuinness hailed Adams for 'asking the British prime minister to initiate a peace process' (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 26 March 1992).

For the RCP, Sinn Féin's *ard fheis* of 1992 indicated an historic rubicon for a republican movement which had given up on forcibly overthrowing British imperialism and now openly sought a settlement. Comparing Sinn Féin's constitutional initiatives and the perceived capitulation of national liberation movements in South Africa and the Middle East, RCP ideologues emerged among the republican movement's severest critics during the Northern Ireland peace process. An editorial in party bulletin *the next step* told

supporters that republican demands for negotiations with Westminster signalled a disastrous rapprochement with imperialism which could only 'confuse and demoralise' the republican rank-and-file (*the next step*, 20 November 1992). Addressing the RCP's annual conference in the summer of 1992, leading IFM activist Eve Anderson bluntly announced that the Provisionals had 'failed to defeat Britain, or win any substantial concessions', and republicans' blustering claims to the contrary could only exacerbate 'disenchantment and war-weariness' (*Irish Freedom: Bulletin of the Irish Freedom Movement*, Autumn 1992).

Having publicly criticised republicans' openness to peace talks from 1992, the RCP subsumed 'the Irish war' in a narrative of liberation movements faltering worldwide. In August 1993, CAM's 'broader anti-war demonstration' enveloped the annual IFM march (*the next step*, 2 April 1993)—a stark shift from the party's programme of 1987, which had considered Ireland 'the key *international* issue of British politics'.<sup>74</sup> Addressing the rally, which included representatives of the Iraqi, Kurdish, and Somali communities, CAM organiser Lynn Rawley shifted the traditional emphasis into wider opposition to 'the militarism of the west in whatever form it takes' (*Irish Freedom: Bulletin of the Irish Freedom Movement*, Winter 1993).

The republican response to the Downing Street Declaration of December 1993 further alienated RCP cadres. Agreed by the London and Dublin governments, the Declaration stipulated that Northern Ireland's constitutional status could only change by a majority vote.<sup>75</sup> This 'principle of consent' was diametrically opposed to republicans' historical emphasis upon all-Ireland self-determination. However, through the winter of 1993 into 1994, Sinn Féin leaders and IRA prisoners discussed the Declaration at length. That republicans would even contemplate the Declaration stunned Eve Anderson: the Provisional leadership was 'making concessions unthinkable a few years ago' (*Irish Freedom: Bulletin of the Irish Freedom Movement*, Winter 1993).

Activists who had once carefully avoided criticism now censured unequivocally. Sinn Féin was cast as an active agent in its own demise. In 1986, Mick Kennedy had cautiously implied that Sinn Féin's new approach to Leinster House risked drawing the movement into clientelism and reformism. By 1993, he condemned the Provisionals' reorientation, scorning Adams for his 'evident desperation to be involved in talks with Britain' and the Sinn Féin leadership for embracing the EEC and UN, institutions at 'the cutting edge of the new imperialism' (*Living Marxism*, February 1993).

For the IFM, Sinn Féin's peace strategy in the early 1990s profoundly misjudged the transformed global conjuncture and overestimated republicans' relative strength. Rid of its Soviet bogeyman, cadres argued, western imperialism lacked internal cohesion, but faced little subjective pressure to concede to radical challengers. For IFM activist Alex Farrell, Sinn Féin's demands to be admitted to all-party talks in 1992 indicated that republicans failed to recognise that the 'balance of forces' acted 'more in Britain's favour today than at any time in the last decade' (*Irish Freedom: Bulletin of the Irish Freedom Movement*, Autumn 1992). IFM supporter Janet Sugden flatly dismissed republican claims that the Downing Street Declaration portended a new constitutional pathway to Irish independence: 'the British are not prepared to concede anything real' (*Irish Freedom: Bulletin of the Irish Freedom Movement*, Summer 1994). When the TOM invited radical groups to coordinate the annual

Bloody Sunday commemoration in 1993, the RCP and RCG representatives withdrew from the committee, citing their refusal to celebrate the unfolding peace process as a republican advance (*Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!* December 1993-January 1994).

Since the RCP had always attributed the Irish crisis to the denial of all-Ireland self-determination, cadres dismissed the cardinal peace process tenet that nationalism and unionism could coexist with 'parity of esteem' in a reformed Northern Ireland. As far as IFM organisers were concerned, international consociationalism was fundamentally undemocratic. When Sinn Féin publicly indicated its willingness to negotiate with the British government and to engage with non-republican perspectives from 1993, Eve Anderson dismissed Sinn Féin's seeming readiness to contemplate 'diverse traditions' in Irish politics:

There is no problem of diverse traditions in Ireland. Loyalists do not identify themselves as such because of some cultural heritage, but because the maintenance of their special position in Ireland requires Britain's occupation of the country (*Irish Freedom: Bulletin of the Irish Freedom Movement*, Winter 1993).

Republican participation in the peace process evoked a sense of profound dislocation for IFM activists, whose campaigns seemed to have lost their *raison d'être*. As IFM leader Fiona Foster asked the movement's conference of 1993, when even republicans seemed to accept the British government as a neutral arbiter in Ireland, how could British radicals articulate their anti-imperialism? (*Irish Freedom: Bulletin of the Irish Freedom Movement*, August 1993).

Longstanding scepticism about republicanism's ambiguous political programme, previously muted or concealed, surfaced during the IFM's final throes in the mid-1990s. RCP veterans traced the Provisionals' constitutional turn back to the early 1980s. These critical analyses delineated what Kevin Bean has termed the 'porous nature of the Republican theoretical tradition and its susceptibility to the ideological pull of external forces'.<sup>76</sup> Writing in 1993, Eve Anderson argued that Sinn Féin's talks with John Hume since the late 1980s had confirmed

the mismatch and conflict between the determined practical activity of the republican movement ... and its shapelessness at the level of politics and ideas ... The republican movement has always been loose and amorphous politically (*Irish Freedom: Bulletin of the Irish Freedom Movement*, Winter 1993).

Similarly, *the next step* editor Kenan Malik reflected on how the RCP's anti-imperialism had, privately at least, negotiated considerable reservations about republican strategy and ideology:

We have always disagreed with the political programme and strategy of the republican movement – just as we have disagreed with the programme and strategy of every petit-bourgeois liberation movement across the globe (*the next step*, 2 April 1993).

Shortly before winding up, the IFM endorsed long-serving activist Mark Ryan's *War and peace in Ireland: Britain and the IRA in the new world order* (1994) (*Irish Freedom: Bulletin of the Irish Freedom Movement*, Summer 1994). Ryan's assessment was remarkable primarily for its diachronic and spatial sophistication, connecting republicanism's internal recalibration with international political upheaval. The USSR's disintegration had undermined 'oppositional' politics and galvanised 'conciliatory' processes worldwide. Excoriating Sinn Féin's transition from 1980s revolutionary movement to 'traditional social-



democratic party', Ryan traced clientelism and opportunism in the Provisionals' electoral turn. Ryan argued that accommodating loyalism in a 'pluralistic' framework for Ireland's future was 'inherently anti-democratic ... The central principle of democracy is majority rule'.<sup>77</sup>

Divergent assessments of the republican peace strategy were most pronounced when the IRA declared its ceasefire in August 1994. In Long Kesh, many IRA prisoners cautiously hoped that victory was close at hand.<sup>78</sup> In west Belfast, celebratory rallies thronged the streets. Meanwhile, writing in Britain before the ceasefire of August 1994—indeed he still considered a cessation unlikely—senior IFM organiser Sean Green castigated the republican façade:

What the IRA has failed to win on the field of battle, Sinn Féin has no chance of winning at the negotiating table. There is no avoiding the grim reality that the "peace process" represents a historic defeat for the liberation movement (*Irish Freedom: Bulletin of the Irish Freedom Movement*, Summer 1994).

For the rump of the IFM, the ceasefire confirmed the conviction that republicans had capitulated. *Irish Freedom* editor Fiona Foster devoted the organisation's final bulletin to 'showing that the current peace process is a sham ... it cannot deliver the peace with justice that Irish nationalists have struggled for over the past 25 years' (*Irish Freedom: Bulletin of the Irish Freedom Movement*, Summer 1994).

Having declared the republican movement's defeat, the remnants of the IFM established affinities with disillusioned republicans who criticised the peace process along similar lines. For its keynote conference in Wembley in March 1994, CAM hosted dissenting republicans who regarded Sinn Féin's participation in constitutional and diplomatic initiatives as a retrograde step for the liberation movement. A veteran leftist republican who had left the Provisional movement while imprisoned in 1986, Tommy McKearney told the conference that Sinn Féin should have rejected outright the Downing Street Declaration: 'there is nothing in it for nationalists or republicans'. *Living Marxism* featured at length McKearney's contribution to the Wembley conference, quoting approvingly his assessment of 'weakness' in the republican movement and warnings against being 'misled' into a 'devious ploy ... strengthening the connection between Britain and Ireland' (*Living Marxism*, April 1994). Echoing McKearney's analysis, Mark Ryan dismissed the Declaration as an exercise in British statecraft: it would be folly, Ryan argued, for republicans to interpret these diplomatic moves as a precursor to Irish unity (*Saoirse: Irish Freedom*, April 1994).

Convinced that the peace process was entangling militants in debates which could only reduce the republican movement's objectives, the IFM also drew upon the critique of another longstanding leftist republican, Bernadette McAliskey. Interviewed by Mark Ryan in 1994, McAliskey charged Provisional leaders with 'talking in riddles' to maintain legitimacy with the republican grassroots while projecting their amenability to peace talks. According to McAliskey, Gerry Adams and his supporters were 'lost' and 'floundering', risking 'taking the whole ship down with them' (*Living Marxism*, August 1994). Neither McKearney nor McAliskey called for a return to armed struggle. Rather, they critiqued the Provisionals' constitutional strategy alternately as naïve diplomacy, or



dishonest reformism. Endorsing these two republicans from County Tyrone, IFM activists repudiated the Provisional movement's direction, and resigned themselves to the historic defeat of Irish anti-imperialism.

## Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how British radicals engaged with the Northern Ireland conflict to refine their theory and critique alternative strategies on the radical left. From its inception in 1981, the RCP typified this purposive, polemical *modus operandi*. Espousing 'unconditional support' for Irish republicanism functioned as a critique of the perceived nationalism and reformism of the left and the trade union bureaucracy. Moreover, such divisive partisanship on Ireland articulated the party's challenge to British workers. Radical Irish solidarity and anti-racism conveyed the RCP's determination to confront and overturn nationalist and chauvinist tendencies in the British working class and its institutions.

Inasmuch as the organisation engaged with the 'Irish war' functionally to expound its own praxis, the RCP was not unique: various radical groups evinced positions on Northern Ireland to signal their particular theories of the state and revolution. But what set the RCP apart from many left-wing groups was its acute distinction between the form and content of republican politics. Outwardly, 'unconditional support' concealed a multifaceted analysis which juxtaposed the republican campaign's anti-imperialist *content* and petit-bourgeois *form*. Concomitantly, the RCP could endorse republicanism's core hostility to the British state while simultaneously critiquing, if mutedly, the political limits of its militancy.

RCP activists positioned themselves emerging from the ruins of historic working-class defeats to build anew an independent revolutionary vanguard. By contrast, from the 1980s, the heterogeneous republican movement sought to aggregate several tactical elements—including guerrilla warfare, electoralism, and a pan-nationalist initiative—into a mass movement. For the RCP, Irish solidarity clarified and amplified a particular mode of revolutionary politics for a select vanguard. For the Provisionals, the success of a solidarity movement in Britain depended upon its political breadth and capacity to push mainstream opinion in favour of British withdrawal. Consequently, while the IFM proclaimed 'unconditional support', republicans held the RCP front group in suspicion. For republicans seeking an inclusive mass movement on a minimal platform, the specificity of the RCP's solidarity rendered it at best immaterial, and at worst inimical to galvanising British public opinion against British rule in Ireland.

As Provisional strategists noted, numerically at least, the RCP was marginal by comparison to the SWP or TOM, for example. Even at its peak, the RCP could count no more than 200 active members, while its wider support network barely exceeded 1,000. But for RCP cadres who saw themselves building a revolutionary movement from scratch, the *qualitative* imperative of forging an independent vanguard was the priority. In 1980, when an SWP activist scorned the RCT's 'political purism', Political Committee representative James Wood retorted that the organisation sought not simply to become 'some mass movement', but to build 'a workers' movement based on class politics ... a revolutionary alternative' (*the next step*, October 1980).

Republicans' and RCP activists' differing interpretations of global political realignments reflected a broader crisis of revolutionary politics from the late 1980s. Conflict transformations in the Middle East and South Africa, coupled with the Soviet Union's disintegration, posed dilemmas for anti-imperialists worldwide. For a Provisional leadership initiating an innovative pan-nationalist programme, the experience of the PLO and ANC in negotiations vindicated an increasingly constitutional strategy. The RCP's internationalist revolutionaries took a very different view. For the party's Political Committee, by negotiating with their imperialist adversaries, the Palestinian and South African liberation movements confirmed their petit-bourgeois compromise with capitalism. By the same token, although RCP veterans had celebrated the demise of the Soviet Union, they regarded subsequent western interventions in the Gulf and the Balkans in the early 1990s as a dismal signal of the 'moral rearmament of imperialism'.

These divergent assessments of the new world order exposed and widened strategic divisions among radicals on both sides of the Irish Sea. For Irish republicans who prioritised a national revolution above social transformation, conflict transitions elsewhere portended the potential for a constitutional, domestic transfer of power. Determined to build an independent working-class vanguard, the RCP refused to countenance reformism: a real political alternative necessitated the destruction of the state. As this article has demonstrated, these strategic differences had distinguished the RCP from Provisional republicans throughout the 1980s. But the end of the Cold War, and peace processes in the Middle East, South Africa, and Latin America, cast in sharper relief the practical dilemmas facing radicals and revolutionaries. For republican pragmatists, the global political tumult attested the limits of guerrillaist absolutism and the necessity of mass nationalist mobilisation and gradualist negotiations. For RCP cadres, whose political targets extended beyond Irish nationhood, republicans entering talks with historic enemies merely confirmed that the western order continued to hold the upper hand. Republicans insisted that the new world order presented a new opportunity to advance their struggle; for RCP veterans, the 'moral rearmament of imperialism' signalled a grave crisis of political subjectivity *in toto*.

Moreover, the IFM's critique of the Irish peace process in the early 1990s illuminated how differently leftist and republican milieus conceptualised revolutionary politics and agency. The RCP's vision of a revolutionary political subject clashed with the Provisional leadership's overtures to the British government. Aspiring to all-Ireland democracy, Provisionals pioneered a peace initiative on the premise that a 'pan-nationalist' mass movement could, with diplomatic support from international institutions and Irish-America, persuade Westminster to withdraw. As Richard English has argued, through the strata of the movement, socialism was a significant but ultimately secondary goal.<sup>79</sup> Conversely, the RCP was ideologically committed to establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat 'with the objective of realising communism throughout [the] world'.<sup>80</sup> Irish independence was not, of course, the pinnacle of the party's objectives. Moreover, the alternative which the RCP envisaged would not be achieved by wresting concessions from the state, but by supplanting it. The struggle to respond to the transformed global conjuncture exposed the profound ideological and strategic differences which had coexisted uneasily with 'unconditional support'.

Divergent perspectives on the Irish peace process further highlighted how republicans and RCP cadres differentially understood their historical roles. Throughout the conflict, Provisional republicans positioned themselves as the inheritors of a centuries-old struggle for Irish independence and nationhood. For the Provisionals, hailing a 'pan-nationalist', constitutional path to Irish unity in the 1990s meant spearheading this broad-based campaign towards a triumphant conclusion. The support of the *ard fheis* in 1989 for the 'pan-nationalist' initiative demonstrated this readiness to combine armed struggle, clientelist electoralism, and diplomatic overtures. Aggregating these eclectic tactical forms, it was felt, would galvanise the movement in the conclusive phase of its 'age-old struggle'.

While the Provisionals saw themselves rousing a broad base for a breakthrough in the 1990s, the RCP emerged from a very different, perhaps unique, political tradition. Declaring that revolutionary politics had been in retreat worldwide since the 1920s, the RCP's founders had always maintained that training a vanguard would be a herculean task. RCP activists considered themselves theoretically distinct and intellectually important, but admitted that their influence was marginal and mediated by circumstances of serious adversity. The party's understanding of its task—salvaging a revolutionary vanguard against the behemoth obstacle of labourism and the left—inclined its cadres towards an especially unsentimental outlook. Writing in 1991, a member of the party's Political Committee declared that the left was at its lowest ebb since the revolutions of 1848.<sup>81</sup>

The RCP's campaigning on Ireland was not motivated by a desire to learn from or imitate republican tactics or politics, nor to encourage an actionist tendency in Britain. The party's 'unconditional support' for 'Irish freedom' did not reflect the sentimental or empathetic varieties of solidarity which Quinn Slobodian has identified in the New Left's Third Worldism.<sup>82</sup> Neither did the IFM's solidarity work anticipate the reciprocal assistance which characterised many of the transnational anti-capitalist protests of the late twentieth century.<sup>83</sup>

Rather, the RCP's Irish campaigning functioned explicitly to clarify British workers' class interests. This was a purposive, didactic solidarity, exhorting the British working class to repudiate the state and reformism alike.<sup>84</sup> The emphatic quality of the IFM's 'unconditional support' for Irish republicanism signified not a thorough political affinity with the Provisionals, but a challenge to British workers to adopt independent, revolutionary anti-imperialism. An RCP organiser in Stockport succinctly evoked Ireland's instrumental relevance: British workers had 'nothing to gain by supporting the British state... but everything to gain by supporting the fight for Irish freedom' (*Stockport Express Advertiser*, 1 May 1986).

The RCP's 'unconditional support' was always more contingent and multifaceted than its basic appearance suggested. Throughout the 1980s, the RCP and IFM championed Irish republicanism to the extent that they considered it a lethal threat to the British state. Endorsing Irish republicanism's anti-imperialist *content*, rather than its particular tactical or political *form*, cadres could harbour residual and muted misgivings. Those criticisms were articulated more openly in the early 1990s, after the Political Committee decreed that anti-Irish chauvinism was no longer a major cause of the lack of revolutionary fervour in the British working class.

By the end of its curious career, the RCP regarded with equal distaste a post-nationalist Ireland 'in a state of perpetual childhood' (*LM*, March 1997) and, more broadly, a pre-political world 'not fit for people'.<sup>85</sup> RCP analyses of the peace process dovetailed with a wider critique of diminished political contestation expounded in the party's closing statement.<sup>86</sup> From this perspective, inter-party negotiations signified not only the defeat of the republican challenge to the British state, but a deeper malaise of subjectivity. A process in which 'political fixers in Dublin, Belfast, [and] Whitehall' combined to marginalise anti-state dissent in Northern Ireland, Mark Ryan warned, fundamentally infringed political participation (*Living Marxism*, February 1996).

For veterans of the RCP, the peace process epitomised a regressive political phase which corroded the human subject's capacity to transform the world.<sup>87</sup> Writing after the IRA ceasefire ended abruptly in February 1996, doctoral student Chris Gilligan asserted that intergovernmental attempts to 'pacify' the populace threatened enduringly to stultify political life.<sup>88</sup> For radical educationalist Kevin Rooney, a peace process which marginalised dissent, and failed to address social inequities, could only essentialise and eternalise 'two divided communities'.<sup>89</sup>

The ardour with which the RCP and IFM had once espoused 'unconditional support' for Irish republicanism was matched only by the finality of that solidarity's obsolescence. When Sinn Féin representatives signed the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998, committing signatories to exclusively constitutional politics and power-sharing devolution in Northern Ireland, neither the RCP nor the IFM existed. While Sinn Féin's leadership hailed a gradualist advance towards Irish unification, insisting 'our struggle goes on' ([sinnfein.org/ardfheis/98ardfheis/retlp.html](http://sinnfein.org/ardfheis/98ardfheis/retlp.html)), former RCP cadres regarded the Agreement as the republican struggle's obituary: 'Republicanism, rest in peace', wrote ex-RCP activist Brendan O'Neill (*LM*, May 1998). As this article has demonstrated, the party's 'unconditional support' for 'Irish freedom' had always been more contingent, complicated, and functional than the slogan implied.

## Notes

1. The RCP originated as the Revolutionary Communist Tendency in 1978: the Tendency became a Party in May 1981. Its largest branches were in England—most notably in London, as well as substantial networks in, inter alia, Canterbury, Coventry, Manchester, and Sheffield. The organisation also had a presence in Scotland and Wales, and cadres determined to combat *British* imperialism. For a veteran's memoir of the organisation, see Fitzpatrick, 'The point is to change it.'
2. Revolutionary Communist Group, *Our tasks and methods*.
3. Wood, 'The crisis of the bourgeoisie.'
4. Workers Against Racism, *Cleansing our ranks*, 6.
5. Revolutionary Communist Party, *Building the new leadership*.
6. Lenin's dictum distinguished between the 'spontaneous' or 'trade union' radicalism of workers who identified their own exploitation, and the more profound, active 'independent ideology' of workers who critiqued capitalism as a complete system. Lenin, *Collected works*, volume 5, 374.
7. Revolutionary Communist Tendency, *Our tasks and methods*, 1, 9.
8. Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 498.

9. At its foundation in November 1988, *Living Marxism* had 74 subscribers, each paying an annual subscription of £15 (approximately equivalent to £42.80 in 2021). By the early 1990s, the magazine could count 6,000 subscribers. Raised from members' and supporters' monthly dues, party funds covered the set-up costs. Design and production were largely coordinated in-house, and RCP supporters sold the magazine during events and at street and estate sales. As circulation increased, the magazine also sold advertising space. Personal correspondence from former member of RCP Political Committee.
10. For a detailed account of ITN's libel case against *Living Marxism*, see Campbell, 'Atrocity, memory, photography, part 1' and Campbell, 'Atrocity, memory, photography, part 2.'
11. For an overview of the Provisional movement's strategic evolution, see Moloney, *Secret history*; English, *Armed struggle*.
12. In parallel with campaigning on Ireland, militant anti-racism was a focal point of RCP activity: both themes arraigned the perceived nationalism and social-chauvinism of the British working class and its institutions. Richards, *Under a national flag*.
13. *Ireland's victory means Britain's defeat*, 6.
14. Irish Freedom Movement, *The Irish war*, 156–7.
15. The IFM demonstration became such a fixture in the radical solidarity calendar that an array of left-wing activists attended. In 1989, alongside nine MPs and two MEPs, some 115 Labour Party councillors joined the march. Trade union branches in Durham, London, and Nottingham were among the affiliated sponsors, while revolutionary organisations including the CPGB's *Leninist* faction and the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) also endorsed the rally. *The Leninist's* correspondent at the August 1991 IFM demonstration noted 'many contingents ... freely handing out different literature'.
16. Freeman, 'The road to power,' 52–3.
17. Mulholland, 'Northern Ireland and the far left,' 552.
18. For example, Red Action, and the RCP's forebears in the Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG), also espoused 'unconditional support'. Whereas the RCP and RCG criticised the Provisional republican movement's strategic reorientation in the early 1990s, Red Action remained sympathetic. A *Red Action* editorial in 1994, for instance, portrayed the Provisional IRA ceasefire as a marker of republican 'strength rather than weakness ... the IRA have shown it possible to bomb someone out of your country'. By this point, Red Action criticised the RCP 'who, unlike all others, had a pro-republican position up until 1992 when it was inexplicably dropped'.
19. Farrell, *Northern Ireland*.
20. Probert, 'Marxism and the Irish question,' 65. From the late 1970s, however, Marxist historians Paul Bew, Peter Gibbon, and Henry Patterson challenged the orthodox interpretation. For Bew, Gibbon, and Patterson, anti-partitionism subordinated class politics to the 'bankrupt tradition' of nationalist irredentism. Their hostility to the 'anti-imperialist' Marxist position on Ireland dovetailed with the two-nations theory of, for example, the British and Irish Communist Organisation, which upheld Northern Ireland's legitimacy as a Protestant nation. Bew, Gibbon & Patterson, *The state in Northern Ireland*, 2, 29, passim; Perry, 'Revisionist Marxist theory,' 128; Perry, 'Revisionist Marxism,' 457–477.
21. *Workers against imperialism*, 18.
22. Munck, 'A divided working class,' 127.
23. Clarkson & Murphy, 'The loyalist working class,' 31.
24. The republican movement's internal education programme in the mid-1980s held that by 'forcing a British withdrawal', the 'war of national liberation' for Irish unification would 'allow North-eastern Protestants for the first time to take their place as free and equal citizens of an all-Ireland republic'. Sinn Féin Education Department, *Loyalism*.
25. See note 13 above 10.
26. Labour and Trade Union Group, *Northern Ireland Labour and Trade Union Group*.
27. *Workers against imperialism*, 14–5.
28. Füredi, *The Soviet Union demystified*, 234–5.
29. Richards, 'Revisionism, imperialism and the state,' 17.

30. *Workers against imperialism*, 34.
31. Lenin, *Imperialism*.
32. Until an internal schism in 1977, the Troops Out Movement had over 1,200 active members across Britain, alongside a wider affiliate membership of more than 10,000. Calling for British withdrawal and Irish 'self-determination', TOM enjoyed considerable support in the labour movement: 326 union branches attended its conference in 1974. TOM also enjoyed solidarity connections with British leftists in the International Socialists, International Marxist Group (IMG), and CPGB. Renwick, "'Something in the air'"; Tranmer, 'A force to be reckoned with?', 7.
33. Freeman, "'Self-activity" makes you blind,' 25–6.
34. Revolutionary Communist Party, *Preparing for power*, 48–9.
35. Jobson, *Nostalgia*, 85–108.
36. Richards, 'Editorial: Their alternative,' 1.
37. See note 34 above 9.
38. Lenin, *Collected works, volume 20*, 439.
39. Workers Power, *The British left*, 41–2.
40. Revolutionary Communist Tendency, *Smash the Prevention of Terrorism Act!*
41. Mulholland, 'Northern Ireland and the Far Left,' 549–50.
42. Socialist Workers Party, *Why we say*, 7, 9.
43. Communist Party of Great Britain, *Ireland*, 10.
44. Northern Ireland Office, *Briefing on the IRA: The Extreme Irish Republican Movement in Britain*, 26 May 1983.
45. Cunningham, 'The Militant Tendency,' 208.
46. Irish Freedom Movement, *The Irish war*, 146.
47. In 1978, for example, the SWP insisted: 'We can't pretend that a call to vote Labour again can be made without choking back our disgust. But at least the devil we know has one advantage for the left'. Similarly, the IMG insisted that Labour was a workers' party which was 'independent from the bosses'—a position which the early RCT dismissed as 'illusions in Labourism'. In contrast, a founding RCT cadre asserted that the Labour Party could 'never defend the interests of the working class ... To give Labour any electoral support is to accept the present alternatives facing the working class ... the future for class politics lies through an uncompromising struggle against Labour and all it stands for'. Freeman & Marshall, *Who needs the Labour Party?*, 30.
48. Virdee, 'Anti-racism,' 215.
49. The pejorative 'petit-bourgeois nationalism' elicited Marx's formulation of the 'petty bourgeoisie' as a 'transitional class' between the bourgeoisie and proletariat, 'in which the interests of two classes are simultaneously blunted'. RCP cadres employed 'petit-bourgeois nationalism' as an epithet for a nationalist milieu which rallied the masses around a national liberation struggle, but could not act independently or consistently in the interests of proletarian internationalism. Marx, 'Eighteenth Brumaire,' 62.
50. As the Provisionals' programme between 1971 and 1982—when it was abandoned after a leadership faction fight—Éire Nua proposed a federalised Ireland based upon economic nationalism. Although subordinated to local industrial and agrarian cooperatives, private property rights would remain. In the historic north-eastern province of Ulster, nationalists and unionists would share power in a decentralised regional assembly. Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, *Our people, our future*.
51. Troops Out Movement, *No British solution*.
52. Labour Committee on Ireland, *What has Ireland got to do with British trades unionists?*
53. Finn, *One man's terrorist*, 139.
54. Hepworth, 'The age-old struggle', 91–128.
55. Finn, 'The British radical left and Northern Ireland,' 211.
56. Belfast Sinn Féin, *Troops Out Movement August '84 delegation*.
57. The party coined the 'moral rearmament of imperialism' in 1991, while organising a conference to address the global balance of forces after western intervention in the Gulf.

58. Revolutionary Communist Students, *On the offensive*.
59. Berg, *Intellectual radicalism after 1989*, 78.
60. Freeman, *The empire strikes back*, 31.
61. Revolutionary Communist Students, *Peace in the Gulf!*
62. Freeman, *The empire strikes back*, 31–3, 37, 39.
63. Hepworth, 'The age-old struggle', 51, 102.
64. Sinn Féin, *Ard fheis 1990*.
65. Sinn Féin, *Breaching Ireland's Berlin Wall*.
66. Bean, *The new politics*, 148.
67. Sachs, *Soft vengeance*.
68. Spencer, *From armed struggle*, 144.
69. Rolston, "'This is not a rebel song",' 55.
70. Westad, *The global Cold War*, 395.
71. Gerry Adams quoted in Cox, 'Bringing in the "international"', 678.
72. *Why we ended the Hunger-Strike: The full text of the H-Block blanket men's statement announcing the end of the hunger-strike* (1981). The SDLP reciprocated the republican antagonism: addressing the party conference in 1988, SDLP leader John Hume argued that the Provisional movement had 'all the hallmarks of undiluted fascism ... If I were to lead a civil rights campaign in Northern Ireland today, the major target of that campaign would be the IRA'. Perry, 'Revisionism,' 45.
73. Sinn Féin, *Towards a lasting peace*.
74. Revolutionary Communist Party, *The Red Front*, 49 (italics in original).
75. The Declaration stipulated that if democratic majorities in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland voted for a united Ireland, the British government would not obstruct it. Simultaneously, Albert Reynolds's Fianna Fáil government moderated its nominal irredentist claim to the north, and accepted that partition could only end by majority votes in both jurisdictions on the Island of Ireland.
76. See note 66 above 74.
77. Ryan, *War and peace in Ireland*, passim, 7, 9, 16, 71, 75, 99–100.
78. Hepworth, "'We're getting the victory we fought for",' 68–79.
79. English, *Does terrorism work?*, 109.
80. 'Notes for a constitution' (internal RCP document, no date [c.1985]). Copy in author's possession.
81. Knight, *Stalinism in crisis*, 7.
82. Slobodian, *Foreign front*, 99, 199.
83. Rucht, 'Distant issue movements,' 77–8.
84. Deliberately polarising and challenging British workers, the RCP's Irish solidarity bore similarities to the IMG's engagement with the Vietnam War in the 1960s. Criticising more moderate anti-war organisations, such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the British Council for Peace in Vietnam, the IMG formed the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, calling explicitly for a communist victory. For the IMG, this consciously divisive stance would ignite revolutionary anti-imperialism among British youth. Ellis, 'Promoting solidarity,' 564–5.
85. *The point is to change it*, 217.
86. *Ibid.*, 67.
87. Mick Hume quoted in introduction to Marx & Engels, *Communist manifesto*, xxi–xxii.
88. Gilligan, 'Peace or pacification process?', 32.
89. Rooney, 'Education,' 129.

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