

STRIKE BULLETIN NO. 8

WESTMINSTER SHIFTS ITS GROUND

Last week Westminster and the press were telling the

world that the general strike was imposed by a handful of thugs on

the population at large. The press has finally discovered that it has very widespread popular support. But Westminster still sticks to its old story. Of course nobody in Westminster actually believes it any longer. But if they admitted that they had made an enormous, (indeed a criminal), mistake last week, they could no longer give any sort of a reason for refusing to negotiate with the Ulster Workers' Council.

But a noticeable change of emphasis has taken place in their explanations of how the small minority imposed its will on the great majority. Last week they said it was by physical intimidation; by the use of nully boys and thugs. They now say it was by exploiting the understandable, though groundless, fears in the Protestant community that a Council of Ireland would lead them into a united Ireland against their will. That was the explanation given by Francis Pym last night.

This deep suspicion of the Council of Ireland is declared to be completely unjustified. There are said to be "*cast-iron guarantees*" The people must be very stupid indeed if their groundless fears, on a question on which there are cast iron guarantees, could be exploited by a small, sinister, political group in such a way as to cause a general strike. But let us look a bit closer.

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**GROUNDLESS FEARS?** Andrew Barr walked alongside Len Murray in the "*trade union return to work*" last week. Len Murray understands nothing about Northern Ireland politics, and no doubt he took it in good faith from Andrew Barr and Stanley Orme that the fears of a United Ireland manoeuvre through the Council of Ireland were the fears of ignorant people who had been confused by sinister politicians.

But last Friday Andrew Barr put his signature to a letter to Wilson calling on the British Government to make a declaration of intent to withdraw from Northern Ireland. The letter says: "*If the British Government makes such a declaration, it completely changes the framework of the argument for Unionists of all varieties. Realistically, the issue for them then becomes one of obtaining the best possible deal within a united Ireland situation.*" (The letter was also signed by other official trade union leaders prominent in the attempt to break the strike: Betty Sinclair and Joe Cooper, secretary and treasurer of the Belfast Trades Council; by SDLP Assemblymen, Paddy Duffy and Desmond Gillespie; and by many Fianna Fail MPs.)

The Government and press have all described Andrew Barr as an

intelligent and respectable man, superior in every way to the strikers . But Barr is clearly not very impressed by the “*cast-iron guarantees*”. And if Barr, who is a colleague of Stanley Orme’s, thinks that a united Ireland against the will of the Protestants is a real possibility, how can it be said that the fears of the Protestant community are stupid and groundless?

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## THE SDLP NOW THE MAIN DANGER TO POWER SHARING

The main danger to democratic power sharing is now coming from the arrogant and tyrannical behaviour of the SDLP members in the Executive. It is now obvious that the SDLP only engaged in power-sharing in order to further its anti-Partitionist aims. It says it will not try to get a united Ireland against the wishes of the majority in Northern Ireland, “*Unity by Consent*” is its slogan. But it has a strange idea of “consent”. It is now trying to blackmail Westminster into using the Army to ram the Council of Ireland down the throats of the great majority of the Protestant community.

SDLP spokesmen still persist in their vicious slander campaign against the great mass of the Protestant working class. John Hume declared on Radio Eireann yesterday: “*The Northern Ireland Executive is in the front line against a fascist takeover. . . This is a complete fascist takeover. We know the steps that have to be taken to stop it. The plans are prepared, awaiting the sanction of the British Government.*”

This attitude of the SDLP is building up great problems for the maintenance of democratic power-sharing. The only democratic approach for the SDLP would have been to admit after the February election that there was a strong majority against the Council of Ireland. If they had then agreed to suspend the question of the Council until such time as it became clear that it was acceptable to a substantial majority of the people, the power-sharing arrangement could have continued in a democratic form. And its basis could have been broadened, because the Opposition parties (who had come to represent majority opinion in the society) would, no doubt, then have agreed to take part in the Executive.

But the SDLP put the Council of Ireland before power-sharing. Democratic power-sharing has broken down. And the SDLP is denouncing the majority of the people as fascists because they objected to the way they were being railroaded.

It is increasingly unlikely that the British Government will try

to use the Army to break the strike. If they do not, the SDLP will be left in a powerless Executive, screaming "Fascists!" at the greater part of the society that it is supposed to be governing.

The SDLP Assemblymen have brought all of this upon themselves. It was not the case that their Catholic constituents were putting pressure on them to behave like that. There is plenty of evidence that the majority of the Catholic community would have supported them if they acted reasonably and democratically in the power-sharing arrangement, and shelved the Council of Ireland when it became clear that the great majority of the Protestant community was against it. It was their own excessive ambition, and the political dishonesty which resulted from it, that led to their undoing.

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#### WHO IS AGAINST THE SPIRIT OF THE CONSTITUTION ?

Francis Pym said that there can be no negotiations with, or concessions to; the Ulster Workers' Council, because the British Constitution will not tolerate challenges to Parliament from outside bodies . But that's nonsense. Time and again the British Parliament has brought about fundamental changes in response to social pressures from outside Parliament. The present strike has plenty of precedents in the history of the British Constitution.

Parliament must take account of the feelings of the people between elections as well as at elections. And if Parliament, between elections, provokes great hostility to itself from a large proportion of the people, it must either meet the grievance of the people or call an election. It is useless for it to say, when the majority of the people have actively withdrawn their consent from it, that a majority won last year is good enough for this year.

The only alternative to government is consent by the Army and that is against the spirit of the British Constitution. The use of armed force either to overthrow a Parliament, or to maintain a Parliament against the will of the people, is considered completely out of order. The Ulster Workers' Council has no intention of using violence. If the Army is sent into power situations it will not be resisted, but the workers who are now running them will leave and let the Army produce power if it can: and likewise with the distribution of petrol, etc.

If the Government will not negotiate with the UWC for the maintenance of essential services, and if it sends the Army in to maintain

them, the Army will simply disappear as an Army and become a workforce. And that's why John Hume's demands will not be met by Westminster. They are alien to the spirit of the Constitution, and they are completely impractical. And the UWC methods are both practical and in accordance with the spirit of the Constitution. Pym must think again.

Workers' Association

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