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Monday, 18 August 2008

Unionists were outraged after a republican wielded a replica machine gun during a commemoration ceremony yesterday.

Democratic Unionist Junior Minister Jeffrey Donaldson said the march in honour of the H-block hunger strikers had been no excuse to parade the weapon.

Hundreds of republicans in Derry yesterday commemorated the 10 hunger strikers who died in Long Kesh prison in 1981.

It was the first time the annual event had been held outside Belfast.

"I think it is wholly inappropriate that people should display any kind of weaponry, whether it is replica or not," said Mr Donaldson.

"Symbolism like this should not be used, particularly from our party's perspective."

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Sinn Fein defended the marchers' decision to parade the replica weapon and said its presence had a historical significance.

"Families of the victims who were killed through collusion, would have decided to have the replica in the display," added a party spokesperson. "Any criticism is typical of unionist denial around collusion and death squads."

About 300 people marched from the Rosemount factory in Derry to the republican monument in the City Cemetery yesterday.

A large-scale security operation was mounted by the PSNI, as the parade marched along a route that took in the houses where wakes had been held for hunger strikers Patsy O'Hara and Michael Devine.

Wreaths were laid by the INLA, the Irish Republican Socialist Party, the family of Patsy O'Hara, the 32 Country Sovereignty Movement and Oglagh na h'Eireann.

Five of the hunger strikers came from Derry -- Patsy O'Hara and Michael Devine lived in the city and Francis Hughes, Tom McElwee and Kevin Lynch came from the county.

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Perhaps it can be seen as general progress in Northern Ireland's journey into the post-conflict future that we now have politicians parsing over REPLICA weapons rather than the real thing.

After all, it wasn't all that long ago that an event such as mentioned above would- more than likely- have included paramilitaries packing serious heat, not copies.

While I understand that such display, even of fakes, is disturbing to Donaldson and the constituents he represents, perhaps they can channel that displeasure into renewed efforts to the eradication of the Loyalist ordinance still floating around under the floorboards.

And perhaps an independent inquiry into where it all came from.

Posted by Jon Hatch | 18.08.08, 09:28 GMT

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