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Please file*

11/9/23

Department of Foreign Affairs

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AMBASÁID NA hÉIREANN, LONDAIN.



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IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON.

*Mr. Smith - Copy for
you
19/2*

15th February 1974

*e.c. P.S.M.
Mr. Dalton.*

Dear Assistant Secretary

With reference to the final sentence of your letter of 1st February, I am enclosing a report which gives an assessment of the publicity campaign being waged on behalf of the Price Sisters and the other prisoners convicted at Winchester last year. As you will gather from the report, the coverage in the British press has been considerably less than that in its Irish counterpart.

We shall let you have from time to time an indication of the number and type of enquiries we receive on the position of the prisoners.

Yours sincerely

G. O. Sullivan

Ambassador

Mr. C.V. Whelan
Assistant Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs.

Publicity Campaign concerning the Price sisters,
Hugh Feeney and Gerard Kelly

Attempts have been made by two organisations in Britain to promote a publicity campaign on behalf of Irish prisoners convicted of political offences. These organisations have however differing objectives.

The Irish Political Hostages Committee (I.P.H.C.), which was formed in early December 1973, has the following as its objectives:

- (i) that all Irish people imprisoned in Britain for political offences should be given a special status;
- (ii) that prisoners from Northern Ireland should be transferred to prisons in Northern Ireland.

The Joint Action Committee (J.A.C.) was formed at the end of December 1973 and its objective is to have the four hunger strikers transferred to prisons near their families in Northern Ireland and to have the forced feeding stopped. It claims to be ^a non-political humanitarian organisation.

The sentencing of the nine bombers received extensive coverage in the daily newspapers of the 16th November 1973. However, only the Guardian stressed that eight of the nine had gone on a hunger strike and listed the prisoners' various demands. The Guardian continued to monitor developments with several articles towards the end of November.

The I.P.H.C. does not appear to have made any impact during the month of December except for the Irish Post which devoted three articles to the formation of the I.P.H.C., its objectives and its initial activities. The Sunday Observer and the Guardian both had long articles analysing the principles of forced feeding and its history.

Publicity for the hunger strikers intensified in January with the formation of the J.A.C. and its claims that the condition of the hunger strikers and in particular Dolours Price was rapidly deteriorating and that she might be in danger of dying. It is obvious that the J.A.C. at this stage embarked on a publicity campaign not only of issuing leaflets grossly exaggerating the condition of the hunger strikers and the

.../...

treatment they were receiving but also of lobbying MP's and journalists such as Peter Chippindale, who has written most of the many articles in the Guardian on this subject. It is of interest in this connection that the London Editor of the Irish Independent mentioned to Mr Gallagher that both he and the Editor of the paper (Aidan Pender) had to tell [REDACTED] a reporter at the Independent's London office, to discontinue writing unnecessary articles about the hunger strikers and only to report on new developments.

In early February, once it was revealed that the hunger strikers were in good condition, publicity about their case began to tail off.

In general it may be said that the publicity campaign has not been very successful, possibly because of the following factors:

- (i) The JAC and the IPHC seriously damaged their case by exaggerating the physical condition of the hunger strikers and by alleging rough treatment at the hands of prison officials.
- (ii) Two MP's (Dr Tom Stuttaford and Mr Derek Coombs) visited the Price sisters and their report afterwards, on the condition of the sisters and their relationship with the prison officials, received wide publicity and raised serious doubts about the claims of the two organisations.
- (iii) Lord Longford, the Labour peer, visited the hunger strikers at the end of January and stated afterwards that he thought there was no immediate danger to their health. He also called on Lord Colville of the Home Office and, although he was promised a review of the visiting restrictions in the case of Feeney and Kelly, it was made quite clear to him that a transfer to Northern Ireland was out of the question.
- (iv) A parliamentary question on forced feeding on 29/1/74, which received wide publicity, revealed that a prisoner had been on hunger strike for 800 days and this naturally overshadowed the case of the four Irish hunger strikers.
- (v) While the British press comments on the practice of forced feeding have regarded it as degrading and unpleasant, it has been stated, particularly in an editorial in the Guardian on 5/2/74, that forced

feeding is the only course of action open to the Home Office in this situation. It has also been consistently stated that the British Government cannot afford to agree to transfer the prisoners to Northern Ireland.

what are the different political objectives?

(vi) The campaign has not been helped by the rivalry between the JAC and the IPHC inspired perhaps by their differing aims and political motivations.

(vii) Another factor that should be borne in mind is that hunger strikes are not the emotional issue in Britain that they are in Ireland. In addition, almost all the news editors of the national dailies, who decide what is in effect to appear in their papers, are extremely pro-army and would have absolutely no sympathy for the members of an organisation which was conducting a guerilla war against it. The JAC obviously realize this and are trying to operate through junior reporters- even in the case of the London offices of Irish papers.

It would appear, therefore, that the campaign on behalf of the hunger strikers, while it is bound to continue, is unlikely to generate extensive publicity unless some new development arises such as genuine proof that the condition of the hunger strikers has seriously deteriorated or that they have been ill-treated in prison. Another publicity seeking proposal that has been mooted recently is the Dolours Price should be a candidate for a NI seat in the forthcoming Westminster election.

It is also of interest that [REDACTED] mentioned to Mr Gallagher on the 10th February that he had written to Robert Carr some weeks ago about the hunger strike and had received a reply saying a transfer to N.I. would not be in the national interest.

Martin Burke

12th February, 1974.