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1. The origin of this latest hunger strike as with the earlier strike which ended on 18/19 December 1970 lie in the decision taken by the British Government in November 1975 to phase out special category status. This meant that all persons convicted for offences after 1 March, 1976 were to be subject to the ordinary prison regime. In September, 1976 the first prisoners sentenced for offences committed after 1 March, 1976 refused to work or to wear prison clothing (the blanket protest). In March, 1978 the protest was escalated to include fouling of cells and destruction of cell furniture (the dirty protest).

2. The British Government made several attempts to improve conditions in Long Kesh, while remaining firm on the question of special category status. In March 1980, they agreed to the wearing by prisoners, for recreational purposes, of regulation PT vests, shorts and plimsolls, and there was some alleviation of the conditions relating to visits and letters. In August, further concessions on compassionate leave, recreation and association were granted. In October, it was announced that the requirement to wear prison uniform would be abolished and civilian type clothing would be substituted.

3. Despite these improvements in conditions in Long Kesh, Republican prisoners went on hunger strike on 27 October, 1980 in support of five demands namely the 'right

- (i) to wear own clothes
- (ii) to refrain from prison work
- (iii) to associate freely
- (iv) to organise recreational facilities and to have one letter, visit and parcel per week and
- (v) to have lost remission fully restored.

4. On 18/19 December, 1980 the hunger strike ended when the British authorities sent into Long Kesh and Armagh a statement of what would happen when the protests ended and a detailed description of the Northern Ireland prison regime.

A statement from the leader of the Republican prisoners, Bobby Sands, claimed that the Government documents met the requirements of their five basic demands. The British Government emphasised that the hunger strike had not achieved its objective i.e. political status, and expressed the hope that the knowledge of what would happen when the protests ended would lead all the prisoners to stop their "blanket" and "dirty" protests.

5. Between the period 18 December and 29 January while there were grounds for hoping for a successful conclusion to the H-Block problem a large number of prisoners were nonetheless not prepared to conform with prison rules. In these circumstances another statement was issued by the British authorities on 9 January saying that in a further attempt to implement the regime described in the statement of 18 December a group of these prisoners would be moved to clean and furnished cells. On 12 January 22 prisoners were moved into clean furnished cells and when these cells were not fouled furniture was provided for the remaining prisoners in the same wing on 13 January. On 15 January a further group of prisoners was moved into clean furnished cells making 96 the total number of 'former' protestors occupying the clean furnished cells. On 21 January all protesting prisoners were told that the procedure for further moves into clean cells would be that in the first instance the cells would be unfurnished but, if by the day after they moved in, the cells remained clean and prisoners had slopped out, furniture would be supplied.

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6. The 96 prisoners who had been given clean and furnished cells nonetheless continued their protest by refusing to wash, shave, wear prison clothing or to undertake work. All clothing which was supplied for these prisoners by their relatives on 23 January was accepted by the prison authorities but was not passed on to the protestors. The British authorities maintained that where an individual protesting prisoner said that he wished to conform having washed, shaved and had a hair cut, he would be given a set of prison issue civilian clothing, moved from his cell to a new wing containing other conforming prisoners, medically examined for fitness to work and, if fit, allocated to given work. As a conforming prisoner the British said he would then qualify for privileges including, of course, that of wearing his own leisure clothing of the approved type.

7. In a development on 23 January the prisoners who had deescalated their action to a clean protest in furnished cells indicated that they wished to be regarded as "non-protesting prisoners" and that in consequence

- (1) they wanted to wash, shave and have a hair cut
- (2) they would keep their own cells clean
- (3) they would go to reception to be photographed in their new clean state
- (4) they did not want to be moved (as would be the normal practice for those leaving the protest) to a new wing for conforming prisoners.
- (5) they would undertake full time education
- (6) they would not undertake the full range of prison work and
- (7) they would expect once cleaned up to be issued both with prison civilian clothing and their own leisure clothing.

8. The timing of this request was seen as significant because it was made immediately before the weekend when own clothing was permitted. The prison Governor, after consulting higher authorities, replied that the prisoners were free to wash and shave, but that own clothing was a privilege reserved for conforming prisoners. They would not be given own clothing unless they were prepared to work as directed and to wear prison issue clothing during work period. Furthermore if they conformed they would be moved to a block with other conforming prisoners. The British Authorities maintained that the prisoners were trying to put them in a position where either the Authorities granted a point which the protestors could claim as a concession of principle or the Authorities took a stand on a point which the protestors would represent as a minor one.

9. Somewhat to the surprise of prison authorities despite the rebuff the prisoners went ahead with washing and shaving although hair cuts could not be arranged immediately. However on the 27 January the 96 prisoners destroyed furniture and fittings in their new cells and broke the windows. On 29 January the 96 prisoners refused to slop out and began again to smear the walls of their cells. They maintained that the authorities had pushed them into this action by placing them first in dirty cells when they smashed their cell furniture and windows and secondly by the refusal of the authorities to give them their own clothing unless they promised to conform to prison regulations. The British authorities maintained that the group was placed in dirty cells immediately after the furniture and windows smashing episode only because these were the nearest empty cells and that they were all moved into clean cells on the Wednesday morning. The process of a return to normality was over and the level of protest returned to the pre-hunger strike situation with some 401 men in Long Kesh and 29 women in Armagh involved again in the "dirty" protest.

10. On 5 February 1981, it was announced that a second hunger strike by Republican prisoners in Long Kesh would begin on 1 March, 1981. In support of that decision the prisoners maintain that Britain reneged on the agreement of 18 December, 1980 which ended the last hunger strike and which they claim conceded the substance of the prisoners five demands.

11. On 1 March 1981 Bobby Sands refused food and declared himself to be on hunger strike. A statement by the prisoners said the action was being taken in support of their demand for political status. Mr. Sands was joined on hunger strike by Francis Hughes on 15 March and by Patsy O'Hara and Raymond Mc Creesh on 22 March.

12. On 2 March the Republican prisoners still taking part in the "dirty" protest at Long Kesh and Armagh - 439 in all - let it be known that they intended to stop fouling their cells. The prisoners indicated that their action was being taken in support of demands for changes in the prison regime which would give effect to their demand for political status. These prisoners have now been moved to clean cells and provided with clean bedding.

13. The four prisoners at present on hunger strike are:-

- (i) Robert Gerard Sands (Aged 29), serving 2 sentences of 14 years and 10 years for possession of firearms and ammunition with intent and in suspicious circumstances;
- (ii) Francis Joseph Sean Hughes (Aged 27) serving 6 concurrent sentences including a life sentence for murder and 20 years for causing an explosion;
- (iii) Raymond Peter Mc Creesh (Aged 24) serving 5 concurrent sentences including a sentence of 14 years for attempted murder and one of 10 years for conspiracy to murder;
- (iv) Joseph Patrick O'Hara (Aged 24) serving 1 sentence of 8 years for possession of a hand grenade.

14. On 10 April Bobby Sands was elected Westminster M.P. for the Fermanagh-South Tyrone constituency in a bye-election. Mr. Sands was elected by 30492 votes to 29046 obtained by his rival Official Unionist candidate Mr. Harry West i.e. a majority of 1446.

15. On 20 April 1981, Miss Sile De Valera, T.D. M.E.P., Mr. Neil Blaney, T.D., M.E.P. and Dr. John O'Connell, T.D., M.E.P. visited Bobby Sands in Long Kesh prison hospital at his request. After the meeting the three Deputies requested a meeting with the British Prime Minister or her Deputy. This request was rejected by the British Prime Minister. On 22 April the Minister for Foreign Affairs met the three Deputies and undertook to convey the report of their visit to Long Kesh to the Government for their information.

16. British Government Policy on the hunger strike:

The British authorities issued a comprehensive statement of policy on 24 October 1980 in advance of the first hunger strike in which they stated that they:-

"will not and cannot make any concessions whatever on the principle of political status for prisoners who claim a political motive for their crimes" (statement of 24/10/80).

In a statement in the House of Commons on 5 February, 1981 (the day on which the present hunger strike was announced) the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said:-

"The principles by which the Government have stood in the face of the protests at the Maze and Armagh prisons still stand. They will not concede that they should now establish within the normal Northern Ireland prison regime a special set of conditions for particular groups of prisoners. They will not surrender control of what goes on in the prisons to a particular group of prisoners. They will not concede the demand for political status or recognise that murder and violence are less culpable because they are claimed to be committed for political motives."

This policy was reiterated in the House of Commons by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on 3 March, 1981. In a BBC interview on 21 April, 1981 the Secretary of State for N.I. said:-

"The five demands amount to political status and we have repeatedly stated that we do not recognise that political motives for a crime entitled people to be treated differently from people who commit crime for other motives".

The British Prime Minister in an interview on 21 April 1981 while on a visit to Saudi Arabia said:-

"We are not prepared to consider special category status for certain groups of people serving sentences for crime. Crime is crime; it is not political".

17. Irish Government Policy on the hunger strike.

In reply to a PQ on 25 November, 1980 about the hunger-strike which ended on 18/19 December, 1980 the Taoiseach stated:-

"The Government believe that if some adjustments could be made in the prison rules themselves or in their interpretation or their application a solution would be possible.

"The Government do not believe that political status should be an issue..... an acceptable solution can be brought forward without the sacrifice of any principles which might be regarded as being involved.

"..... there is an obligation on authorities everywhere to ensure that within the constraints imposed by security needs prison conditions are as humane and tolerable as it is possible to make them".

In an RTE interview on 12 April, 1981 the Taoiseach said:-

"The solution to the H-Block situation can be found within the prison regulations and within the administration of the prison itself".

"We are ready and willing to take any measures open to us to bring about a resolution of the situation to try and solve the problem on humanitarian grounds".