

A HISTORY OF ARMAGH JAIL

The women's prison in the North of Ireland is situated in the centre of the Protestant/Loyalist city of Armagh. It was built in the 19th century, a huge granite building which today sports all the trappings of a high-security jail such as barbed wire, guards, arc-lamps, and closed circuit television cameras.

Before the '70s it was hardly heard of — the jail which served as hostel/prison/drying-out institution for women criminalised for the usual survival crimes such as theft, alcoholism and prostitution. Few prisoners were in the jail. In fact, in 1969 the total was 8.

Armagh Jail hit the headlines in 1970 when Bernadette Devlin MP was sentenced to six months for leading the people of the Bogside in Derry against the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC: Northern Ireland police). She was no criminal, nor was she termed one. She carried out her constituency work from her 11' by 8' cell.

A mandatory sentence of six months in jail for anyone whom a policeman said had been rioting brought a handful of political prisoners to Armagh. They were allowed two letters per month, one visit per week and no touching of visitors was allowed.

Although the Civil Rights Movement had been widely supported internationally and propaganda proclaimed that the British Army was in Northern Ireland to protect Catholics from a bigoted anti-Catholic police force, Catholics—who were perceived as potential Irish nationalists by the Unionists—were gradually being transformed by the propaganda machine into 'the baddies'. When internment was introduced on August 9, 1971, the British government locked up hundreds of actual and potential political opponents without any crimes having been proven or even claimed to have been committed.

Tens of thousands marched in opposition to this policy in Ireland and in Britain. But the shooting dead of 14 unarmed people without any provocation on Bloody Sunday spelt out clearly that in Northern Ireland mass political peaceful and even pacifist protest by those supporting nothing more than equal civil rights for Catholics would not be tolerated by the British government.

Internment and particularly Bloody Sunday convinced many young people that the British government had no intention of listening to anyone who could not force them to listen. Armed raids on the Catholic ghettos continued and as one woman described it: 'anyone who could walk on two legs was making petrol bombs'. Not surprisingly, women began to be sentenced to long terms of imprisonment.

Special Category Status was won in 1973 due to hunger strikes by two male political prisoners in the Crumlin Road jail. Special Category Status meant that all political prisoners could now wear their own clothing, associate freely, receive food parcels and visits every week, organise their own recreation and education and obtain 50% remission of sentence.

In Armagh, Special Category Status allowed women the chance to take education and examinations. CSE and



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RSA exams were sat and classes in Irish, maths, geography, dressmaking, art, music, physical education and handicrafts were held. The prisoners could walk freely from one side of the prison to the other. There was a kitchen on the wing, and with twice-weekly food parcels (if relatives could afford them), the demoralising prison food was supplemented. As one political prisoner was later to say, 'It wasn't a holiday camp but at least you didn't feel like you were dying from the neck up.'

There were over 1,600 political prisoners in the Northern Ireland jails and this fact was becoming a severe embarrassment to the British government. Attempts were underway to abolish Special Category Status. While the men set fire to parts of Long Kesh, the women in Armagh held a successful blockade of prison officers until Merlyn Rees, the then British secretary of state for Northern Ireland, gave an assurance that status would not be tampered with. That assurance was to prove meaningless.

With the removal of Special Category Status, the Labour government began the process of 'criminalisation' in 1976. All prisoners convicted of offences committed after March 1 of that year were denied political status and classified 'criminals'. The prisoners were now expected to do prison work. In Long Kesh, criminalisation also meant that

male prisoners had to wear prison uniform. In September, Kieran Nugent refused to wear prison uniform and began the blanket protest. The women in Armagh refused to do prison work. The protesting prisoners in Armagh and Long Kesh had begun a struggle for the recognition of their political status which was to end in the deaths of the hunger strikers five years later.

The policy of criminalisation was part of a new three-pronged strategy. The other two aspects were Ulsterisation and Normalisation. Normalisation was the pretence that the contradiction between the demands of the Civil Rights Movement and the intransigent bigotry of the loyalists had been resolved. In order to make Northern Ireland appear to be more like a Western-type Liberal Democracy, the other two strategies were needed.

Because having 25,000 British soldiers in Ireland made the situation look more like war than peace-keeping, the government set up the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) who would replace some of the British soldiers. The fact that this force was composed of some of the most bigoted, anti-Catholic individuals in Northern Ireland did not appear to cause any great concern at Westminster.

The fact that they are security personnel enables members of the UDR to take advantage of surveillance to gain

the necessary knowledge to carry out sectarian assassinations; eg in 1983 a I.R.S.P. member was shot dead returning from the dole office on the first day that he had attended at a new time. In this case and many others, there was inside information. At present, 10 UDR members are awaiting trial for murders of Catholics, some of which were initially claimed by the Protestant Action Force. In addition to setting up the UDR, provision was made for the numbers of RUC (police) to be increased.

Normalisation also meant that the trappings of democracy had to appear to be present. A large number of political prisoners would seem inconsistent with democracy, so the hitherto recognised Special Category Status was removed, and to the outside world, Northern Ireland appeared to undergo an 800% increase in 'crime rate' in the space of seven years! Internment was gone and people were to be processed through the courts. But the trials were to be held in non-jury courts, following up to 7 days' interrogation. There were to be special 'scheduled' offences which were to carry especially long, mandatory sentences. People could be arrested without charge and uncorroborated evidence was to be accepted by the court as sufficient proof of guilt.

The only trouble for the British government was that the prisoners refused

to accept the status of 'common criminals'. As the numbers of those convicted under the Diplock (non-jury court) system increased, so too did the number of relatives of prisoners who were becoming aware that anyone who was unfortunate enough to get arrested on the whim of the security forces had little hope of jumping off the conveyor belt which would eventually drop her or him into prison.

1976 saw the formation of the Relatives Action Committees. They were mainly women relatives of political prisoners who, finding the added financial strain of visits and food parcels and the deteriorating situation in the jails going unnoticed, got together to draw attention to what was happening. The committees worked hard and long, raising money, spreading information and touring Europe, America and Britain raising support for the prisoners. They were later to form the backbone of the H-Block/Armagh committees which mushroomed during the hunger strikes.

Women Against Imperialism, believing that feminists could no longer pretend neutrality on the national question, had broken away from the Belfast Women's Collective. They marked the linking of the struggles for women's liberation and national liberation by picketing Armagh Jail on International Women's Day 1979.

In May 1978, following disturbances among remand prisoners, a squad of male prison officers in riot gear had locked the women in the cells for a number of weeks. The picket in 1979 was attended by about 50 people. When the picket had ended and people were about to leave, the RUC charged the crowd. Eleven women eventually stood trial on charges arising out of the picket. All were fined but two opted to serve prison sentences rather than acknowledge criminality.

A tribunal exposing the conditions in Armagh and publicising the charges against those arrested on the picket was held. The tribunal heard disturbing

facts about the conditions of the protesting women. A woman who should have been on an ulcer diet was being treated instead with valium. Another, who eventually had to be hospitalised, was told that the pains in her stomach existed only in her imagination. Meanwhile, Pauline McLoughlin, a woman who was so ill that she vomited constantly and was rapidly losing weight, was not getting adequate care.

On February 7, 1980, there was what can only be described as mass assaults by male and female prison officers on the women in B wing, Armagh. The resultant bruises and swellings were noted by the prison chaplain, Fr Raymond Murray, and by Bishop Edward Daly who visited the jail on February 13.

The details have been documented in both 'On The Blanket' by Tim Pat Coogan and 'The Armagh Women' by Nell McCafferty. Male warders remained on the wing for three days during which time the women were not allowed access to the toilets. They began to empty their excreta out of the spyholes and windows. When these were blocked up, they smeared it on the walls. The women were offered a return to normality if they would cease the no-work protest for political status. This they refused to do. As their own excrement was almost the only part of their lives over which they could exercise control, they used it as another form of protesting the political nature of their imprisonment.

In March, on the anniversary of their previous picket in 1979, Women Against Imperialism called a mass demonstration. Feminists travelled from the Republic of Ireland, from England, Scotland, Wales and elsewhere to support the prisoners' claim for political status and to assert the right of Women Against Imperialism to picket their local jail on International Women's Day. The pickets are now an annual event.

Protesting POWs in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh began a hunger strike for political status in October. On December 1, they were joined by three Republican women prisoners in Ar-



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Mourners at Bobby Sands' funeral, May 1981