

HUNGER STRIKE

Yesterday I was sick again while the tube was still down. The doctor doing it would not take his hand away from my mouth and I thought that I was choking in my own vomit. It was horrible. However when I related what happened to the Doctor he said and I quote, 'Yes, quite, don't puke and you won't choke.' The very same thing happened today but I managed to shake my head free and puke into a basin.

Marian Price wrote the above letter to her mother on New Year's Day 1974 to describe the torture of force feeding inflicted on her by prison employees on the orders of the British government. Her elder sister Dolours suffered in the same way while they were held in Brixton's men's prison. Their comrades Hugh Feeney and Gerry Kelly in Gartree and Wormwood Scrubs were equally brutally treated. The two boys, as well as being force fed, were kept

totally naked in their cells in solitary confinement as a punishment for their refusal to wear prison uniform. The torture of force feeding lasted 166 days.

Students of Irish history over the last 800 years have noted many constant trends in each epoch of Ireland's subjection. The most frequent is undoubtedly the vicious treatment meted out to the Irish by the British ruling classes. Study of the present situation in the Six Counties shows that even in

the 1970s this has not changed. The nationalist population have seen their fathers and sons, their mothers and daughters kidnapped and interned in concentration camps. Hundreds have been shot in their own streets by British agents and their hired assassins.

On 15th November 1973 nine young people from working class areas of Belfast were sentenced at Winchester Crown Court to life imprisonment for 'conspiring to cause explosions' in



Michael Gaughan



Frank Stagg



Gerald Kelly

London. (The trial had been shifted to Winchester, despite defence protests, to guarantee a conviction). Eight of these prisoners: Dolours and Marian Price, Gerry Kelly, Hugh Feeney, William Armstrong, Paul Holmes, Roy Walsh and Martin Brady immediately went on hunger strike in support of their demand to be given political status and a transfer to the Six Counties. By the end of November, four of them had been tortured into giving up. The hunger strike by the four who were left, later joined by Frank Stagg, Michael Gaughan and briefly Paul Holmes lasted long enough to cause a sluggish stirring of conscience even in the long redundant British liberal mind.

Michael Gaughan's murder by the process of force feeding was the most striking illustration that British brutality would not be confined to the Six Counties. The recent torture of men charged with causing explosions in Birmingham has underlined this fact. The long hunger strike also illustrated that the British government is quite willing to resort to censorship and manipulation of the press as well as of independent professional bodies. For a long while the Home Office was nothing but a mouthpiece for distorted propaganda which purported to be the sole source of information on the condition of the prisoners. The actual demands from the hunger strikers were:

1. A return to Ireland to serve their sentences under the same special category conditions as their comrades jailed over there.
2. Full political status while they were in England, including the right to wear their own clothes and receive unlimited letters.
3. An open visit every week.
4. That they be all held together in one prison.



Marion Price

5. That they be exempted from prison work.

The Prisoners Aid Committee has consistently campaigned for political status for all Irish prisoners subjected to a British political show trial and for the right of all prisoners who wish to do so to serve their sentences in Ireland, especially if this will bring them closer to their families. The demand for a transfer was not a precedent as the course of the campaign revealed that many transfers between Ireland and England had been ordered by the British authorities since 1969, but mainly of soldiers or Loyalists. For the Joint Action Committee, waging a campaign with the full support of the prisoners' families, the daily courage of the prisoners was a great inspiration.

Torture

Day in and day out the four, Dolours and Marian Price, Gerry Kelly and Hugh Feeney, suffered the humiliation of being held down by prison warders, having their mouths wrenched open by a wooden clamp, a plastic tube thrust down their throats into their stomachs. The thick mixture which was poured into the tube frequently made the prisoners vomit but even their own vomit was poured back down their throats. Despite the virtual news black out in the British press, it was apparent by early 1974 that the prisoners were in poor physical condition. Claire Price said the girls were 'unrecognisable'. It was also clear that they were not going to give up or give in. The British government had a tough problem on its hands. Force feeding had failed to end the hunger strike and was causing uneasiness in many circles not renowned for their concern for the Belfast working class.

Ridiculous efforts had been made to



Hugh Feeney

discredit the four. These included the Vermeer art theft, the alleged finding by the Army in the Six Counties of a plan of Armagh prison which could not be revealed for 'security reasons' and idiotic efforts by the Home Office to suggest that the girls were only dieting. The two boys were denied visits from their families except for two occasions, one under the Tories and one under Labour. Visits by dignitaries like Lord Longford and Lord Brockway were however allowed for some reason. Even two Tory MPs who saw the girls, Derek Coombs and Dr Stuttaford, demanded that they should be moved to Ireland and expressed concern at the long term effects of force feeding. Things were not all going the government's way.

Labour

The Labour government of February 1974 inherited the problem of the Tory Home Secretary, Robert Carr. Those who naively expected Roy Jenkins to be more 'liberal' than his predecessor were quickly disillusioned. While Carr had admitted that force feeding was 'horrible', Jenkins sought to justify it purely on medical grounds pretending that the prison doctors were not in his employ. This was at a time when a picket was being mounted by doctors on the British Medical Association for its silence.

Not until after force feeding had ended did the true politics of the situation come clear when Jenkins instructed his minions in the prison medical service not to force feed prisoners who were sane and the BMA passed a resolution saying that it was up to each individual doctor to decide on the ethical issue of force feeding. These two simple events were a clear proof that until then prison doctors had force



Dolours Price

fed on the instruction of the Home Secretary.

Throughout the spring and into the early summer Roy Jenkins continued to play dice with the lives of the prisoners; gambling with their lives and health to get the government off the hook. On 31 March the hunger strike spread to the Isle of Wight where Frank Stagg and Michael Gaughan, joined for a short while by Paul Holmes who was later persuaded by the other two to give up because of his poor health, began to refuse food. The brutality of the method of force feeding used on Stagg and Gaughan illustrate quite clearly that the prison regarded it as a punitive rather than a medical procedure.

Murder

Michael Gaughan was finally murdered on 3 June after 66 days on hunger strike. The Labour Home Office had moved him from one prison to another on the Isle of Wight but had not agreed to his being moved to a prison in the Six Counties or even to the mainland to be nearer to his family. It was revealed at his inquest that at the time of his death his throat and mouth had been badly cut and some of his lower teeth had been knocked out. His weight loss had not been great and could not therefore have been the cause of death which was conveniently put down as pneumonia. The coroner, who refused to allow counsel for Gaughan's family to cross-examine prison doctors, said he thought that the damage to the wall of his lungs was caused by the force feeding tube. These facts speak for themselves. Even the 'doctor' who had attended him commented on Michael Gaughan's courage.

On 1st June, only two days before Michael Gaughan's death exposed the myth of the safety of force feeding and the complacent lies of the Home Office about the deteriorating condition of the prisoners, Jenkins made a vicious attack on the Price family. He accused them of 'urging on' the girls as though they were anxious to see them die. Jenkins did not explain who was 'urging on' the two boys who were not being allowed family visits. This was the stuff which the British gutter press lapped up and Jenkins was certainly playing to the gutter.

With the actual death of one of the prisoners, Jenkins was now in a tricky position and this was worsened with the refusal by doctors at Brixton to continue forcefeeding the girls after nearly killing Marian. Jenkins however had set himself up an escape clause in his seemingly entrenched refusal to transfer the hunger strikers. Three 'mediators', Jock Stallard, Fenner Brockway and Paddy Devlin, had been visiting the prisoners to find a 'compromise' solution. These visits were stepped up, and on 6th June the girls were informed by these three that Jenkins had agreed to move them home before the end of the year.

In the same week the Home Office

put out a false statement that Hugh Feeney had ended his hunger strike hoping to trick the others into giving up. Gartree prison announced that he had eaten a meal which in fact he had eaten after 200 days without food would have killed him. They were forced however to withdraw this lie. It was the last feeble gesture in the propaganda campaign by the Home Office against the prisoners. A telephone call between all four prisoners led to them accepting the assurance of the Home Secretary that they would be moved and that in the meantime they would be allowed to write as many letters as they wanted and wear their own clothes.

The Home Office had been beaten, but going against vaunted British tenets of 'fair play' they still had a few dirty tricks up their sleeves. In the course of a statement in the Commons, Jenkins said that they would be sent home 'subject to security conditions'. The prisoners were told by the mediators that this had been said for political purposes only and that it was not part of the agreement with them—indeed how could it be as the prisoners were in no position to control security conditions either in England or Ireland?

Delay

A sporadic bombing campaign in England, despite large periods of time when Jenkins could perfectly well have moved them, provided Jenkins with an excuse for delaying. In November, following the Birmingham bombs which had of course nothing to do with them, Jenkins not only made a vicious attack on the basic human rights of all the Irish in Britain, but took punitive action against the helpless prisoners by announcing that he would not be moving them in the near future and by moving the girls, whose mother was seriously ill and soon to die without having seen them since June to the remote 'special women's prison' wing in Durham where they were in fact the only long term inmates.

The capitalist press was overjoyed by the actions of this Labour Home Secretary who had proved himself so worthy of the mantle of generations of perfidious colonialist administrators. He had even begun to rival Ernley Blackwell, chief legal adviser to the Home Office who masterminded the circulation of the Diaries which ensured Casement's death and who censored his last letters to his family because they contravened 'Defence Regulations'.

It was only in the Spring of 1975 that the girls were eventually moved to Armagh prison, having been callously refused permission to attend their mother's funeral. One month later, four months after the expiry of Jenkins' 'by the end of the year' deadline, the two boys were moved to Long Kesh.

Frank Stagg however was moved to Wakefield prison where he was held in solitary confinement in a seriously

weakened condition following a second hunger strike which was in protest as humiliating treatment being meted out to him and his visitors at Long Lartin prison. Amazingly, despite the fact that he had ended his strike, that he was seriously ill and that the Association for Legal Justice had announced the intention of having the issue of his treatment heard before the European Court, he was brutally force fed at Wakefield because he refused to drink milk. He was then physically assaulted to make him submit to a medical examination.

Victory

The return of Dolours and Marian Price, Gerry Kelly and Hugh Feeney to prisons in the Six Counties is the first clear cut victory for Irish political prisoners held in Britain and they had the support not only of other Irish prisoners but also of many English prisoners in their battle with the British government—a battle which they fought and won with only one weapon, their bodies. Despite the decision of the Labour government to break their word and to continue holding them as hostages, their eventual transfer which was accompanied by compensatory transfers of Loyalist prisoners had been won not only by their physical suffering but by the moral integrity which had given them the courage to bear that suffering. This capacity obviously made them incomprehensible to gross moral compromisers like Jenkins. Their victory has not yet helped other prisoners who should be in the Six Counties.

Of those convicted with them, many have relatives who face immense journeys to visit them. William Armstrong, for example, has five children and while the ultimate aim of any campaign on behalf of Irish political prisoners must be their release a short term aim must also be to have them moved close to their families and into prisons where they are amongst their comrades and not isolated and scattered as at present throughout dozens of top security prisons. The savage torture of Irish prisoners in Winson Green should be a warning to us of the dangers they face at the hands of British fascists in fancy dress.

The story of the hunger strikers exposes the peculiar combination of brutality and hypocrisy which the British ruling classes have developed as their favourite method for dealing with the 'natives'. They of course express horror and surprise when the same treatment is meted out to them by erstwhile colonial puppets like Idi Amin. The hunger strikers also showed that this sadistic treachery collapses in the face of a courageous and determined opposition, corrupted as it is from within by centuries of guilt.

This is a lesson which the working class of both England and Ireland can learn; those who have justice on their side will always be stronger than those who fall back on the hypocrisies of a rotting and corrupted class rule.