

THE 1981 HUNGER STRIKE – PART ONE

Background - The process which led up to the Hunger Strikes began in 1976. As part of the policy of Ulsterization and criminalisation, the British government ended its previous policy of giving Special Category Status to paramilitary prisoners in Northern Ireland prisons. Special Category Status meant prisoners were treated like prisoners of war; for example, they did not have to wear prison uniforms or do prison work. The end to Special Category Status was a serious threat to the authority which the paramilitary leaderships inside prison had been able to exercise over their own men.

IRA and INLA prisoners began the “blanket protest” in which prisoners would refuse to wear prison uniforms and either went naked or fashioned garments from prison blankets. In 1978, after a number of attacks on prisoners leaving their cells to “slop out” (i.e. empty their chamber pots), this escalated into the “dirty protest,” where prisoners who were not granted political status refused to wash and smeared the walls of their cells with excrement. These protests aimed to re-establish their privileges by securing what were known as the “Five Demands”:

- 1. The right not to wear a prison uniform;**
- 2. The right not to do prison work;**
- 3. The right of free association with other prisoners;**
- 4. The right to organize their own educational and recreational facilities; and**
- 5. The right to one visit, one letter and one parcel per week.**

1980 Hunger Strike - In October, 1980, seven republican prisoners in Long Kesh began a hunger strike. After a few weeks, they were followed by three prisoners in Armagh’s Women’s Prison, and then a short-lived hunger strike by several dozen more prisoners in Long Kesh. A number of unionist prisoners also started their own hunger strike after a few weeks, but they were accused of opportunism, attempting to win concessions on the backs of republicans without risking death or serious damage to their health. (No unionists or Armagh women took part in the 1981 hunger strike.) In a war of nerves between the IRA leadership and the British government, with one prisoner close to death, the British government appeared to concede the prisoners' right to wear their own clothes. The hunger strike was called off in December, 1980, before any prisoners died.

1981 Hunger Strike - After a few weeks, it emerged that the British government was simply intending to give the prisoners the right to wear civilian-style clothing supplied by the prison, and had duped the hunger-strikers in the belief that no new hunger-strike would occur. On March 1, 1981, a second hunger strike began, with Bobby Sands being the first to refuse food. The political atmosphere outside the prisons became electric all over Ireland with widespread rioting in nationalist areas of Northern Ireland.

Shortly after the beginning of the strike, the independent Irish republican MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone died and precipitated a high profile election. Sands was nominated as an Anti H-Block candidate, and was elected to the House of Commons on April 9, 1981 with 30,492 votes to 29,046 for the Ulster Unionist Party candidate Harry West!

Three weeks later, on May 5, 1981, Bobby Sands died from starvation in the prison hospital. The announcement of his death prompted several days of riots in nationalist areas of Northern Ireland. Over 100,000 people lined the route of his funeral. Francis Hughes died a few days later on May 12, 1981. Raymond McCreech and Patsy O'Hara both died on May 21, 1981. After each of the hunger striker's death, another republican would join the protest in the dead man's place. The second "series" of hunger strike replacements soon started to die in July and August. Their names were Joe McDonnell, Martin Hurson, Kevin Lynch, Kieran Doherty, Tom McElwee and Mickey Devine, the last hunger striker, died on August 20, 1981.

The republican prisoners explained that they were not trying to take over the prison, and they believed the British should accept their demands because they were not asking for anything unreasonable. To show that they were flexible, the prisoners said they would be willing to do maintenance work and cleaning tasks in their own wings, which was a change from their stance in the past. However, they re-emphasized their demand for self-education, which would give them a right to choose what and how they would be taught. They wanted to learn the Irish language to retain their old cultural traditions. In the past, prisoners taught each other the language by shouting it up and down the wings of their cells. They wanted simply to conduct these classes in a more traditional and acceptable manner.

In late summer, the hunger strike began to break, thanks in large part to the actions of the radical Catholic priest, Fr. Dennis Faul, who intervened with hunger strikers' families after they had lost consciousness to urge them to give consent to the prison authorities for their relatives to be fed by drip. The first prisoner whose family intervened was Paddy Quinn. After this happened with a number of other prisoners, on October 3, 1981, the IRA and INLA called off the hunger strike.

Next month: The Consequences of the 1981 Hunger Strike

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See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1981_Irish_Hunger_Strike
<http://larkspirit/hungerstrikes>
www.irishhungerstrike.com

**EVENT TO COMMEMORATE THE 25th ANNIVERSARY
OF THE 1981 HUNGER STRIKE**

The Philadelphia Irish-American community will commemorate the 25th anniversary of the 1981 hunger strike.

An educational exhibit will feature individual displays about each of the hunger strikers featuring historical memorabilia, biographies, photographs, and documents. The exhibit hall will also feature continuously running political documentaries and a history of hunger strikes in Ireland throughout the 20th Century. A memorial Mass will be followed by a buffet dinner and music by several Irish bands.

Location: Philadelphia Irish Center, Carpenter Lane and Emlen St.

Date: Saturday, June 3, 2006

Time: 7:00 P.M.

Tickets: \$25.00

