

The Irish Prisoner Hunger Strike: Interview with Pat Sheehan



“[Taped] in the summer of 2010, this video contains a discussion by former Irish Republican Army prisoner of war and Hunger Striker Pat Sheehan. Sheehan talks about the strike that captured worldwide attention and solidarity, and situates it in the broader context of the national liberation struggle in the North of Ireland.”

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My beliefs are exactly the same now as they were when I was fighting in the IRA on active service, and when I was on hunger strike in the prisons. My beliefs are no different.

Britain has no right to be in Ireland. It has no right. It has no political right, it has no moral right, it has no economic right - it has no right whatsoever to be in this country. Britain colonized Ireland, it conquered Ireland, and it oppressed the people since that time over 800 years ago. And Britain should get up and leave, and leave the governance of Ireland to the people of Ireland.

We took the decision to go on hunger strike after many discussions and after feeling that we had exhausted every other avenue to resolve the prison issue. And just to give you some sort of historical context about how the hunger strike came about: Although there has been 800 years of resistance to British rule, you know, intermittently it has died down and has become quiet – but when the state attacked the Civil Rights marchers in the late 1960s and 70s it reenergized the IRA and communities here were being attacked and the IRA had to rearm itself to defend communities. And so you had an eruption of conflict on the streets here in Belfast. In particular Belfast and Derry were the main places where the conflict erupted. And as a result of that many people ended up in prison.

It has always been the case that when IRA prisoners are in jail they want to organize their own lives and have their own structures. So in 1972 there was a hunger strike, and the demand was to be recognized as political prisoners, and to have political status. And what it meant was that people who were in prison as a result of the conflict could wear their own clothes and organize their own lives. They were all moved from Belfast Crumlin Road Prison up to Long Kesh, which was a hastily built prison. And it was very basic – it had sort of, you know, the half-circular huts that you would see in the old prisoner of war movies, you know, Second World War prisoner of war movies. You just had cages with wire and four huts in a cage.

In any event, Republicans had got their demand of being recognized as political prisoners. However, almost as soon as the British conceded that, they then developed a new strategy to try to defeat the IRA. And it was a three-pronged strategy: it was “Ulsterisation”, normalization, and criminalization.

Now, “Ulsterisation” basically meant – it was the same strategy that’s used by colonial powers all over the place; the Americans used it in Vietnam. It’s bad publicity for governments when their own troops are being killed in countries abroad, particularly when the people don’t really care that much about the war or don’t understand it, but they see their own troops being killed. They tried to replace – withdraw the British army from the front line – and replace them with locally recruited members of the Ulster Defence Regiment, and the RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary], which was the police force. Basically it was a paramilitary organization, a military organization. They drove around in armored cars, they had heavy machine guns and weaponry like that, and they were trained along military lines.

The second prong of their strategy was normalization. They tried to put a ring of steel around the ghettos, where the conflict was at its most intense, and also to put a ring of steel around town centers to give the appearance that life was carrying on as normal.

The third prong of their strategy was criminalization. What they believed was that if they could criminalize the conflict here, and particularly the prisoners, it would have such a demoralizing effect on the outside among the IRA that it would eventually lead to the defeat of the IRA – and the defeat of the struggle in general.

Now, part of the difficulty they had was that they had political prisoners in the prisons. So they tried to end it, and they just brought in an arbitrary date of the 1st of March 1976, and said that anyone sentenced through the courts – and remember the courts were non-jury courts, and they had already built special interrogation centers. People were being tortured, were being forced to say incriminating statements, and then sentenced to very, very long periods in prison. What the British said was that anyone sentenced through the courts after the 1st of March, 1976 would be treated the same. Everyone would be treated the same, and you would have to wear a prison uniform, and do prison work. You would be integrated with Loyalist prisoners, and any other type of prisoner. And we resisted that.

The first man sentenced under the new regime was a man called Kieran Nugent. When he was sentenced and brought to Long Kesh, the newly built “H-blocks”, he was given a prison uniform and he said, “If you want me to wear that, you’re going to have to nail it to my back”. And that was how the blanket protests started, because he was then thrown into a cell, and given a blanket to wear around – we had no clothes at all.

So and as time went on, more and more people joined the blanket protest, and the numbers increased. The brutality of the regime increased, as they saw the numbers growing and they wanted to try and break the protest. We believe they were given a carte blanche by the British government to use whatever tactics they thought necessary to try and break the protest. But as the regime got more brittle, our resolve got stronger, we intensified our protest and eventually

we reached a stage where we felt that a hunger strike was the only weapon we had left and we decided to go on hunger strike.

Remember, we were locked in our cells 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. We had no toilets in the cell, apart from a pot, right? And if we needed to go to the toilet we either had to use the pot or ring a bell to get the prison staff to come and let us go to the toilet. What would happen more often than not, was that the prison officers would ignore you if you wanted to go to the toilet. Or when you did get out of the cell, you were subject to brutality – you were beaten up. You see, once you came out of the cell, you then came into contact with the prison officers and that was when you were most likely to get a beating.

They were supposed to empty the chamber pots twice a day, and what they did was sometimes you would go three, four, five days without allowing you to empty the chamber pot. They wouldn't let you use the toilet. So, you know, the cell would have been overflowing with urine and excrement, and stuff like that. So we began throwing it out the window, and the prison officers began shoveling it back into the cell, you know? So we then decided that the best thing to do was to smear the excrement on the walls, you know, we were going to turn it against them and then pour the urine out under the doors. That's the situation we were forced into.

There were 26 cells in each wing, and you know, they're big, heavy steel doors. But there sometimes would be fairly large gaps down the sides of the door, you know? And we were able to shout out to each other, and we could also communicate out the windows. In terms of passing stuff on to each other, there were two heating pipes that ran the whole length of the wall right through all of the cells. And there were usually gaps in it too that you could pass – you know, you could fold a piece of paper up and pass it through the pipe in the next cell, and he could pass it along down to the next cell, and so on like that.

We were also able to smuggle in and out small, what we called "comms" – communications, just wrapped in cling-film and we would've hidden them in various parts of our bodies. I mean, in your mouth, up your nose, in your back passage, under the foreskin of your penis, you know? In a multitude of places – it was fortunate that most of the people who were saving them didn't know where they had come from *[laughing]*. So, that was – we had a fairly sophisticated means of communication.

In the initial aftermath of the hunger strike it was probably one of the most demoralizing periods in prison, because we hadn't achieved all our demands. We did get the right to wear our own clothes, but we were still being forced to do prison work, and we were still integrated with other prisoners. So – and as you say, we had lost 10 comrades and friends over, you know, the space of just a few months in 1981. And we were left in a kind of limbo about how we should move forward.

But I just want to, you know, clarify a point – that while we felt very demoralized in the aftermath of the hunger strike, that wasn't the picture outside. And maybe that's because we were so isolated – we didn't understand the impact that the hunger strike had had, you know, both in Ireland and internationally throughout the world. You know, that it had – it did have a massive

impact. And what it did was that it completely blew the criminalization strategy out of the water. I mean there was nobody on this planet in 1981 who had heard of Bobby Sands, who believed he was a criminal. You know, so, although we hadn't achieved all our demands within the prison, in terms of the overall struggle the hunger strike had been successful.

We had intense debates and discussions about how we should move forward. Some people felt that we should just remain on protest – just indefinitely. Just stay on protest, refuse to do prison work, refuse to mix with other prisoners. But the argument that won through was that we should move in the general prison system. One of the things we learned from the whole period of the hunger strike was that when we got in direct confrontation with the British, by-and-large we lost. Or we certainly didn't win, anyway, if we didn't exactly lose.

But – so what we did was, you know, we were still on protest after the hunger strike. What we decided to do was to filter people down into what were called the “conforming blocks”. You know, people who were conforming with the prison regime. We were called “non-conforming” prisoners, and they were described as “conforming prisoners”. And we set about reorganizing our structures, engaging in sabotage within the prison, and generally stoking up tension. Now we still hadn't achieved all our demands. We were still being forced to do prison work, and there were a large number of workshops located throughout the prison. I mean, this was a fairly big, big site where this prison, where Long Kesh is – or was. And they used to either take us in a bus or walk us to the workshops, and we used that opportunity to gather information and intelligence. We also had manufactured some weapons in the workshops.

In 1983, we organized a mass escape from Long Kesh – 38 prisoners escaped. It was the biggest escape ever in the history of British or Irish prisons, and 38 men escaped. So once the escape happened, the prison administration stopped all prison work. So at that stage we achieved basically all the demands we had been looking for in 1981. But the prison administration still tried to maintain strict control, you know, only allowing one out at a time – stuff like that. But we eventually broke that down too. I mean in prison, the way we saw it, every day was a battle – and we were up for it. And we eventually broke the thing down by the time the late 80s came.

I was released in 1987. By that time things were beginning to relax, but by the time I was back in the H Blocks again in 1991, it was a completely different place. The prison administrators were recognizing our commanders in the blocks and in the camp. They had regular meetings with them, to discuss issues affecting prisoners. There were regular consultations with people from the British government, representatives from the British government. So it was a completely different situation. The cell doors were open 24 hours a day, and we could organize our own lives, you know, within the prison.

Well, one of the things we also managed to achieve was to have the prison administration provide academic access to academic education, you know, and many people did degrees in prison – so we had that too. But we also had our own education system as well, you know, we were teaching things like political philosophy, like history, the Irish language – I mean, all of

those sorts of things were going on anyway even if the prison administration had never given us access to academic education, we still had our own system.

We believe now that the political conditions have changed enough to allow us to disengage from armed struggle and ... achieve our objectives through political means. I mean, if you remember, I was saying last night that ... armed struggle can be justified in many circumstances, but sometimes it's not the right tactic to use ... and one of the difficulties is that – even among Irish Republicanism, some people elevate armed struggle to a principle, you know, and they come off with this view that as long as there's one representative of the British government on this island we have the right to use force, you know?

And on principle that's fair enough, but in terms of advancing your struggle sometimes it can have a negative effect. Armed struggle is justified in many circumstances when people – particularly when people are oppressed, but it isn't always the right tactic to use, and you need good leadership and you need proper analysis, and emotion has to be left at the side. People need to know what is the best way forward.

At the minute we believe that the political path is the best way to advance our struggle. I mean, in terms of strategies and tactics – I mean what you have to have – I mean, you have your clear objective about what you want to achieve, but you also have to have strategic objectives to bring you towards that ultimate objective, you know? And there could be any amount of strategic objectives, but they all have to fit in to the overall plan, and sometimes the tactics you need to use are pretty mundane, and it requires hard work and it can be quite boring and unexciting. You know, when you're studying the revolutions, you have to take that into account – and study political theory and political philosophy. And developing tactics and strategy that suit the circumstances where you are in any given situation.

The IRA campaign here always had popular support. It couldn't have gone on for so long, and at the intensity it did go on, if it didn't have popular support. And you know, the notion that you can go out and commit an armed action, and then people will automatically rise up and join in, is a theory and a strategy that doesn't have much weight – that time and time again has failed the practical test. You have to think carefully – what your objective is and then you have to, in a very methodical way, plot out how you intend to get there.

You know, revolution in itself often suggests using force, and that shouldn't be the way, because revolution can mean all sorts of different tactics and strategies – and that's what being a revolutionary is about – that you have to think outside the box, that you have to think of different ways.

And I give the example: in the H Blocks after the hunger strike, that we realized that direct confrontation was not a good tactic, so we had to think of another way of getting what we wanted by using another method. And that was what we did, and it succeeded. So, you know, revolution is not just straight forward, it's a very complicated business. [END]