

Ulster's tragic story

Alison Thomson talked with Fra McCann, a veteran of several Northern Ireland prisons about the conditions in the prisons and the reasons for the protest going on now.

Thomson: Could you explain briefly the background of the Irish troubles?

McCann: The first occupation of Ireland was 800 years ago. Since then the English have had major garrisons in Ireland, and there have been three major campaigns. There have always been struggles with the British. There were risings in the 1800s against the Brits - Republicans were imprisoned for upwards of fifteen years, shackled and beaten. In the Easter rising of 1916, the IRA was formed. Two weeks after the rising, all the leaders of the rising were executed. It changed the mood of the Irish people - now they threw their weight behind the rising. Twenty six counties were given "back to the Irish" as they say and six counties were partitioned off.

Thomson: Why the six counties, when nine counties make up Ulster?

McCann: The northeast of Ireland was at that time the most industrial area of Europe. As well, in the six counties there was a loyalist majority. The Loyalists said that if Britain withdrew they'd start a bloody war. The Nationalists were treated as third class citizens when it came to the likes of jobs. They'd ask you your religion, and if you said Catholic you wouldn't get the job.

They gave the industrial areas extra seats. It meant the loyalists always had more votes even though there were more nationalists. In 1963 Sinn Fein were running in the elections - they were canvassing from the Falls Road. Ian Paisley said he'd lead people there because he'd seen a tricolour (an Irish flag) flying. Police smashed into the shop where Sinn Fein had headquarters.

The civil rights movement began from Queen's University in Belfast, organized by students and teachers.

Thomson: When did this latest



Fra McCann

round of troubles begin?

McCann: The late sixties. Internment began - there's been internment every decade. They rounded you up without charge or trial.

The Brits have a stranglehold economically on Ireland. Irish prime ministers have taken a tough attitude against Republicans.

Thomson: What led to the hunger strikes?

McCann: The conditions in the H blocks. It's not the first time hunger strikes have been used by the Irish - there was a hunger strike in the summer of 1972. In 1975 the British set up a committee to look into overall conditions, and concluded there shouldn't be political status, so prisoners convicted after March 1, 1976 do not have political status.

thousands of maggots crawled over it - they were all over the beds.

In October last year the hunger strike was discussed - most people wanted that. Bobby Sands said that he was willing to go on a hunger strike and die for the political status rightfully his. The Republican movement pleaded with them not to do it but after four years the men said we've had it and they began a hunger strike.

The National Smash H Block committee began meetings all around Ireland to gain support - there were big demos in major places throughout Ireland.

There were 40 prisoners on the strike. On December 18 the prison presented documents to Sands as the OC of the prisoners and he called off the strike - the major demands had been granted. They weren't implemented, the governor delayed. Bobby an-

nounced that he'd be going on a new hunger strike March 1. This time the government wouldn't let journalists in and the publicity began to die down.

The MP for Fermanagh-South Tyrone died and Bobby decided to run. The British government pleaded with people not to vote for Bobby. When the results came in, it was a major setback for the British government. He'd got 30,000 votes - that is more votes than Thatcher got to put her in parliament.

There was no move to end the hunger strike and Bobby died. There were 10 000 people at his funeral.

The government had thought with Bobby's death they'd go off their strike but it strengthened their resolve. There are 40 Bobby Sands in H block. If necessary they'll all go on a hunger strike and die for political status.

Thomson: tell us about your arrests.

McCann: I've been arrested many times. In 1972 I was standing on a

street corner with some friends and a British Army foot patrol arrested me. I was taken to a police interrogation centre - it was closed because and international investigation found it was torturing men with shocks, noise and lack of sleep. They took men up in helicopters, hooded them, and when they got a certain distance from the ground they pushed them out. I was beaten, but not badly.

In November I was arrested again and held without charge or trial until 1975.

In 1976 I was arrested on a seven day detention order and badly beaten. They forced me to say I was in the IRA and had had a weapon.

Thomson: Have you ever been in the IRA?

McCann: Never. I'm a Republican and that's all it takes to be arrested.

Thomson: Where do you go from here?

McCann: The hunger strike will go on until the British government gives in.

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