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The H Blocks Issue Abroad

United States

1. The H Blocks protest has gained considerable attention in the Irish American community since it began four years ago, and even before the hunger strike was announced it had aroused a good deal of sympathy among Irish Americans. For PIRA supporters in the United States, the H Blocks issue has become by far the strongest propaganda weapon in their campaign for British withdrawal. The subject has received widespread publicity in the Irish ethnic newspapers, at Irish functions and on local radio and TV programmes. By focussing the attention of Irish Americans on the protest, and now on the hunger strike, PIRA supporters, especially Noraid, have been able to revive sympathy and backing for their objectives, after their popularity had been on the decline for about five years.

2. Protests have been made about H Blocks in recent years at St. Patrick's Day parades, and through pickets on British Consulates and offices, and demonstrations against visiting British dignitaries. Since the hunger strike was announced, the level of protests has risen sharply. During November there were demonstrations, orchestrated by Noraid, at British Consulates in New York, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia and San Francisco, and at Pittsburgh and Albany. Many city councils and State legislatures have passed resolutions - inspired by either Noraid or the Caucus - in support of the prisoners' demands. Two recent ones were by the Detroit City Council on 29 October and by the California State Legislature on 30 October. Visits by former "blanketmen" have been organised by Noraid and have received a lot of publicity. Two ex-prisoners, Liam Carlin and Francis McCann, were given citations by Boston City Council and the Massachusetts State Legislature on 23 September, and on the same day McCann was received by Massachusetts Governor Edward King.

3. The issue has also given new life to Rep. Mario Biaggi and his Ad Hoc Congressional Committee which had not been active over the past year. In October Biaggi and 25 members of the Ad Hoc Committee protested about the visit to the US of Lord Diplock, and on 23 November Biaggi and three other Congressmen called on the American Ambassador to the UN to "press the UN to mediate and try and end the hunger strike at Long Kesh." It is reported that efforts are being made to have a statement supporting the hunger strikers read into the US Congressional record. The newly elected Republican Senator for New York, Alfonse D'Amato intends to visit Ireland from 7-10 December, under the auspices of the Caucus, on a fact-finding mission about the H Blocks situation. Senator-elect D'Amato has said that he intends to start an Ad Hoc Committee in the US Senate.

4. The H Blocks issue has forced Britain onto the defensive in the US media, with their information services, diplomatic officers and even a Minister of the NIO having to reply to criticisms of their position. Such criticism has appeared in both popular and quality papers. Propaganda material has been widely circulated. Two Conservative backbench MP's Mr. John Biggs-Davison and Mr. Brian Mawhinney are visiting the US to publicise the British Government's case.

5. There seems to be a real danger that concern among Irish Americans about H Blocks will be translated into increased support for pro-IRA groups, and that this support will take the form of a renewed flow of funds and arms. The most recent Noraid returns are for the six months ending 29 July 1980 and they show a falling off on the previous period. In general, contributions to Noraid have fallen substantially since the early seventies. It will not be possible to say if the hunger strike and the attendant publicity have increased financial contributions to Noraid until the returns for the second half of the year become available. However, judging from the publicity which the issue has been getting in Irish-American circles, and given that Noraid are now focussing almost exclusively on this question, it seems quite probable that there will be an upward swing.

Other Countries

The hunger strike has stirred up interest in other countries including:

France: A Prisoners Defence Committee has been formed and has received publicity. Statements of support for the hunger strike have been made by trade unions and leftwing groups, and the leader of the French Communist Party, M. Georges Marchais has proposed a resolution on Human Rights in Northern Ireland at the European Parliament.

Denmark: A textile factory owned by the British Consul in Aarhus was burned down and a caller said that the action was a protest over H Blocks.

Belgium: There were demonstrations during the Queen's visit to Brussels and an opposition Senator has put down a question about "breaches of Human Rights in Northern Ireland".

Australia: There have been protests by Irish groups and a petition has been presented to Parliament by an MP.

Soviet Union: Pravda referred on 29 October to "the wave of solidarity" with the prisoners demands for political status "not only in Northern Ireland but beyond its borders". A sharply worded article in Sovyetskaya Rossiya of 3 December described conditions in the H-Blocks as outlined in a letter smuggled out of "Long Kesh Concentration Camp". Linking the issue with the Madrid Conference, the article said Britain was "clearly trying to avoid accusations of crude violation of basic human rights and freedoms".

Britain:

The Irish community, which has not shown a high profile on the Northern question in recent years, has given signs of its concern over H Blocks. A H Block Lobby Group has been formed, and a delegation which included leaders of Irish organisations met the Ambassador in London to express their concern. A march in support of British withdrawal took place in London on 15 November, with about 5,000 people taking part, and it had as its main focus the H Blocks hunger strike.

Department of Foreign Affairs

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