

THE SIEGE OF 64 GREAT STRAND STREET

by Pat Feeley

Connolly House, 64, Great Strand Street, was formally opened as the headquarters of the Revolutionary Workers' Groups on the 11th of March, 1933. The building was a two-story tenement in a lane off Capel Street.

As a headquarters it had some attractions. It was spacious: the ground floor was big enough to accommodate a bookshop and a printing press and the second floor had some big rooms suitable for meetings and lectures. It was situated in a quiet street and in the normal course of events would not have attracted undue attention. At the same time it was near the city centre. The communists did not go out of their way to advertise their new headquarters but they were keeping a high profile on the streets, addressing meetings at Abbey Street corner, Cathal Brugha Street and elsewhere, and this served to draw attention to the building in Great Strand Street.

Anti-communist feeling was high in Ireland at the time. The Eucharistic Congress had taken place in the summer of the previous year and the great mass of the people had pledged their loyalty to the church. It was an event of major importance marking the triumph of Catholic nationalism and church power and the establishment of the confessional state.

Catholic politicians demonstrated publicly that whatever might divide them politically they were united in religion and in their loyalty to the church. The two leaders of the civil war parties, de Valera and Cosgrave, came together as canopy bearers for Cardinal MacRory at the religious ceremonies in the Phoenix Park.

To be Irish was to be Catholic and nationalist. These were intolerant times. Communism was alien and communists were outcasts. They were denounced from the pulpits as anti-God men and agents of Satan. Bishops issued pastorals against them and the Catholic papers condemned them. The continuous warnings, denunciations and conspiracy theories brought about an atmosphere of anti-communist hysteria. This was especially true of the Catholic papers, notably **The Irish Rosary** and **The Standard**.

During 1933 **The Standard** published weekly articles and editorials on the dangers of communism in Ireland. Many of these said more for the imaginative powers of the writers than for their factual knowledge. There were stories of secret red protocols, communist conferences at Trim, red armies, Godless leagues, organisations of militant atheists and so on. There were communists under every bush and stone ready to rise up and overthrow the state.

Commenting in January on the break up of the Castlecomer Mine and Quarry Union, the paper said that the Bishop of Ossory had sounded a warning on an attempted communist lodgement in his diocese where discontent in the coal field had attracted 'the Muscovites'. This activity (the formation of the union and Nicholas Boran's agitations) offered an opportunity for the study and analysis of communist methods. Later in the same month there was a front page article on the Friends of Soviet Russia who had changed their name to the Friends of the Soviet Union. The writer said this organisation had close connections with the communist college in Eccles Street (Mrs. Despard's house) and was set up to attract the 'would-be intelligentsia, professional cranks and

bohemian elements'. Total membership, however, did not exceed 30 which the paper commented, more correctly than usual, was about all they could muster.

In a subsequent article it was said that a publication of the FOSU had attacked the Holy Father and that the blasphemies and obscenities in it were 'horrible beyond measure'. (1)

The Lenten pastorals of the bishops in March were again taken up with attacks on communism.

Dr. Keane, Bishop of Limerick, said communism had undeniably found a foothold in Ireland and certain groups that looked to Russia as their spiritual home were bringing out vile publications.

Dr. O'Kane, the Bishop of Derry, referred to the high unemployment level in the city which he said invited the paid agitators. These were usually strangers, who though well paid and comfortable themselves, preached the common ownership of wealth. If the unemployed really wanted support and help they would be well advised to drive out such 'foreign agitators'. (2)

Bishop Harty of Cashel spoke of an attempt to introduce communism under the guise of patriotism and said that the church and government had a duty to protect the youth from ensnarement.

Dr. Cullen said that the agents of Russian communism had arrived like 'wolves in sheep's clothing' to undermine the state and while he personally did not believe they presented any real danger, they would still have to be firmly opposed.

In an editorial **The Standard** said 'the sowers of cockle were in the Irish wheat field' and that the times were favourable for them. Visions of a country where there would be work and full employment were attractive to distressed men with hungry families. Employers should pay their employees a proper wage and not abuse them as such abuse gave 'rise to class war'. Also they should be prepared to consider reforms as the industrial and financial organisations had broken down. (3)

Naughton, the bishop of Killala, warned the faithful against 'agents of Russia with ample funds' who were availing of the economic crisis to propagate communism. He was glad to see, he said, that the Irish Labour Party had disassociated itself from the actions of these people and while he was confident that the laity would reject the Russian system, he advocated Catholic action to combat the 'Powers of Darkness'.

Dr. James J. MacNamee, Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise, spoke of the attempt to supplant Christian civilisation with a new order based on materialism and atheism which would destroy Catholic morality, the institution of marriage and the sacredness of family life. The very idea of God was to be rooted out. (4)

It is hard at times to know whether the bishops actually believed that the church and state were under threat, whether they had in fact begun to believe their own propaganda, or whether they were, as some believed, attacking the communists - not because they believed them to be a threat but in order to hold back the labour movement as a whole and delay change.

Dr. Mulhern of Dromore informed the faithful that agents of 'a satanic movement' had found followers in Ireland, and he warned against promises of a world of happiness and prosperity.

Dr. Fogarty said that 'no soul, no God, no life hereafter', were 'the head and fount of the whole system'. Agents of communism, with financial support from Russia, were in Ireland where they were circulating papers and pamphlets and running a college. Apt pupils of the Moscow school, they did not openly attack religion, but advocated class struggle and a workers' republic, he stated.

In February an English priest, the Rev. Owen Dudley, preached to a full house in Dublin's Theatre Royal on the menace of communism. He spoke of a steady, deliberate movement led by a determined group of men guided by Lenin's political beliefs which justified terrorism, denied individual rights, and deprived the bourgeoisie of all political rights. Bolshevism aimed at the destruction of all religion and every notion of God.

In Russia the family had been abolished, the state had first rights over children and marriage was not binding. There was no morality, abortion was permitted and unnatural vices went unpunished. The Red Menace was not a fiction. Communism was 'a subtle poison' and its success was a warning to Europe to set its affairs in order. (5)

Ireland was not the only country where there were red scares and anti-communist hysteria. Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in January 1933 and in February the Reichstag, the parliament building, was burned. The communists were blamed for this and it was said that the fire was intended as a signal for communist terrorists to start a revolution.

A Dutch communist Van der Lubbe was arrested and was alleged to have confessed to setting fire to the building. (In 1981 he was exonerated of all blame and the Nazis themselves were said to have been responsible).

Hitler spoke of the 'economic rehabilitation necessary for the final annihilation of Marxism' and used the fire and the spurious threat of communist revolution to make himself absolute dictator of Germany.

The articles of the Weimer constitution, guaranteeing

freedom of speech, freedom of press, the right to hold meetings and the privacy of letters, telegrams and telephone calls, were suspended. One hundred and thirty communists were arrested. The Prussian police force was placed on full alert and 60,000 Nazi stormtroopers and Nationalist steel helmets were enrolled as auxiliary police. Communist and socialist papers were suspended, the government press chief said they would never again appear and that parliament and parliamentary democracy were things of the past. (6)

In Ireland the communist menace more often than not was the product of a fevered brain but this did not stop politicians and others from raising the communist hare.

At a political meeting in Birr in March, Dr. T.F. O'Higgins, founder of the Army Comrades Association, said that it was not Fianna Fail that won the general election but the Communist Party and the I.R.A. and it was they who were controlling the government. (7)

Preaching in Armagh cathedral on St. Patrick's day, Cardinal MacRory made a strong attack on communism in Ireland. He said that the faith planted by St. Patrick had been in Ireland for 1,500 years through 'sunshine and storm', 'threats and confiscations', 'tortures and deaths', and he prayed that it would remain 'to the consummation of the world'.

There was now, however, ranged against it a deliberate and systematic movement with origins in Russia, which had as its aim the destruction of all religion. It wished to substitute the brotherhood of man for the fatherhood of God.

The communists maintained, he said, that because there was still poverty, injustice, and unequal distribution of wealth in the world Christianity had failed. If the Christian world fell short of what it ought to be, the answer was not to sweep it away but to put into practice the teachings of Christ. In Ireland the majority of the people North and South were Christians 'of some kind' and they should confront the enemies of God with a solid front(8). This was an important pronouncement made on the feast day of the national saint and showed that the church was seriously concerned about communist activity in the country and determined to oppose it with all its power.



Sean Murray addresses a Dublin street meeting.



Bill Gannon

In an editorial on 'The Communist Menace' **The Standard** said that their revelations on communism had opened the eyes of many simple people, who had been gulled by the propagandists, and the progress of the movement had been halted. However, its activities had not ceased. An organisation existed which had as its objective the enrolment under the communist flag of as many Irishmen as possible. This organisation had a definite programme, a plan of campaign and a publication which in a recent issue attacked the Irish bishops and made an attack 'revolting and horrible' on the fundamental principles of Christianity. The Irish Bolsheviks and their supporters had become bolder and were using the correspondence columns of the popular papers, to which they were strangely given access, to disseminate their propaganda.

Verbal attacks from the pulpits soon developed into physical attacks on the streets. On Friday night, 24th of March, R.W.G. speakers at the corner of Abbey Street and Capel Street were attacked. The papers reported that this happened after one of the speakers condemned the Papal encyclical and referred to the Vatican as a 'capitalist organisation'. The crowd began to sing **Faith of Our Fathers** and when the meeting was over the guards had to escort the speakers to O'Connell Street. (9)

An Phoblacht, basing its comments on the press reports, said that religion was firmly implanted in Ireland and that the anti-religious statements made at the meeting were 'irresponsible and lunatic'. Those responsible were only inviting trouble. (10)

Sean Murray replied to this in a letter stating that there was no reference to religion or to the Papal encyclical in the speeches and that the press was just 'whipping up feelings'. The meeting, Murray said, had finished without interruption and the attacks had come afterwards at the hands of a gang of thugs who were there for that purpose. (11)

There were two big gangs of street fighters in the city at the time, one on the Northside and one on the South. These were the 'animal gangs' drawn from men who tended the cattle on the cross-channel boats. (12) They went about armed with dangerous weapons (razors, knives and chains) and turned up at street meetings looking for trouble. They were not politically motivated, they were just

thugs. It was not unknown for them to go to the Pro-Cathedral for evening devotions weighed down with their weapons which they left outside to be collected afterwards for the evenings diversions.

At least one meeting in Clanbrassil Street had to be abandoned when they threatened the speakers, and they attacked the platform at another meeting in Cathal Brugha and tried to stab Sean Murray, the blade passing through his overcoat.

On the Sunday after the Cardinal's sermon, which was published in all the papers, there were further incidents at street meetings in Dublin. At a meeting of the unemployed in Cathal Brugha Street a speaker suggested a march to Leinster House on the following Wednesday to lobby Labour T.D.s on the need to improve conditions for those out of work. According to newspaper reports some of the remarks offended a section of the crowd who, when the meeting was over, chased the communists down O'Connell Street and into Prince's Street where they escaped down an alleyway.

At another meeting on the same day at the corner of Prince's Street the press reported that a man called for 'three cheers for the Pope' to which the crowd responded enthusiastically and demanded that the meeting be brought to a close. This was done and there were no further scenes. (13)

Sean Murray later denied that this ever happened. He said that the interruptions described never took place, that the meeting was not abandoned and that the newspaper report was a complete fabrication. (14)

The Army Comrades Association, the forerunner of the Blueshirts, was formed in 1931. Initially it was a fraternal group of ex-army officers but when the Cumman na nGaedheal party lost the general election in 1932 and when its members began to be denied the freedom of speech by hostile crowds, encouraged by the I.R.A., the A.C.A. was transformed into a public movement to combat republican belligerence and what they saw as the leftward drift in Irish politics.

Some people maintained that the attacks on Connolly House were led by the A.C.A. and that men wearing white armbands were to be seen on the streets directing the crowds. The bulk of the evidence, however, does not suggest this and it is much more likely that if there were people on the street wearing white armbands that these were members of the confraternities.



Sean Nolan