## Northern Ireland: Hunger Strikes

### Tasks set in textbooks on the Hunger strikes

T. McAleavy, *Conflict in Ireland*, Collins Educational, New Edition, 0-00327-008-4  
Austin Reid, *Ireland since 1923. Politics or Violence*, Longman, 0-58204-009-4,  

### Hunger strikes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>When?</strong></th>
<th><strong>What happened?</strong></th>
<th><strong>What was the impact of the strike?</strong></th>
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</thead>
</table>
| 27 October - 18 December 1980  
1980 hunger strike  
1 March - 3 October 1981  
1981 hunger strike | Following the collapse of power-sharing in 1974, the British government concentrated on trying to control the violence through strengthening legal and police powers.  
Internment without trial was stopped.  
Paramilitary prisoners, who had been convicted of violence and other crimes, were treated just like other prisoners, and lose their ‘special category’ status.  
From 1978, IRA prisoners held in the ‘H-blocks’ of the Maze prison stages ‘blanket’ and ‘dirty’ protests. | The strikes and deaths won much sympathy and support for the IRA in Catholic areas of Northern Ireland, throughout the Republic, and the world.  
The hunger strikes transformed the political context of the Northern Ireland problem. Now, republican prisoners appeared in the unwonted role of being prepared to accept suffering for their cause rather than simply inflict suffering on its behalf. The mass turnouts at the prisoners’ funerals revealed that the standing of the prisoners in Catholic areas had risen dramatically and this was soon reflected in a novel development, an impressive Sinn Féin electoral intervention. By June 1983 Sinn Féin had obtained some 13.4% of the vote in the North which compared well with the SDLP’s 17.9%. |
| 'Special category’ status  
Between 1972 and 1976, paramilitary prisoners were not treated like ‘common criminals’: for instance they could wear their own clothes and their officers had special privileges, etc. | Blanket/dirty protests  
Some prisoners refused to dress, wash or use toilet facilities, a non-violent technique to reclaim their special category status | Thursday 9 April 1981  
Bobby Sands Elected to Westminster |
| Hunger strikes  
The 1980 strike was ordered by the IRA, but not that in 1981, when one prisoner after another started to refuse food, and continued doing so until they died.  
5 May 1981  
Bobby Sands died after refusing food for 66 days - the first hunger striker to die. |  |  |

### Two views of the prisoners’ demands

- ‘We are not prepared to consider special category status for certain groups of people serving sentences for crime. Crime is crime, it is not political.’  
  *Margaret Thatcher, 21 April 1981*
- ‘I am a political prisoner because I am a casualty of a perennial war that is being fought between the oppressed Irish people and an alien ... regime that refuses to withdraw from our land.’  
  *Bobby Sands, writing on the first day of his hunger strike*
Hunger strikes: summary & significance

http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/hstrike/summary.htm

Bobby Sands, then leader of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in the Maze Prison, refused food on 1 March 1981 and so began a new hunger strike. The choice of the date was significant because it marked the fifth anniversary of the ending of special category status (1 March 1976). The main aim of the new strike was to achieve the reintroduction of ‘political’ status for Republican prisoners. Special category, or ‘political’, status would be achieved if five demands were met: the right of prisoners to wear their civilian clothes at all times; the right to free association within a block of cells; the right not to do prison work; the right to educational and recreational facilities; and the restoration of lost remission of sentence.

It later became clear that the IRA leadership outside the prison was not in favour of a new hunger strike following the outcome of the 1980 strike. The main impetus for a new protest came from the prisoners themselves. The strike was to last until 3 October 1981 and was to see 10 Republican prisoners starve themselves to death in support of their demands.

The tactic of the hunger strike has a special place in Republican history and has proved very emotive for Nationalists in Ireland throughout the 20th century. The impact that could be achieved on world opinion was clear in 1920 when Terence MacSwiney, then Lord Mayor of Cork, died in Brixton Prison, London, on day 74 of his hunger strike. A passage from a speech he had made at his inauguration as Lord Mayor was to be recalled during the 1981 hunger strike: ‘It is not those who can inflict the most, but those who can suffer the most who will conquer’.

Just how much impact the 1981 strike was having on the Nationalist population of Ireland became clear when Bobby Sands was elected a Member of Parliament (MP) during a by-election for the Fermanagh/South Tyrone seat and two other hunger strikers were elected as Teachta Dáil (TDs) in a general election in the Republic of Ireland.

The hunger strike ended on 3 October 1981 when those Republican prisoners who had still been refusing food decided to end their hunger strike. At this stage in the protest six prisoners were on hunger strike. The main reason for the ending of the strike was the realisation that each of the families of the strikers would ask for medical intervention whenever the strikers lapsed into unconsciousness.

On 6 October 1981 James Prior, then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, announced a series of measures which went a long way to meeting many aspects of the prisoners’ five demands.

The hunger strike of 1981 had very important and far-reaching consequences for Northern Ireland and proved to be one of the key turning points of ‘the Troubles’. The Republican movement had achieved a huge propaganda victory over the British government and had obtained a lot of international sympathy. Active and tacit support for the Irish Republican Army (IRA) increased in Nationalist areas.

Political support for Sinn Féin (SF) was demonstrated in two by-elections (and the general election in the Republic of Ireland) and eventually led to the emergence of SF as a significant political force in Northern Ireland.

The British government’s fear that SF would overtake the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) as the main representative of the Catholic population of Northern Ireland was a key reason for the government signing the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) on 15 November 1985.
The hunger strike, 1981
McAleavy, pp 78-9

SOURCE 1

The hunger strike has a long tradition. The funeral of the Nationalist Terence McSwinney, mayor of Cork, who died after going on hunger strike in 1920.

SOURCE 2

Cartoon: Thatcher and the H Block protest.

SOURCE 3

He knows that if he dies, through his death, there will be so much anger stored up in the Irish people that it will fuel the struggle for the next ten years.

Danny Morrison, Sinn Fein, speaking about Bobby Sands, March 1981.

SOURCE 4

There is no such thing as political murder, political bombing or political violence. We will not compromise on this. There will be no political status.

Margaret Thatcher’s reaction, March 1981.

DPS, Tasks on Hunger Strikes, 1981, 3
The hunger strikers won much support among ordinary Catholics.

SOURCE 6
There were people on the marches against the government’s treatment of the hunger strikers who had never been on a march before. Never was there such a determination among the mass of people to have done with the British government. It was now possible to speak respectfully of the IRA.

Des Wilson, a Catholic priest from Belfast, October 1981.

SOURCE 7
When Bobby Sands died many of us felt it’s back to square one. If you tried to call a peace rally now you wouldn’t get anyone to come. There is far more bitterness and a feeling of anti-Britishness.


SOURCE 8
We were led to believe that only a minority of Catholics supported violence. To Protestants the hunger strike showed that Catholics were prepared to support the gunmen who murdered their fellow citizens.

Protestants were dismayed at the widespread Catholic support for the Hunger Strike: Frank Millar, Official Unionist Party, May 1983.

SOURCE 9
Ten people had the courage to stand by their country to the point of dying for it. The H block issue became a worldwide issue. The Republican movement gained enormously in the number of people who joined, in favourable publicity and in finance.

Daithi O’Conaill, Sinn Féin, December, 181.

1. What happened during the Hunger Strike crisis?
2. Why do you think the IRA prisoners went on strike?
3. What were the results of the Hunger Strike?
Why did Sinn Fein become a significant political force?
IRA hunger strikes, 1980-81

SOURCE 1
Diplock courts did not have juries, because of the problem in Northern Ireland of witnesses being intimidated. The case was tried by a judge.

SOURCE 2
Bobby Sands’s funeral, May 1981

SOURCE 3
Danny Morrison, Sinn Fein’s public relations officer, in November 1981. After this speech, republican policy was often called the ‘Armalite and ballot box’ policy.
An Armalite was a rifle favoured by IRA snipers.

Who here really believes that we can win the war through the ballot box? But will anyone here object if with a ballot box in this hand and an Armalite in this hand we take power?

1. Look at Source 1. What does the source tell historians about nationalist attitudes towards the justice system in Northern Ireland?
2. Look at Source 2. Which of the interpretations below best explains the thousands of mourners attending Sands’ funeral?
   - ‘Vast numbers of Catholics supported Sands, the IRA and Sinn Fein:
   - ‘It was a protest against British policy rather than support for the IRA:
3. How might a) a British politician, or b) a member of a loyalist paramilitary group view Source 3?
We had little faith in the Catholic middle class, for we never expected anything from them. For any working-class section of our community to expect anything from the middle class is stupid anyway.

. . . We were let down by the South, too: we had the likes of Jack Lynch come out with his ‘We will not stand idly by’ speech and yet that’s exactly what he did...

. . . When the violence started, our community was let down by two different groups of people - the IRA and the Church. In the end the IRA came

**SOURCE 4**
Extracts from *Ourselves Alone? Voices from Belfast’s Nationalist Working Class*, published by the Falls Think Tank

**SOURCE 5**
A Sinn Fein mural in Beechmount Avenue, Belfast, 1983

**SOURCE 6**

*The gun at the centre of the Christmas tree is an ArmaLite rifle.*

Look closely at Sources 4-6. How do they help to explain the increasing support for Sinn Fein in the early 1980s?
Reactions to the rise of Sinn Fein
Walsh, pp 101

I would like to elaborate on Sinn Fein’s attitude to armed struggle. Armed struggle is a necessary and morally correct form of resistance in the Six Counties against a government whose presence is rejected by the vast majority of the Irish people. . . . There are those who tell us that the British government will not be moved by armed struggle. As has been said before, the history of Ireland and of British colonial involvement throughout the world tells us that they will not be moved by anything else.

**SOURCE 7**
Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams speaking in 1983

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<th>In practice, people have been demanding peace since long before the IRA became active. In my own area of Ballymurphy, community groups have long demanded employment, decent housing, play centres, facilities for the aged, handicapped and young . . . Those demands for the kind of peace which is based on justice and equality were made year titter year, and year after year they were refused. We cannot have justice and peace in Ireland, because we do not have a society capable of upholding them.</th>
<th>My reaction was almost one of despair, that they were going to elect someone whom we considered to be a terrorist and who was not going to play any part at Westminster. I had no doubts at all that he belonged to the Provisional IRA. I think he summed up the Armalite and the Ballot Box completely. What a waste the whole thing was.</th>
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**SOURCE 8**
Extract from The Politics of Irish Freedom, written by Gerry Adams in 1986 and updated in 1994

**SOURCE 9**
The reaction of British Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Brooke to the election of Gerry Adams as MP for West Belfast in 1983. Adams refused to take his seat in the Westminster Parliament because he would not swear an oath of loyalty to the British state and the Queen.

Read Sources 7-9. Explain why these statements would cause concern to politicians in Northern Ireland, the Republic and Britain.
The 1981 hunger strikes:  
A study of continuity and interpretation  

SOURCE A  
Wall art on the Falls Road in Belfast in 1981

| They push a tube up the nostril which goes wriggling  
  down into the stomach. Then there’s a funnel on the  
  end of the tube which they pour the water and food in,  
  you see.  
  All the time they were pushing this bally tube down, I  
  kept coughing and coughing incessantly. Well, I didn’t  
  know what was the matter, but I understand it was  
  double pneumonia and pleurisy, due to food getting  
  into my lungs.  

SOURCE B  
Emmeline Pankhurst, the leader of the Suffragettes,  
writing about force feeding of hunger strikers in British  
prisons, 1914.

| In previous hunger strikes of the period, in Mountjoy  
  jail in 1919 and in Wormwood Scrubs in 1920, the  
  Government had given in after ten days or so, or when  
  the hunger strikers seemed close to death, being  
  unwilling to create martyrs. In the case of Terence  
  MacSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork, the Government had  
  announced it had no intention of giving in to moral  
  blackmail.  
  On 24 October 1920, after a 73 day hunger strike,  
  MacSwiney died. Another IRA hunger striker died in  
  Cork prison a few hours later.  

SOURCE D  
Adapted from The Green Flag by Robert Kee, 1972.

| Now, in my native country, I was a prisoner in the  
  hands of my own countrymen. May the reader never  
  know what it is like to be marched, a prisoner, through  
  his native town for doing what he believed to be his  
  duty in the cause of his country.  
  I was taken to Mountjoy jail.  
  In protest at the treatment meted out to me, I went  
  on hunger strike. After twelve days of hunger and six  
  of thirst strike I was released.  

SOURCE C  
From My Fight for Irish Freedom by Daniel Breen,  
1924.

| When Gandhi returned to politics in 1939, his first act  
  was to undertake a fast (hunger strike) to force the  
  ruler of Rajkot to change his autocratic rule. The public  
  unrest was so great that Gandhi’s demands were  
  granted. In 1948, when India was at war with itself  
  and thousands were being killed, he went on hunger  
  strike again to stop the people fighting.  

SOURCE E  
From an American history book written in 1995. It is  
commenting on the hunger strikes undertaken by the  
Indian leader, Gandhi.

1. How does the evidence in this feature help you to explain why the hunger strike was started in 1981?  
2. The wall painting (Source A) says ‘Blessed are those who hunger for justice’. What evidence can you  
   find in Sources B—E that previous hunger strikers were campaigning for justice?  
3. The phrase ‘Blessed are those who hunger for justice’ is one interpretation of events in the Maze  
   prison in 1981. How might  
   a. the Ulster Unionist, Ian Paisley, and  
   b. the British Prime Minister in 1981, Margaret Thatcher, have interpreted the Maze hunger strikes?

DPS, Tasks on Hunger Strikes, 1981, 8
1. Why did republican prisoners decide to go on hunger strike in 1980 and 1981?
2. What were the short and longer-term results of the IRA hunger strike?
3. Describe how the following groups might have felt about the hunger strike:
   unionists in Northern Ireland;
   Sinn Hin supporters in Northern Ireland and beyond;
   Catholics in Northern Ireland;
   the British government;
   the hunger strikers.

*DPS, Tasks on Hunger Strikes, 1981, 9*
A British view of the hunger strikes
Reid, p. 61

A cartoon in the Daily Express, 1981

1. What point is the cartoonist making about the funerals of IRA members who died from fighting or hunger striking?
2. What is his view of the way the world treated such funerals?