

‘Protestant Socialists’? Ulster Loyalism and Working-class Politics: 1969-1974

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List of Abbreviations

B&ICO-British and Irish Communist Organisation

DUP-Democratic Unionist Party

IOO-Independent Orange Order

IRA-Irish Republican Army

ITGWU-Irish Transport and General Workers Union

LAW-Loyalist Association of Workers

OIRA-Official Irish Republican Army

PD-Peoples Democracy

PIRA-Provisional Irish Republican Army

POL-Principles Of Loyalism

PUP-Progressive Unionist Party

RCA- Revolutionary Citizens Army

UCA-Ulster Citizens Army

UDA-Ulster Defence Association

UPV-Ulster Protestant Volunteers

USCA-Ulster Special Constabulary Association

USC-Ulster Special Constabulary

UUP-Ulster Unionist Party

UUUC-United Ulster Unionist Council

UVF-Ulster Volunteer Force

UWC-Ulster Workers Council

VPP-Volunteer Political Party

Introduction

On the 1 November 2002 a document called the *Principles of Loyalism (POL)* written by Billy Hutchinson was released by the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), the political wing of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF).¹ *POL* attempts to distil Loyalist thought into one concise document which also tells the tale of Loyalism, from the signing of the Ulster Covenant until the modern day. Upon reading *POL*, an outsider familiar with republican history will notice that the relationship violent Loyalism has with the Covenant is a mirror image of the relationship Republicans have with the 1916 Proclamation. The other major thing one will notice is the way the document portrays 'the Troubles'² as a two pronged struggle: a struggle against the IRA and a struggle against traditional unionism. This narrative is not one the outside world readily accepts. Current members of the PUP claim that the UVF and the short lived Volunteer Political Party (VPP), an early incarnation of the PUP, were socialist organisations.³ This dissertation will test this claim and analyse the extent to which 'the Troubles' led to the emergence of a working-class consciousness among Protestants.

For the sake of brevity it examines 'the Troubles' in its early days, from the mid sixties until 1974, when the VPP first threw its hat into the electoral ring. The first section attempts to establish the relationship which existed between working-class Protestants and their social and political 'bettters' during the first fifty years of the

¹ *The Principles of Loyalism: An internal discussion paper*, 1 November 2002.

² 'The Troubles' is a colloquial term used by people in Northern Ireland to refer to the thirty or so years of violence between roughly 1969 and 1998.

³ Interview, Hugh Smyth, Shankill Road Belfast, 21 April 2009.

state. Sections two and three deal with events which contributed to the emergence of a working-class consciousness amongst Loyalists. The outbreak of violence itself and the prison experience are treated in section two. The next section deals with the Ulster Workers' Council (UWC) strike of 1974. Symptoms of this apparent rise in leftist thinking are analysed in section four which examines the statements and orientation of the terrorist groups themselves. The VPP is the subject of the fifth and final section, which will try to assess the extent to which the party could be considered socialist.

This work built upon a strong base of secondary sources, such as Jim Cusack and Henry McDonald's *UVF*, Peter Taylor's *Loyalists* and Steve Bruce's *Red hand*. These works, although interesting and informative primarily deal with the 'military' side of Loyalism rather than the political side. Those secondary works which do treat the political side of Loyalism, usually analyse Paisleyism, Bruce's *God Save Ulster* as well as *The Ulster Loyalist Political Vision* have both taken evangelicals as their central theme. Patrick Heffernan's 'Finding a Voice? Development of Unionist Working-class Political Thought', is one of the few pieces of academic research to take working class politics within Loyalism as its central theme. However, it concentrates largely on the more late 1980s and early 1990s. As such, it has been necessary to dig into numerous contemporary sources, from party political publications to simple newspapers in order to get the full picture. Understanding of this primary and secondary research had been re-enforced through a detailed interview with former PUP party leader Hugh Smyth.

1. Working-class Loyalism and the politics of control. 1920-1969⁴

Unionism as an ideology is similar to all nationalistic ideologies,⁵ in that it involves class collaboration and attempts to deny the basic contradictions and antagonisms between classes.⁶ One of the great successes of Unionism in the first fifty years of its existence was its ability ‘to maintain effective control over its own masses’⁷. This was achieved through the encouragement and harnessing of a ‘militia culture’ within Northern Ireland, through the Orange Order and through the deliberate attempts made by Unionist leaders to remove all social questions from the political discourse of the province.

The Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) of 1912 had been formed, led and trained by the upper and middle classes of the province and had fought valiantly during the battle of the Somme. In the aftermath of the First World War the UVF was re-established as a community defence or vigilante organisation to fight the Irish Republican Army (IRA). The new state of Northern Ireland very quickly gained control of this militia through the establishment of the Ulster Special Constabulary (USC)⁸, to assist in the fight against the IRA.⁹ The Orange Order, which had previously encouraged young men to join the UVF, now encouraged young men to join the USC.¹⁰ The USC were

⁴ Much of the research for this section of the dissertation is informed by research the author carried out in order to complete the essay ‘How effective was James Craig (Lord Craigavon) as Prime Minister of Northern Ireland?’ for the course on Northern Ireland which took place in the first half of this academic year, course code HI3024.

⁵ Ronnie Moore & Andrew Sanders, Formations of Culture: Nationalism and Conspiracy Ideology in Ulster Loyalism, *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 18, No. 6 (Dec., 2002), p.9.

⁶ J.W. McAuley, & P.J McCormack, The Protestant working-class and the state in Northern Ireland since 1930: a problematic relationship, p.115, P11001 NIPC.

⁷ *The Birth of Ulster Unionism*, third edition, British and Irish Communist Organisation, 1971, p.12, P445(a) NIPC.

⁸ The USC consisted of the A, B and C Specials. The B-Specials were the most numerous and were to become infamous in the Catholic community.

⁹ Sir Arthur Hezlet, *The ‘B’ Specials, A History of The Ulster Special Constabulary*, (London 1972) p.15.

¹⁰ The Orange Order and the Border, *Irish Historical Studies*, May 2002 p.55.

effectively a paramilitary force or ‘civilian militia.’¹¹ With almost 15,000 armed men at its disposal,¹² the Northern Ireland government was no regional talking shop or ‘debating society’,¹³ but a force to be reckoned with. The Northern Ireland government and the ruling Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) increasingly sought to militarise this force and the existence of the USC allowed the government of a degree of political freedom by concealing what were military problems as simple criminal matters.¹⁴ The second benefit this had was the successful harnessing of Protestant militarism. Northern Ireland’s first Prime Minister, James Craig, knew that his government was presiding over a population the majority of whose loyalty to the Crown was not in doubt, but whose loyalty to political institutions was conditional.¹⁵ If one examines the cabinet papers of Craig’s government, one can see that the regime’s primary reason for arming the USC was not fear of the IRA, but fear of an uncontrolled Protestant militia.¹⁶ Indeed Craig himself stated that it was his wish to ‘ensure that as large a proportion of the population as possible were brought under discipline’.¹⁷

The danger to law and order of not having militant Protestants under discipline was a real one. An example of this danger was the mass expulsion of Catholics from ship yards in the 1920s by Protestant workers who were critical of the government ‘for not taking up Carson’s offer to organise the Protestants to aid the army and police against the IRA.’¹⁸ The UUP harnessed a militia culture in order to cement its own control

¹¹ J. Bowyer Bell, *The Secret Army: The IRA*, (Poolbeg, 1998) p.294.

¹² Hezlet, *The ‘B’ Specials*, p.13.

¹³ Cabinet Papers of Northern Ireland, MIC/686, Reel: 1, CAB/4/5/5, PRONI.

¹⁴ Brian A Follis, *A State Under Siege, The Establishment of Northern Ireland 1920-1925*, (Oxford 1995) p.90.

¹⁵ Patrick Buckland, *James Craig*, (Gill & Mc Mahon 1980) p.32.

¹⁶ Cabinet Papers of Northern Ireland ,PRONI, MIC/686, Reel: 1, CAB/5/15/7.

¹⁷ Austen Morgan, *Labour and partition :the Belfast working-class: 1905-23* (Pluto Press, 1991) p.289.

¹⁸ Bob Purdie, Red Hand or Red Flag? Loyalism and Workers in Belfast *Saothar* Vol. 8 p.67.

over the state and its own people. The working-class, potentially ‘the gravediggers of the bourgeoisie’, were turned into the gatekeepers.¹⁹

It has been said that the ‘function of a national culture in the bourgeois system is to unite the various classes in the society under the rule of the bourgeoisie.’²⁰ The importance of this cultural control was well recognised by the UUP, who maintained close relations with the Orange Order, ‘whose lodges fulfil the role of working men’s clubs’.²¹ However even that ‘Sacred Order’ was not immune to the tensions between classes; The Orange Order split roughly along class lines in the early twentieth century, with a working class splinter group calling itself the Independent Orange Order (IOO). The IOO revolted against the traditional upper class Unionist leaders following their failure to deal with issues of poverty and also made appeals to its Catholic ‘Fellow Irishmen’ in the interests of social progress.²² In 1907 the IOO backed the dockers and carters strike.²³ The IOO has been cited as proof by socialists and nationalists that the Protestant working-classes held revolutionary potential.²⁴ Although the IOO did merge back into the ranks of mainstream Orangeism, this highlighted to the UUP that they could not take their cultural hegemony for granted. Throughout the course of the UUP’s fifty-year rule close links with the Orange Order were always stressed, with Craig stating that he was ‘an Orangeman first and a politician and a member of parliament afterwards.’²⁵

¹⁹ McAuley & McCormack, *The Protestant working-class and the state in Northern Ireland since 1930* p.115.

²⁰ *The Birth of Ulster Unionism*, B&ICO, p.12.

²¹ Martin Wallace, *Northern Ireland, 50 Years of Self-Government* (David & Charles, Newton Abbot 1971) p.84.

²² Purdie, *Red Hand or Red Flag?* p.65.

²³ Ibid. p.66.

²⁴ *United Irishman*, August 1968.

²⁵ Michael Farrell, *Northern Ireland, The Orange State*, (Pluto Press 1976) p.92.

The Northern Irish Labour Party (NILP) was one of the few parties within Northern Ireland which sought votes from both sides of the religious divide. The party attempted to build cross-community class consciousness and presented itself as the opposition party in Northern Ireland. In 1925 the constitutional position of the North finally seemed, to some, to have been settled, with the feared boundary commission having come to little. In the same year the NILP returned three MP's.²⁶ This was all the more worrying for the UUP regime as the majority of Labour organisers in the North hailed from the Protestant community.²⁷ The Northern Ireland government recognised that unemployment had reached 'dangerous' levels in 1932, with over 75,000 out of work.²⁸ With the overall downward turn in the economy there was certainly the potential for a strong Labour movement to emerge. Craig's government put a stop to this in one fell swoop: the abolition of proportional representation, for which Craig took 'full personal responsibility'.²⁹ Craig stated that it was his intention to have in parliament 'men who are for the union on the one hand, or who are against it and want to go into a Dublin parliament on the other'.³⁰ The UUP wished to take all talk of class or economic issues out of the political sphere of Northern Ireland, and have her politics defined only by the constitutional issue. In so much as Craig was attempting to damage the NILP and retard her growth, this move was extremely successful as 'at a stroke its influence as a third party was weakened to the point of being more symbolic than real'.³¹

²⁶ Graham Walker, The Northern Ireland Labour Party in the 1920s, *Saothar* Vol. 10 p.22

²⁷ Walker, The Northern Ireland Labour p.23.

²⁸ *Draft Conclusions of Cabinet Discussions 31 August 1932* Cabinet Papers of Northern Ireland MIC/686, Reel 14, CAB/4/304/6, PRONI.

²⁹ Buckland, *James Craig*, p.111.

³⁰ Farrell, *The Orange State*, p.111.

³¹ Walker, The Northern Ireland Labour p.27.

The way the UUP fought its campaigns was calculated to stir up sectarianism. It was precisely when the threat from nationalists was least pronounced and economic problems most severe that unionists made their most divisive speeches. This continued trend continued right into the 1950s and 1960s, Hugh Smyth recalls Unionist politicians coming into the Shankill and warning those that lived there that a vote for *anyone* but the UUP was a vote for a united Ireland.³² Any signal of co-operation between Catholic and Protestant workers was seen as a threat by the Northern Irish government. In 1932 for example, there were joint demonstrations by unemployed Catholic and Protestant workers.³³ The reaction to this co-operation and dissatisfaction with the unionist regime was an attempt by the UUP to define the economic issues through an ethnic lens. Craig and others made a series of highly divisive speeches discouraging the employment of Catholics and ‘disloyals’.³⁴ In 1938, one of the worst years for unemployment in Northern Ireland,³⁵ the unionists portrayed the election as simply a plebiscite on the existence of the state following the ratification of Ireland’s Constitution in 1937.³⁶

So it was through the utilisation of the Orange Order and the USC, the abolition of PR and the continued stirring up of old fears and hatreds that the UUP maintained control of the Protestant masses. Of these mechanisms it was the encouragement of the USC-controlled vigilantism³⁷ which was to have the most disastrous effect. During the emergence of the state, Craig said that he would be happy to countenance the

³² Interview, Hugh Smyth, Shankill Road Belfast, 21 April 2009.

³³ Hepburn, Belfast Riots p.76.

³⁴ Ibid. p.77.

³⁵ A.C Hepburn, The Belfast Riots of 1935, *Social History*, Vol.15, No.1 p.75.

³⁶ Buckland, *James Craig*, p.97.

³⁷ Steve Bruce argues in *The Edge of the Union: The Ulster Loyalist Political Vision* that no militia existed between 1921 and 1969 because there was no serious threat to the union. However this ignores entirely the USC where thousands of young men were kept under arms during the period he describes.

downsizing of the UCS once peace time hit,³⁸ however, despite the coming of peace to Northern Ireland, this force was kept under arms and under control. Once ‘the Troubles’ began, the USC was disbanded and a paramilitary organisation calling itself the Ulster Special Constabulary Association (USCA) was established which had close links and shared membership with the UVF and UDA.³⁹ The UUP spent the first fifty years of its rule trying to encourage *controlled* sectarianism in order to keep itself in power. It trained and armed its working-class, in an attempt to encourage *controlled* paramilitarism in order to keep its working-class ‘under discipline’ and the IRA in check. But in the late 1960s the UUP lost control of the monster it had created and the Protestant paramilitaries ‘erupted like a primeval force, dripping with overt sectarian hatred.’⁴⁰

2. Working-class Loyalism and the Outbreak of the Troubles: Prison and Pogroms

³⁸ *Draft Conclusions of the Cabinet meeting 19 April 1922*, Cabinet Papers of Northern Ireland MIC/686, Reel: 1, CAB/4/40/46, PRONI.

³⁹ Ex-USC men draw up list for ‘new force’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 4 September 1971.

⁴⁰ *Labour in Ulster*, British and Irish Communist Organisation, p.14, P407(a) NIPC.

It is rarely disputed that most of the hardships suffered during ‘The Troubles’ were primarily suffered by the working-class. The middle class were far less directly affected as they were ‘not being burnt out or shot at.’⁴¹ The communal riots which rocked Northern Ireland at the outset affected working-class areas. Those who were interned and therefore those families left without fathers, brothers and sons, were almost entirely working-class. Following on from this, the prison experience, inside and outside the wire, is one which was almost the sole preserve of the working-class. This section will examine how, counter-intuitively, the outbreak of ethnic violence (usually associated with pan-class ethnic alliances) assisted the emergence of a Loyalist class consciousness.

In 1969 Catholics and Protestants in marginal areas were burned out of their homes and ‘forced to move into their respective ghettos.’⁴² Although many more Catholic homes were burnt out than Protestant, the burning of Protestant homes had a profound effect on the community. To this day the burning of homes on the Falls is seen by Loyalists as largely reactive. Murals in Loyalist areas tell the tale of Protestants being burned out by Catholic mobs and being forced to flee overseas.⁴³ From an outside perspective it is easy to compare the numbers burned out on both sides, and surmise that Catholics were the victims and Protestants the perpetrators of the crime. However in this many observers miss the point, what is important is not what happened, but how it was perceived and how it is remembered by the different communities. After all the rhetoric of the ‘Big Shots’ such as Paisley, it was members of the working-class who looked around them to find burning streets, whilst the ‘Big Shots’ went

⁴¹ Bruce, *The Red Hand* p.270.

⁴² Bruce, *God Save Ulster*, p.98.

⁴³ See Figure One.

back to their leafy suburbs.⁴⁴ Hugh Smyth, who lived in the Highfield estate on the Shankill when ‘the Troubles’ started, recalls waking up one morning in the early 1970s and seeing large parts of his estate burned or abandoned.⁴⁵ The first blows of ‘the Troubles’ fell on the Falls and the Shankill road, entirely working-class areas. This was not lost on working-class Loyalists.

Internment without trial was introduced to Northern Ireland in August 1971.⁴⁶ Intense rioting followed the introduction of internment; 2% of Catholic homes in Belfast were burned down and 0.5% of Protestant homes.⁴⁷ On the first night of internment, 342 men were taken to the internment camp Long Kesh, all nationalists.⁴⁸ However, as with every other reduction of civil liberties introduced to control republicans, internment was also applied to Loyalists over time.⁴⁹ Internment, in addition to simple criminal charges, removed many men from their families and caused ‘great hardship’⁵⁰ on both sides of the community. When the main bread-winner in many families was removed, those left behind were left in even worse poverty than they had previously been. Hugh Smyth recounts that when this hardship came upon people they looked around them for help, and found that there was no one there to help.⁵¹ According to Smyth, the Loyalist community felt that they had been left to suffer by their leaders who had only ever come to the Shankill around election time. The feeling amongst Loyalists at the time was: ‘we’ve voted Unionist all our lives, and

⁴⁴ Interview, Hugh Smyth, Shankill Road Belfast, 21 April 2009.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Muintir Condemns Internment, *Nenagh Guardian*, 28 August 1971.

⁴⁷ Cusack & McDonald, *UVF*, p.90.

⁴⁸ Ibid. p.90.

⁴⁹ Bruce, *The Edge of the Union*, p.10.

⁵⁰ Interview, Hugh Smyth, Shankill Road Belfast, 21 April 2009.

⁵¹ Ibid.

where has it got us?⁵² Those families left on the outside felt as if they had been abandoned to chaos and poverty by their supposed leaders.

In relation to the formation of the UVF, the important Loyalist leader and thinker Gusty Spence claims that he was approached by a high ranking member of the UUP in 1966 and was told that the UVF was reforming throughout the province.⁵³ As has already been mentioned, the truth or otherwise of such statements is not the point. The fact that Spence *believed* he was being used as a pawn and then left to rot was what mattered. Encouragement of the UVF may or may not have come from Prime Minister O'Neils rivals within his own party, but one member of the 'Fur coat Brigade'⁵⁴ who certainly did encourage the UVF was the Rev. Ian Paisley. Not only could Paisley's fiery language be taken as having encouraged the actions of the UVF, but he overtly courted the favour of the UVF in the early days. In June 1966 Paisley read out a letter of support which he had received from the UVF at a rally of his supporters in Ulster Hall, calling them 'defenders of the flag of Ulster.'⁵⁵ Yet a few short months later, following the murder of Peter Ward, Paisley had forgotten all about the UVF and claimed not to have ever heard of them.⁵⁶

Paisley carefully fostered and utilised the militia culture discussed in the previous section; he founded a group known as the Ulster Constitution Defence Committee (UCDC) which was little more than a front for a paramilitary organisation known as the Ulster Protestant Volunteers (UPV).⁵⁷ The UPV was militaristic in tone and organisation, and was divided into divisions. Although Paisley later claimed that this

⁵² Interview, Hugh Smyth, Shankill Road Belfast, 21 April 2009.

⁵³ Roy Garland, *Gusty Spence*, (Blackstaff press 2001) p.48.

⁵⁴ Interview, Hugh Smyth, Shankill Road Belfast, 21 April 2009.

⁵⁵ Cusack & McDonald, *UVF*, p.14.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Taylor, *Loyalists*, p.35.

was simply a reference to electoral boundaries,⁵⁸ this is hardly convincing. ‘For God and Ulster’, the motto of the UVF, was also the motto of the UPV.⁵⁹ The UPV did have links to the UVF. In 1969 the Loyalists bombed a number of targets, North⁶⁰ and South⁶¹, in order to destabilise the O’Neill Government. All of the men charged with these attacks were members of the UPV as well as the UVF⁶² and the explosives for the attack were supplied by a UPV quarry man.⁶³ Noel Docherty, who had been a founding member of the UPV with Paisley, was arrested for explosives offences having been caught supplying the UVF.⁶⁴ Although Docherty and Paisley both claim that Paisley had no knowledge of the more militaristic elements of the UPV, it is certainly true that Paisley bore a degree of moral responsibility for the slide into violence as ‘he had contributed substantially to the general climate which allowed members of his organisation to believe that such acts were justified.’⁶⁵ In this respect at least, Spence was justified in believing that he, and other members of the working-class, had been encouraged to act violently and then abandoned.

The prison experience represented a much steeper learning curve for Loyalists than it did for Republicans. Republicans had a history of imprisonment, and when ‘the Troubles’ began they simply fell back into a familiar pattern. Loyalists on the other hand had ‘traditionally supported the institution of prison as a place for those who rebelled against the state.’⁶⁶ They were now being imprisoned and maltreated by the state they had fought to defend. Once Loyalist prisoners entered the compounds at

⁵⁸ Bruce, *The Red Hand*, p.22.

⁵⁹ Taylor, *Loyalists*, p.35.

⁶⁰ Dennis McGrath, Blasts hit power, water, *Irish Independent*, 21 April 1969.

⁶¹ Motive for Explosion still Obscure, *Irish Times*, 21 October 1969.

⁶² Bruce, *God Save Ulster*, p.78.

⁶³ Taylor, *Loyalists*, p.37.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Bruce, *God Save Ulster*, p.79.

⁶⁶ Henry Sinnerton, *David Ervine, Uncharted waters*, (Brandon 2002) p.42.

Long Kesh, many of them were brought to see the Camp C/O, Gusty Spence. David Ervine was one of these men, arrested and brought to Long Kesh once he had been caught with a gelignite bomb in his car; Ervine was brought into Spence's hut and asked 'Why are you here?' When Ervine answered that he was there for possession of explosives, Spence replied 'No no no no no. Why are you here?'⁶⁷ This question was one which had eaten away at Spence since his arrest and imprisonment in 1966 for the murder of Peter Ward, which he still denies he carried out – although he does not deny being a member of the UVF at that time⁶⁸ or even carrying a gun that day.⁶⁹

Spence, 'inside the wire', started to think similar thoughts to Hugh Smyth, believing that people had become disenchanted with the political leadership they were getting, which was leading them nowhere but up a blind alley.⁷⁰ In a tape Spence recorded in 1974, he said that 'We need to politicise people.'⁷¹ This politicisation is exactly what he attempted to do in Long Kesh. The sense of betrayal Spence felt led him to attempt to ensure that the men under his command in Long Kesh understood why they were there, and crucially, why the men who led them there were not. David Ervine, Billy Hutchinson, Ken Gibson and hundreds of other young men passed through the prison which Spence ran. Under Spence, education was not only encouraged but compulsory.⁷² This paid dividends as some members gained their basic education at the camp and then went on to secondary and third level studies. Billy Hutchinson, for example, achieved a degree in Social Science and a diploma in town planning while in Long Kesh.⁷³ The library which the Loyalist prisoners built up over time was an

⁶⁷ Taylor, *Loyalists*, p.142.

⁶⁸ Garland, *Gusty Spence*, p.65.

⁶⁹ Taylor, *Loyalists*, p.44.

⁷⁰ Ibid. p.138.

⁷¹ Ibid. p.139.

⁷² Sinnerton, *David Ervine*, p.43.

⁷³ Taylor, *Loyalists*, p.138.

impressive one they were complimented on it years later by a visiting Catholic Cardinal who was also surprised to find that some of the Loyalist prisoners had learned Irish.⁷⁴

Members of the Official Irish Republican Army (OIRA) and the UVF mixed in the study huts of Long Kesh and shared a landing in the Crumlin Road gaol before the granting of political status.⁷⁵ The two groups began to converse and study together in the early 1970s. Whether the leftism of Spence and his men gave the two groups common ground or if contact with the Marxist Officials turned some members of the UVF towards the left is impossible to evaluate. In all probability the answer is a little bit of both. According to Spence, members of the OIRA actively sought dialogue with members of the UVF.⁷⁶ There is some documentation to suggest that this may have been a deliberate tactic on the part of the OIRA.⁷⁷ Whether this policy included attempting to educate UVF prisoners is unknown. In addition to this, the groups had shared enemies in the prison guards,⁷⁸ not to mention the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) which outnumbered them both. In their campaign to get better prison conditions, the UVF were ignored by the UUP and the DUP, while Paisley advocated hanging them⁷⁹. Only the SDLP⁸⁰ and, in an odd turn, the Catholic Church⁸¹ seemed interested in prison conditions.

⁷⁴ Garland, *Gusty Spense*, p.249.

⁷⁵ Ibid. p.127.

⁷⁶ Ibid. p.120.

⁷⁷ On the 6 of November 1966 at the IRA Army Council, it was resolved ‘That the Army do everything possible to widen the rift between the UVF and the Unionist Party.’ (*Review of Unlawful and Allied Organisations: December 1, 1964, to November 21, 1966*, p.7, Dept Justice 98/6/495 NAI).

⁷⁸ Garland, *Gusty Spense*, p.121.

⁷⁹ Sinnerton, *David Ervine*, p.50.

⁸⁰ Ibid. p.80.

⁸¹ Ibid. p.50.

According to Hugh Smyth, during the first fifty years of the state ‘Protestants were made to believe that they were first class citizens and they believed it.’⁸² The outbreak of ‘the Troubles’ saw a middle and upper class leadership up the tempo of the conflict and then denounce their followers and retreat to their suburbs. The state which members of the UVF had taken up arms to defend had attacked them as viciously as it had attacked those trying to destroy it. Outside the wire, working-class estates were burned to the ground, working-class men were locked up and their families left impoverished. Inside the wire, prisoners were questioning their leaders and their political allegiances, educating themselves and working with and conversing with members of the OIRA.

3. Working-class Loyalists take over: the 1974 UWC strike

⁸² Interview, Hugh Smyth, Shankill Road Belfast, 21 April 2009.

The Ulster Workers Council (UWC) strike which brought down the Sunningdale Executive in 1974 has been labelled ‘Fourteen days of Fascist terror’,⁸³ a ‘severe blow to the British monopoly Capitalist class’,⁸⁴ ‘the last major successful rebellion in the history of the UK’,⁸⁵ or as the first time in history that the Loyalist working-class asserted themselves against the wishes of their leaders.⁸⁶ Perhaps it was all of the above. This section traces the emergence of the UWC and the course of the strike, before going on to analyse how this action affected Loyalist political thought.

The UWC had its origins in a group known as the Loyalist Association of Workers (LAW). LAW was established in 1970 to oppose ITGWU and Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) involvement in Northern Irish trade unions.⁸⁷ During this period there were incessant calls to form ‘separate Ulster TUC’.⁸⁸ LAW attracted the support of thousands of Loyalist trade unionists throughout the province. Although this action does appear to be blatantly sectarian in nature, one must take into account the world view of those who supported LAW. Loyalists considered themselves a part of the United Kingdom, and as ‘Ulstermen.’ The ITGWU was an all-Ireland institution which had close links with nationalism and ‘unequivocally’ supported a united Ireland.⁸⁹ The fact that Loyalist trade unionists rejected being associated with an organisation organised on an all-Ireland basis is not surprising. Indeed, Loyalist shipyard workers had a great deal more in common with workers in Glasgow and Liverpool than they did with workers in Dublin or Cork. The LAW was initially

⁸³ Jack Bennett, *Fourteen Days of Fascist Terror*, (Connolly Publications 1974), P1920 NIPC.

⁸⁴ *An Analysis of the Significance of the Ulster Workers’ Strike, May 14-30, 1974*, A series of articles from the RED PATRIOT Editorial Staff, P489 NIPC.

⁸⁵ Cusack & McDonald, *UVF*, p.132.

⁸⁶ Interview, Hugh Smyth, Shankill Road Belfast, 21 April 2009.

⁸⁷ ‘It’s time to wind up LAW’, *Sunday News*, 9 September 1973.

⁸⁸ Francis Devine, ‘“From The Abstract To The Reality”: Jim McFall And Belfast Boilermakers, 1926-1992’, Unpublished article in authors possession.

⁸⁹ Interview, Francis Devine, SIPTU College, 27 April 2009.

successful in galvanising Loyalist workers. LAW was behind the strike in March 1971 which brought down James Chichester Clarke.⁹⁰ The group also organised an anti-internment strike which turned riotous.⁹¹ LAW, with its close links to the UDA advocated an independent Northern Ireland,⁹² and this was the death knell of the organisation. In 1972 LAW announced its wish to become a political party,⁹³ but elements within the organisation opposed this political move and the project was still-born.⁹⁴ The group's leader, Billy Hull, advocated Northern Ireland seeking aid from the Soviet Union in the event of a Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI).⁹⁵ He was also dogged by allegations of financial irregularities.⁹⁶ By September 1973 LAW was had fallen as fast as it had risen, and was described as nothing more than Mr. Hull and a small cabal of supporters.⁹⁷ It was finally 'torn apart' by a proposed rent-and-rate strike.⁹⁸

Once it became apparent that LAW was 'no longer capable of harnessing the industrial strength of Protestant workers' the foundations of the UWC were laid.⁹⁹ In November of 1973, the meetings which led to the establishment of the UWC were ongoing. Having received assurances that there would be no paramilitary involvement in the organisation, the Harland and Wolff shop steward Harry Murray committed the ship yard workers to the organisation.¹⁰⁰ However as time went on, despite Murray

⁹⁰ Gordon Gillespie, The origins of the Ulster Workers Council Strike: Structure and tactics, *Etudes Irlandaises*, 2004 No.29, p.130 P15643 NIPC.

⁹¹Ibid. p.131.

⁹² UDA will back new Loyalist party, *Irish Times*, 3 August 1972. (LAW and the UDA even shared the same office space. Anderson, Don, *Fourteen May Days: The Inside Story of the Loyalist Strike of 1974*, (Gill & Macmillan 1994) Chapter three).

⁹³ LAW to become political party, *News Letter*, 2 August 1972.

⁹⁴ Politics out- LAW group, *Belfast Telegraph*, 23 August 1972.

⁹⁵ A statement from the Loyalist Association of Workers, *News Letter*, 23 November 1972.

⁹⁶ 'It's time to wind up LAW', *Sunday News*, 9 September 1973.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Bruce, *The Red Hand*, p.92.

⁹⁹ David McKittrick, UWC rose from Ashes of LAW, *Irish Times*, 17 May 1974.

¹⁰⁰ Gillespie, The origins of the Ulster Workers Council Strike, p.135.

being ‘dead against’ paramilitary involvement, the UWC eventually accepted that the involvement of paramilitary organisations was a necessity.¹⁰¹ In early March 1974, Ken Gibson of the UVF was brought onto the central committee of the UWC and the organisation was making donations to support Loyalist prisoners.¹⁰²

The Sunningdale agreement was drawn up in 1973 and ‘the British government, like a conjuror drawing a dove from his sleeve, announced the resolution of the conflict: a new form of devolved government in which executive positions would be divided between liberal unionists and the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP).’¹⁰³ The part of the agreement which concentrated Loyalists minds in opposition to the agreement was the proposal for a Council of Ireland where British, Irish and Northern Irish members could meet to discuss issues of mutual importance.¹⁰⁴ The agreement divided the UUP and incurred the wrath of the DUP, the Loyalist paramilitaries and most importantly perhaps, the UWC. On the evening of Tuesday 14 May 1974, Brian Faulkner, the leader of the pro-Sunningdale liberal unionist wing of the UUP won an important vote in the Assembly, when a vote calling for the rejection of Sunningdale was defeated. Immediately after the vote was taken, Harry Murray, the chairperson of the UWC, announced an indefinite strike in support of the demand for new elections to the assembly.¹⁰⁵

For the first day or two of the strike, not many people took it seriously – even Murray’s wife asked him on 15 of May why he wasn’t going to work.¹⁰⁶ However, this is where the paramilitaries came in. Workers were turned back from factories at

¹⁰¹ Ian S Wood, *Crimes of Loyalty: A History of the UDA*, (Edinburgh 2006), p.38.

¹⁰² Gillespie, The origins of the Ulster Workers Council Strike, p.135.

¹⁰³ Bruce, *The Edge of the Union*, p.12.

¹⁰⁴ Bruce, *God Save Ulster*, p.103.

¹⁰⁵ Bruce: *The Red Hand*, p.94.

¹⁰⁶ Taylor, *Loyalists*, p.130.

gun point¹⁰⁷ and intimidation was widespread.¹⁰⁸ Once people realised that the strike was a serious matter, Northern Ireland was brought to a standstill. Entire areas were turned ‘into ghost towns’ and the port of Larne was completely shut down.¹⁰⁹ The strike was condemned by ITGWU leaders,¹¹⁰ who attempted to organise ‘back to work’ marches.¹¹¹ These marches however were an abysmal failure, with only handfuls of workers turning out.¹¹² Paisley and other anti-Sunningdale politicians such as Craig ‘jumped on the bandwagon’¹¹³ once they saw that the strike was not going to fail. The intimidation which was so necessary in the first week of the strike faded away once the strike had built momentum.¹¹⁴ Paisley held huge rallies in support of the strike once it became clear it would succeed.¹¹⁵ Fourteen days after Loyalists had failed to kill Sunningdale in the Assembly, they had killed it in the streets.¹¹⁶

According to Hugh Smyth, ‘[t]he strike let the working-class people know the power they had in their hands.’¹¹⁷ The strike was planned entirely by members of the working-class, with politicians and middle class Unionists coming on board later.

Paramilitaries (almost entirely drawn from the working-class)¹¹⁸ and workers planned the stoppage without politicians of the anti-agreement United Ulster Unionist Council (UUUC) as they felt that the politicians could not be trusted.¹¹⁹ Indeed the politicians associated with the UWC ‘did their best to wriggle out of calling a strike’¹²⁰ possibly

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Interview, Hugh Smyth, Shankill Road Belfast, 21 April 2009.

¹⁰⁹ UDA turns Larne into ghost town, *Belfast Telegraph*, 15 May, 1974.

¹¹⁰ UWC not trade union group, says Blease, *Irish Times*, 29 May 1974.

¹¹¹ Unions Organise marches back to work, *Irish Times*, 20 May 1974.

¹¹² Marches Flop, *Belfast Telegraph*, 21 May 1974.

¹¹³ Interview, Hugh Smyth, Shankill Road Belfast, 21 April 2009.

¹¹⁴ According to Hugh Smyth: ‘after the first week, people didn’t need to be intimidated anymore.’

¹¹⁵ Rally of 4,000 Paisley supporters of strike, *News Letter*, 25 May 1974.

¹¹⁶ Strike ruins executive, *Daily Telegraph*, 29 May 1974.

¹¹⁷ Interview, Hugh Smyth, Shankill Road Belfast, 21 April 2009.

¹¹⁸ Bruce, *The Red Hand*, p.270.

¹¹⁹ Anderson, *Fourteen May Days*, Chapter three.

¹²⁰ Bruce, *The Red Hand*, p.92.

fearing a repeat of the violence which had accompanied the 1973 strike. Some experienced trade unionists believed that a strike should not be called mid week, but rather on a Monday when 'people generally don't want to go to work.'¹²¹ Despite the opposition of these two groups, the workers and the paramilitaries went ahead.

Once the strike was underway the UWC co-ordinating committee went from a group of unknowns to the de-facto government of the province. One of the strike leaders, Glenn Barr, spoke about the shock which hit the co-ordinators: 'Here we were, a bunch of working-class fellows, and all of a sudden we were handed all of this power, and this responsibility'.¹²² UWC statements were read out on the BBC in the morning, passes were issued by the UWC saying who could or couldn't work,¹²³ even the levels of electricity which the province was to receive was decided by the UWC, who promised to reduce the power from 725 megawatts to 400, and did just that.¹²⁴ Many Loyalist 'strikers' simply chose to spend their time in the pub,¹²⁵ but on 17 of May the UWC 'ordered the city off the drink' and closed pubs, reputedly under pressure from 'Loyalist wives'.¹²⁶ When law and order had broken down in certain areas in the early 1970s the UVF had copied the IRA in establishing taxi services in working-class areas of the city.¹²⁷ UVF taxis were even made free for pensioners a few months after they came into operation.¹²⁸ During the strike these skills had to be put to use throughout Northern Ireland when basic services such as rubbish collection were organised by the paramilitaries: photographs of happy men in military uniform

¹²¹ Anderson, *Fourteen May Days*, Chapter three.

¹²² Taylor, *Loyalists*, p.129.

¹²³ Devine, "From The Abstract To The Reality".

¹²⁴ Robert Fisk, *The point of no return, the strike which broke the British in Northern Ireland*, (London 1975) p.19.

¹²⁵ Wood, *Crimes of Loyalty*, p.37.

¹²⁶ "Order City off Drink", *Irish News*, 17 May 1974.

¹²⁷ UVF taxi service in operation, *Irish News*, 17 August 1972.

¹²⁸ "No taxi charge for Elderly"-UVF, *News Letter*, 28 September 1972.

loading up rubbish trucks were published in newspapers.¹²⁹ The working-class members of the UWC were not just given leadership of their own community, but of all sections of the state. A *de facto* department of agriculture was established in the UWC head offices with the UWC taking charge of ensuring that each farm got enough feed to look after its cattle.¹³⁰ The condemnation of the British Government, Irish and British trade union leaders and many politicians did not change the fact the workers were firmly in charge. An army unit which infiltrated an electricity plant concluded that without the workers it would be impossible for the military to operate the plant.¹³¹

The strike had a profound effect on those who participated in it. It made them realise that they did not *need* their leadership, that their leadership *needed* them. The British and Irish Communist Organisation (B&ICO) was a Maoist group who believed that ‘[t]he economic situation in Ireland in the 19th century gave rise to the development of two nationalities’,¹³² the Irish nationality and the Ulster nationality. The Worker’s Association, a small branch of the B&ICO which was represented on the executive of the NILP at this time¹³³, was supportive of the strike, issuing a series of bulletins, the last of which stated:

The general state of mind brought about in the Protestant community by the strike offers a greater opportunity for the working-class out of a democratic political settlement than has ever existed before.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ *News Letter*, 25 May 1974.

¹³⁰ Wood, *Crimes of Loyalty*, p.38.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* p.38.

¹³² *The Birth of Ulster Unionism*, B&ICO, p.12.

¹³³ *Why the NILP? A Dossier on the Northern Ireland Labour Party*, December 1974, P4785 NIPC

¹³⁴ Wood, *Crimes of Loyalty*, p.38.

While this at first appears counter-intuitive, an analysis of the discussions which led the UDA to form the Ulster Political Research Group (UPRG),¹³⁵ seems to back it up. In March 1975 the leadership of the UDA met for a three-day conference in the Netherlands.¹³⁶ This conference recognised that the UWC strike had provided a rallying point for the Protestant community. It was believed that the UDA should seek other such rallying points, such as a clear statement on and actions in relation to the human rights issue. It was also felt that action taken by the UDA on human rights could ‘test the extent to which the Catholic community was prepared to co-operate in building a new Ulster.’¹³⁷ The UDA leadership recognised the need for clear aims for the organisation in order to define what this ‘new Ulster’ might actually look like. One thing was certain; the UDA ‘did not seek to bring back all the trappings of the old Unionist government with the disadvantages for working-class people which had characterised the last fifty years.’¹³⁸ The reaction of the UVF to the strike is dealt with in a later section dealing with their early foray into politics.

The ‘[s]trike gave Loyalist groups a taste of political power’¹³⁹ which they would not forget.¹⁴⁰ Once built up a head of steam and attracted Paisleyite support, the UWC strike was a ‘disparate coalition of Loyalist workers, politicians and paramilitaries.’¹⁴¹ Although Paisley managed to ‘cash in on what the strikers had achieved’¹⁴² this does

¹³⁵ The UPRG was the political wing of the UDA. This group transformed itself into the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP), which took an active part in the Good Friday negotiations. The UDP collapsed into itself and was disbanded after the agreement was signed having achieved lukewarm support from the community.

¹³⁶ Minutes of UDA conference, 27 March 1975, *CAIN*, Accessed on 21 November 2008 (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/uwc/uwc-pdfs/udaconf75.pdf>).

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Minutes of UDA conference, 28 March 1975.

¹³⁹ Patrick Heffernan, *Finding a Voice? Development of Unionist Working-class Political Thought*, (unpublished MPhil thesis, University of Dublin, 1995) p.13, P6204 NIPC.

¹⁴⁰ Hugh Smyth believes that in the immediate aftermath of the strike the UWC should have formed a political party which ‘would have cleaned up.’

¹⁴¹ Gillespie, *The origins of the Ulster Workers Council Strike*, p.129.

¹⁴² Interview, Hugh Smyth, Shankill Road Belfast, 21 April 2009.

not diminish its importance. The fact which makes the strike stand out in Loyalist History is that it was the first time the working class led their 'bettters' in rebellion, rather than simply being followers and pawns.

4. Working-class Loyalism and 'People's armies'

During the period under study, the UVF and to a much lesser extent the UDA, moved politically to the left. This leftward move developed a logic of its own which led to co-operation with their 'enemies' and the emergence of some 'ghost groups' whose very existence is still a matter of debate to this day.¹⁴³ This section will analyse paramilitary leftism. The Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) was accused by its rivals of

¹⁴³ The Ulster Citizen Army Smear, *Lobster, the Journal of Parapolitics*, Issue 14, 1987, p.20.

being a Marxist group, to what extent to which this could be considered true? We will then go on to examine one of the aforementioned ‘ghost groups’, the Ulster Citizens Army (UCA). (Unfortunately we do not have the space to trace all of the Marxist ‘ghost groups’ which existed during this period, such as the Revolutionary Citizens Army (RCA) which reputedly had close links to Peoples Democracy.¹⁴⁴) Having dismissed the notion that the UFF was a Marxist group and analysed the significance of the UCA, we will finally go on to examine the co-operation which occurred between the OIRA and the UVF.

One could be forgiven, at first glance, for thinking that the UFF, with its anti-colonial sounding name, was a left-wing group. The group, which is largely considered to simply be a front or pseudonym which members of the UDA could use in order to carry out murders,¹⁴⁵ was nothing of the sort. The name ‘Ulster Freedom Fighters’ was in fact originally chosen as a joke.¹⁴⁶ There is very little evidence beyond the name of the group and the claims made by the UVF that the group had leftist leanings.¹⁴⁷ The only other piece of evidence indicating that the UFF had a social consciousness was the discovery in the Maze prison of handkerchiefs where a portrait of communist hero Che Guevara and the UFF motto were found.¹⁴⁸ This could indicate a genuine affinity felt for the Argentinean revolutionary by some of the members of the UFF. Even if this is the case, this does not make the group itself Marxist. What is much more likely is that the group, which felt that it would be ‘funny’ to call itself the UFF, may well have also thought that it was ‘funny’ to attempt to wrest from nationalists one of ‘their’ heroes and sully him by equating him

¹⁴⁴ John Deering, RUC follow up ‘Murder’ leaflets, *Irish Times*, 5 December 1974.

¹⁴⁵ Taylor, *Loyalists*, p.115.

¹⁴⁶ Bruce, *The Red Hand*, p.54.

¹⁴⁷ James Grylls, IRA link threatens a Protestant ‘war’, *Daily Mail*, 26 October 1973.

¹⁴⁸ ‘We will smash Citizen’s army’ says the UVF, *Belfast Telegraph*, 25 October 1973.

with their own cause. Actions speak louder than words, and the UFF was an overtly sectarian organisation during the period under review. The UFF bombed Catholic pubs without warning. In a statement following the bombing of a pub in Ballinarry, near Portadown, the UFF issued a warning to all Protestants not to drink in Catholic owned pubs. ‘They do so at their own risk, and no warning will be given.’¹⁴⁹ When we compare this unbridled sectarianism with statements from the UVF heavily criticizing the ‘filth of sectarianism’¹⁵⁰ we can see that it would distort the picture of the left within militant Loyalism to include the UFF in that spectrum.

Towards the end of 1972 in an East Belfast Pub a group calling itself the Ulster Citizen Army was formed from ‘the more socialist orientated and class conscious’¹⁵¹ factions of both the UDA and UVF.¹⁵² The riots of October 1972 had apparently caused the split within the organisations.¹⁵³ The UCA called itself ‘The Revolutionary Army of the Ulster Working-class’¹⁵⁴ and their insignia included the aforementioned description as a motto, the Red Hand of Ulster, and the Starry Plough.¹⁵⁵ The *raison d'être* for the UCA was to stamp out the sectarianism which had overrun Loyalist organisations; ‘we cannot stand idly by while members of the Catholic working-class community are slaughtered without cause.’¹⁵⁶ The UCA identified itself as a Loyalist organisation which was opposed to sectarianism, rather than an organisation which crossed the divide. When making reference to the UDA and the UVF, the UCA referred to those organisations as ‘fellow Loyalists.’¹⁵⁷ The UCA is most famous for

¹⁴⁹ UVF warns UFF and UCA, *Irish News*, 26 October 1973.

¹⁵⁰ We do deplore killings –UVF, *Belfast Telegraph*, 7 October 1972.

¹⁵¹ The Ulster Citizen Army Smear, *Lobster*, p.19.

¹⁵² W.D. Flakes, S. Eliot, *Northern Ireland: a political directory 1968-1999* (Belfast 1999) p.473.

¹⁵³ The Ulster Citizen Army Smear, *Lobster*, p.20.

¹⁵⁴ UVF Declares Enmity to ‘Citizen Army’, *Irish Times*, 26 October 1973.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Bruce, *The Red Hand*, p.69.

¹⁵⁷ Counter Threat by ‘Citizen Army’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 26 October 1973.

distributing pamphlets with the names and addresses of members of the UDA whom it accused of engaging in sectarian murder.¹⁵⁸ UCA leaflets accused other Loyalist paramilitaries of having been “gradually taken over by evil men who wished only to gain power and wealth for themselves at the expense of the ordinary Loyalist worker.”¹⁵⁹ The information contained within the UCA leaflets in relation to the name address and ‘rank’ of Loyalist paramilitaries was ‘surprisingly concise and accurate.’¹⁶⁰

The UCA, in another leaflet, claimed to have met representatives of the ‘Catholic working-class community’¹⁶¹ in order to tackle sectarian murders. The name of the organisation harked back to James Connolly’s Irish Citizens Army, which had risen in 1916. The use of ‘a well known symbol of the Socialist faction of the Irish Republican Movement’,¹⁶² the starry-plough, in their insignia, combined with the name of the organisation and their anti-sectarianism led their Loyalist rivals to accuse the groups of having close contacts with the OIRA.¹⁶³ Indeed, at various times the UCA were said to have been in discussions with Peoples Democracy (PD), the OIRA, the B&ICO and the Communist Party.¹⁶⁴ Members of the OIRA neither confirmed nor denied contact with the UCA, simply stating that ‘informal contact’ had been made with Protestant community in Northern Ireland as ‘part of its commitment to do everything possible to lower sectarian tension.’¹⁶⁵ Enmity towards the British army was another area of common ground between the UCA and the OIRA. In October of

¹⁵⁸ John Deering, RUC follow up ‘Murder’ leaflets, *Irish Times*, 5 December 1974.

¹⁵⁹ UDA officers accused, *Irish Times*, 30 September 1974.

¹⁶⁰ Conor O’Cleary , Loyalists go on convention manoeuvres, *Irish Times*, 7 December, 1974.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² UVF Declares Enmity to ‘Citizen Army’, *Irish Times*, 26 October 1973.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ The Ulster Citizen Army Smear, *Lobster*, p.20.

¹⁶⁵ UVF warns Marxist groups, *Belfast Telegraph*, 25 October 1973.

1973 the UCA issued a ‘declaration of war’¹⁶⁶ on the British Army. Threats were made against high ranking members of the British Army and businessmen alike. They were to be shot should they ‘succeed in throwing Northern Ireland into a state of civil war.’

The UCA never actually *did* anything other than issue threats and leaflets.¹⁶⁷ In addition to this, no one has ever come forward to claim membership of the organisation and there are no records of a UCA mural ever having appeared.¹⁶⁸ This has led Steve Bruce to dismiss the organisation as having dreamt up by the British Army.¹⁶⁹ However, the notion that the UCA was fictitious is not necessarily backed up by facts. The British Army treated the UCA as a real organisation, with the group being mentioned as a ‘real if somewhat mysterious group’ by two British Army documents at the time.¹⁷⁰ In addition to this, the other paramilitary groups at the time clearly believed that the group existed, as the UVF publicly vowed to ‘smash’ the UCA on numerous occasions.¹⁷¹ Whether or not one believes that the British Army would go so far as to produce two fictitious briefing documents about an organisation which it had dreamt up, or whether or not one believes that the UVF would threaten to smash a group which simply did not exist, is actually beside the point. The UCA did distribute leaflets, make press statements and threaten members of other Loyalist groups. In this respect, the group existed, however large it was and whose interests it was serving doesn’t really matter. If the group was fabricated by the Army in order to cause tensions within Loyalist circles, this tells us that the emergence of such a group was something which was seen as a definite possibility and which was exploited by

¹⁶⁶ ‘We will smash Citizen’s army’ says the UVF, *Belfast Telegraph*, 25 October 1973.

¹⁶⁷ The Ulster Citizen Army Smear, *Lobster*, p.20.

¹⁶⁸ Bruce, *The Red Hand*, p.71.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ The Ulster Citizen Army Smear, *Lobster*, p.21.

¹⁷¹ ‘We will smash Citizen’s army’ says the UVF, *Belfast Telegraph*, 25 October 1973.

the Army. If the group existed of its own right, then this draws us to similar conclusions about the leftist or Marxist trends which existed within paramilitary Loyalism. There were elements (of arguable degrees of strength) within the Loyalist paramilitary camp who were leftist (if not Marxist) and anti-sectarian. There were also elements within Loyalist groups, specifically the UVF, which *did* have links with the OIRA.

We have previously looked at relations between OIRA and UVF inmates in Long Kesh. There was a belief that, in the words of David Ervine, the UVF and the OIRA were in the same ‘phase’,¹⁷² unlike the Provisionals. However, contacts between the two groups went beyond what occurred inside the wire. The UVF met representatives of the Official Republican movement in 1971, but this meeting, despite the two groups finding some common ground (such as their opposition to internment) came to very little.¹⁷³ Two years later, when the UVF had matured somewhat politically, the two groups met again. Three members of the ‘Brigade Staff’ of the UVF travelled to Dublin and met a delegation representing the Officials. Cathal Goulding, the Chief of Staff, was a part of that delegation.¹⁷⁴ Robert Fisk, who described the UVF during this period as having developed a ‘surprisingly Marxist ideology’,¹⁷⁵ said that this leftward turn provided common ground between the two groups. Amongst other things, an ending of sectarian assassinations, the desegregation of schools and breaking the political power of the Church were on the agenda.¹⁷⁶ Following the talks, some elements within the UVF denied any knowledge of contact with the Officials,¹⁷⁷ whilst the President of Official Sinn Féin Tomás MacGiolla confirmed that the talks

¹⁷² Sinnerton, *David Ervine*, p.62.

¹⁷³ When the UVF and the IRA met, *Sunday News*, 11 March 1973.

¹⁷⁴ Robert Fisk, Leaders of illegal Ulster force meet IRA for secret talks, *Times*, 21 February 1974.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ UVF and IRA leaders in secret talks, *Daily Telegraph*, 22 February 1974.

had gone ahead and that there would be more in future.¹⁷⁸ Indeed the leadership of the two organisations found common ground regularly in the period under study. This was usually in relation to their shared leftist views or common enemies. For example, when the UVF made a '[d]ramatic call for peace' in 1974¹⁷⁹ the UDA rejected it¹⁸⁰ and the OIRA supported it.¹⁸¹

The ideological understanding which developed between the upper echelons of the OIRA and the UVF were not simply confined to those that had the shared experience of Long Kesh or the leaders of these groups. There was also a certain amount of recognition of common ground even amongst the lower ranked members. Loyalist documents were discovered in searches of OIRA compounds.¹⁸² Possibly due to the shared enemy of the PIRA, there appeared to be a limited amount of logistical crossover between the UVF and the OIRA. In a police search of the strongly Protestant East Belfast during October 1973, a number of M1 carbines were discovered. The M1 was a traditional OIRA weapon and it was believed by intelligence agencies at the time that the weapons may have been handed over by the OIRA.¹⁸³ Even members of the UVF who were from outside Belfast, (traditionally more conservative than the Belfast UVF) saw OIRA members as different from PIRA members due to their working-class credentials. In an interview with the *Ballymena Observer*, the commander of the North Antrim UVF stated that if an Official fell into their hands, they would treat him well and set him free,¹⁸⁴ as he, like the UVF was fighting for the working-class. We should not labour the point however, remembering

¹⁷⁸ Robert Fisk, UVF rejects confirmation of talks with official IRA, *Times*, 22 February 1974.

¹⁷⁹ UVF makes Dramatic call for peace, *Sunday News*, 3 February 1974.

¹⁸⁰ UDA says no to UVF peace proposals, *Irish Independent*, 5 February 1974.

¹⁸¹ Officials greet UVF call for reconciliation, *Irish News*, 5 February 1974.

¹⁸² IRA link threatens a Protestant 'war', *Daily Mail*, 26 October 1973.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ North Antrim UVF Give Priorities, *Ballymena Observer*, 2 May 1974.

that in 1975 a UVF Active Service Unit stabbed a man to death whilst he stumbled upon them attempting to place a bomb on a train carrying three hundred Officials.¹⁸⁵

We are left with a number of conclusions. Having examined the UFF, we can see that just because a group is called socialist by its enemies, it does not necessarily mean that we should take them into account as a socialist group. The leftwing direction which the UVF took in the period under review was certainly a serious one which led to one of two possible outcomes. One possibility is that there was a split and the Marxist UCA came into being. This would show us that there were those within militant Loyalism who had become such convinced Marxists that they were willing to ‘go to war’ with the British army, the UDA and the UVF for their beliefs (indeed, two out of the three men who apparently founded the UCA were dead within a year.)¹⁸⁶ The other possibility is that the ideological tensions within militant Loyalism, and the leftwing movement within the organisation (which certainly existed among ‘the immediate followers of Gusty Spense’,¹⁸⁷ if not others), was becoming strong and that the British Army attempted to harness the perceived growth of the left within the group and the fears that engendered, to cause a split by fabricating the UCA. Finally we can see that the left-wing direction of the UVF allowed it to share common ground in addition to common enemies with the OIRA, outside the wire as well as inside Long Kesh.

¹⁸⁵ Cusack & McDonald, *UVF*, p.168.

¹⁸⁶ UVF warns Marxist groups, *Belfast Telegraph*, 25 October 1973.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

5. The Party of Working-class Loyalists? The emergence and ideology of the VPP

This section will assess to the extent to which the Volunteer Political Party (VPP) was a socialist party, as claimed by former party leader Hugh Smyth.¹⁸⁸ In order to understand the extent which the VPP could be described as socialist, it will examine a number of factors. First it will look at those involved in the party and the organisations which they were involved in beforehand. It will then go on to analyse the manifesto issued by the VPP in the run up to the 1974 elections. Accusations of being a ‘Marxist’ party were thrown at the VPP – how the organisation responded to these accusations tells us a lot about how it saw itself. As part of this analysis of UVF political policy this section will consider publications such as *Within the context of Northern Ireland*,¹⁸⁹ which was published by the Red Hand Commando (RHC) in

¹⁸⁸ When asked if he considered the VPP a socialist party Smyth responded, “Oh there’s no doubt that it was a socialist party.” Interview, Hugh Smyth, Shankill Road Belfast, 21 April 2009.

¹⁸⁹ *Within the Context of Northern Ireland*, Red Hand Commando, P6627 NIPC.

1974. RHC was a small paramilitary group formed in 1969 by John McKeague, chairman of the Shankill Defence Association.¹⁹⁰ Over the following years, the organisation was brought closer and closer to the UVF, to the point that the UVF spoke on behalf of that organisation at talks between Secretary of State Merlyn Rees and the UWC.¹⁹¹ For this reason, when considering the ‘military’ or political movements of the UVF in this period, one will not get the full picture unless one considers the RHC as a part of the UVF. Members of the UVF sometimes claimed attacks using the name RHC; similarly RHC publications can be seen as part of the UVF/VPP political strategy.

The UVF decided to ‘come out of the shadows’¹⁹² politically in 1974 when the creation of the VPP was announced in *Combat* as the formation of a ‘political wing of the Ulster Volunteer Force’.¹⁹³ The statement makes no bones about the fact that the VPP was bereft of policy in its inception and calls for ‘the formation of a policy document which embraces all shades of opinion within the organisation’ and calls on all volunteers to submit ideas to the newly formed political executive.¹⁹⁴ The search for political direction was however, not simply limited to members of the UVF, who were all required to join the VPP,¹⁹⁵ but the newly formed party also circulated questionnaires around working-class areas of Northern Ireland.¹⁹⁶ Internment, nationalisation of industry, transport and education all featured in the questionnaire, described by the party chairman, Ken Gibson as ‘an honest attempt to give the public a real opportunity of stating its view on specific issues.’¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁰ Red Hand Loyalists Down Arms, *Irish Times*, 12 August 1974.

¹⁹¹ Red Hand Ceasefire, *Irish Independent*, 12 August 1974.

¹⁹² *Combat*, Vol. 1, No 14, 1974.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ UVF asks members to join political wing, *Irish Times*, 30 July 1974.

¹⁹⁶ ‘Let’s hear from you’ says VPP, *Sunday News*, 22 September 1974.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

The party's leader Ken Gibson was a former internee and had been the spokesperson for the movement since it was legalised.¹⁹⁸ Described as 'an intelligent and articulate man'¹⁹⁹ Gibson had previously been a member of the DUP, when he was branch chairman of the East Belfast Branch. Gibson was believed to have been a top 'intelligence officer' in the UVF, was interned in February 1973 and sent to Long Kesh.²⁰⁰ As described previously, Long Kesh, (known colloquially by Loyalists as 'Spence University') was a place where political education was encouraged amongst Loyalist prisoners.²⁰¹ By the time Gibson 'graduated' from Long Kesh, in December 1973, he was a changed man and a heavy critic of Ian Paisley, the DUP and the 'Fur Coat Brigade'.²⁰² The trade unionist, Glen Bar, who had been the chairperson of the co-ordinating committee of the UWC was a founding member of the party,²⁰³ as was a former member of the NILP, Rev John Stewart.²⁰⁴

Hugh Smyth, a man respected on both sides of the community,²⁰⁵ and the leader of the Ulster Loyalist Front (ULF) was another important founding member of the VPP. The ULF was founded by Smyth and city councillor Fred Proctor.²⁰⁶ Smyth, an uncompromising Loyalist with left-wing views,²⁰⁷ had been born on the Shankill Road

¹⁹⁸ Robert Fisk, UVF hopes rise for W Belfast Election, *Times*, 21 August 1974.

¹⁹⁹ Dennis Lehane, Challenge, *Sunday Independent*, 25 August 1974.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ Sinnerton, *David Ervine*, p. 48.

²⁰² Gibson and the VPP were especially critical of Paisley's lukewarm support for the UWC strike, until he was sure it was going to be successful; Loyalists' words war hots up, *Sunday News*, 20 October 1974.

²⁰³ Gibson calls for tripartite talks, *Sunday News*, 6 August 1974.

²⁰⁴ *Principles of Loyalism*, p. 36.

²⁰⁵ During an interview the author carried out with a PIRA member active in the late 1970's and early 1980's 'Hughie' was described thus, "I have a lot of respect for Hughie. I don't agree with his politics of course, but any man who works his whole life for his community is to be respected. I'd say he's no better off now than he would have been if he'd just been an ordinary working man."

²⁰⁶ Political link-up by UVF, *Irish Independent*, 25 March 1974.

²⁰⁷ UVF to Support Loyalist Leader, *Financial Times*, 25 March 1974.

as one of nine children raised in a two bedroom house.²⁰⁸ In March of 1974 the UVF endorsed the ULF as its political ally and granted personnel ‘temporary leave’ to assist the ULF.²⁰⁹ The ULF was primarily concerned with ‘defending and promoting the interests of the Protestant working-class’²¹⁰ and fighting for prisoners families.²¹¹

It is unsurprising then, with founding members such as these, that the VPP produced a manifesto which set it to the left of the NILP.²¹² The manifesto was published in *Combat* and was quite short, but still worth some discussion.²¹³ The introduction valorises those involved in the UWC strike, which reinforces the point made in the previous section:

On the 18th December 1688, thirteen brave apprentice boys slammed shut the gates of Londonderry in the face of King James’s army. In May and June of 1974, thirteen brave men sat on the co-ordinating committee of the Ulster Workers Council which slammed shut the gateway to a United Ireland.²¹⁴

Throughout the manifesto, the VPP pledges to work for ‘ordinary working people.’²¹⁵ In Northern Ireland at the time, this is significant as ‘Our Protestant people’ was a phrase heard far too regularly for comfort by Loyalists who simply defined their ‘nationality’ in opposition to Catholicism and Irishness.²¹⁶ Not only was their

²⁰⁸ Interview, Hugh Smyth, Shankill Road Belfast, 21 April 2009.

²⁰⁹ UVF to give backing to Ulster Loyalist Front, *Sunday News*, 24 March 1974.

²¹⁰ Outlawed Loyalist group turns to politics, *Guardian*, 30 March 1974.

²¹¹ Interview, Hugh Smyth, Shankill Road Belfast, 21 April 2009.

²¹² Heffernan, *Finding a Voice?* p.31.

²¹³ *Combat*, Vol. 1 No. 26, 1974.

²¹⁴ *The Volunteer Political Party: A Progressive and Forward Thinking Unionist Party*, Manifesto for the Volunteer Political Party (VPP) Westminster Election 1974, P16054 NIPC.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ Moore & Sanders, *Formations of Culture: Nationalism and Conspiracy Ideology*, p.11.

manifesto not overtly sectarian, but the VPP had planned on canvassing for votes,²¹⁷ and opening advice centres on the Falls Road.²¹⁸ Despite the security risks, the VPP did do some limited canvassing on the Falls.²¹⁹ *Within the Context of Northern Ireland* calls for total and complete separation of church and state; ‘Religion and politics must be parted forever in our beloved country.’²²⁰ Indeed, the link with people from the south of Ireland is stressed rather than the differences. *Within the Context* calls for a united Ireland, within a federated UK, stating that ‘with the passing of the years, it would be the aim of the residents of Northern Ireland to woo the Southern residents within the bounds of an all Ireland, within a federal system in the British Isles’.²²¹ Regarding southern Catholics as misled lost children of the UK does show a remarkable amount of political naivety, but no more so than those who believed that Northern Protestants were misled children of Ireland. Importantly, these documents were overtly anti-sectarian, even if those that peddled them were not.

The manifesto criticises the traditional leaders of Loyalist communities, using the disdainful title ‘Fur Coat Brigade’ throughout to refer to members of the UUP and DUP.²²² The VPP reminds people that their politicians need to ‘do more than shout ‘NO SURRENDER’’,²²³ that they need politicians who are concerned with the economic well being of the province. ‘As long as the Unionist shouted “NO SURRENDER” he could vote against the introduction of a Regional Employment Policy which brought considerable benefit to Ulster’s Economy.’²²⁴ The Unionists tendency to ‘vote slavishly with the Tories’ is criticised. The VPP attempted to build

²¹⁷ Heffernan, *Finding a Voice?* p.16.

²¹⁸ VPP leaders shocked by ‘ignorance’, *Sunday News*, 11 July 1974.

²¹⁹ Interview, Hugh Smyth, Shankill Road Belfast, 21 April 2009.

²²⁰ *Within the Context of Northern Ireland*, p.4.

²²¹ *Ibid.* p.2.

²²² Manifesto for the Volunteer Political Party (VPP) Westminster Election 1974.

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

relations with the Labour Party throughout the summer of 1974 when a delegation of thirty went on a tour of the UK.²²⁵ Gibson criticised the UUUC for not expressing the wishes of the electorate to Westminster politicians saying that ‘the only Labour Party views made known to Westminster MPs were those of the SDLP.’²²⁶

The influence of those members of the NILP who helped found the VPP can be seen by the fact that the arguments put forward by the Volunteer Party for the maintenance of the link with Britain were ‘Walkerite’ in nature.²²⁷ Willaim Walker was a Belfast Labour politician in the early 1900s who believed that the best interests of the Irish working class lay in ‘the integration of the Irish Labour movement with British Labour within a Unionist context.’²²⁸ Walker was a unionist and a trade unionist who the NILP considered one of their founding fathers. Similarly, the importance of the link with the UK was emphasised by the VPP, not simply as a negative wish not to be ruled by Rome, but for the economic importance of the link for the working-class. The importance of the British subsidies for social welfare was stressed, in addition to the different structure of the Southern economy to the Northern Economy; ‘the economic policy would be based upon the interests of business and agriculture at the expense of the industrial Ulsterman.’²²⁹ The desire to remain a part of the United Kingdom, rather than the desire to say out of the Irish Republic is stressed in an entire section with the heading ‘No to U.D.I.’ This entire section is a thinly veiled attack on the political thoughts of some within the UDA.

²²⁵ VPP leaders shocked by ‘ignorance’, *Sunday News*, 11 July 1974.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

²²⁷ Walker, ‘The Northern Ireland Labour Party in the 1920s’, p.23.

²²⁸ *Ibid.* p.10.

²²⁹ Manifesto for the Volunteer Political Party (VPP) Westminster Election 1974.

Within the Context deals extensively with issues such as the need for more social housing, increased investment (and total integration) in schools, and increased pension allowance. Protectionism is also called for in the form of ‘[s]trict control of exports and imports, enable home industries to compete in world markets.’²³⁰ The VPP manifesto hints at the need to nationalise industry, but *Within the Context* calls for nationalisation of all banks, water, electricity, gas, minerals, oil and any other natural resource deemed appropriate. In addition to this, it calls for the government to take a large percentage of all foreign companies interested in setting themselves up in Northern Ireland.²³¹ A limit on capital investment is also proposed.²³² These are undoubtedly ‘leftist’ policies, and this did not go unnoticed by the political rivals of the VPP, and indeed some critical members of the UVF.

Letters to various newspapers were sent when the VPP was active claiming that the organisation’s command structure had been influenced by communism ‘and had brainwashed its members into Marxist thinking.’²³³ One letter signed “A Broken UVF Wife” claimed that her family had been broken up because her husband had become “an out and out communist.”²³⁴ The UVF and the VPP’s response to these letters and accusations was somewhat mixed. The organisation denied that it was communist, and reminded people that it had (apparently) been founded to fight communism as well as the IRA. In the statement in question, the UVF spokesperson also stated that the UVF “has also been alone in campaigning for a return to traditional patriotism and

²³⁰ *Within the Context of Northern Ireland*, 1974 p.10.

²³¹ Ibid. p.5.

²³² Ibid. p.6.

²³³ UVF- ‘Victims of a smear campaign’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 8 September 1974.

²³⁴ Ibid.

the preservation of our historic British way of life.’²³⁵ When held up next to the grandiose social statements of the VPP, this seems to be an example of organisational schizophrenia. A letter to the editor of *News Letter* has a much more nuanced way of approaching the leftism of the VPP. This letter, signed by the ‘Press Officer of the UVF’ links traditional Calvinistic values with leftism: ‘Our so called socialism (a term we reject) is based upon Christian benevolence and the teachings expounded by our Saviour at the Sermon on the Mount.’²³⁶ This statement sums up the attitude of those within the VPP. They rejected the term ‘socialist’ but defended and exposed socialist policies. Patrick Heffernan dismisses the notion that the VPP were a socialist party, instead calling them ‘a community based party of social action.’²³⁷ Whatever one chooses to label the VPP, one cannot deny that they were a party which fit very much, in their own way, into the spectrum of the left.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ UVF policy, *News Letter*, 31 August 1974.

²³⁷ Heffernan, *Finding a Voice?* p. 74.

Conclusion

When leader of the PUP, Hugh Smyth got into an argument with Paddy Devlin about the nature of socialism: Devlin called himself a socialist, whilst Smyth called himself a ‘Protestant socialist.’²³⁸ Devlin claimed that there was no such thing as a Protestant socialist, whilst Smyth, the PUP and the VPP seem to have proven that there was indeed such a thing as a Protestant socialist. Loyalists are a people who are ‘the most misunderstood and criticised community in western Europe.’²³⁹ Irish republican tradition claims that they don’t exist, and will simply ‘come to their senses’ once the British withdraw.²⁴⁰ Loyalism however, obviously does exist, not necessarily as ‘Britishness’ but as a form of Ulster nationalism. The UVF believed that Ulster was a nation,²⁴¹ but a nation whose best interests were served within the United Kingdom.

The outbreak of ‘the Troubles’ saw the Ulster working-class ‘open their eyes’²⁴² to the blind alley they had been led into by their leaders. The imprisonment of men who had been riled up and trained by their leaders to carry out violence and then abandoned led those men to question their leaders and become involve themselves directly in

²³⁸ Interview, Hugh Smyth, Shankill Road Belfast, 21 April 2009.

²³⁹ J. Bowyer Bell, *The Gun in Politics*, (Transaction Publishers 1987) p.313.

²⁴⁰ Cusack & McDonald, *UVF*, p.1.

²⁴¹ What is a nation? *Combat*, No2 Vol. 1, 1 April 1974.

²⁴² Interview, Hugh Smyth, Shankill Road Belfast, 21 April 2009.

political matters. As Ronnie Moore and Andrew Sanders point out, during the early years of ‘the Troubles’ Loyalist discourse couched in primarily political terms, as it was initially supportive of one form of political rule, Stormont. It then mustered its strength against another form of devolved government in the form of the Sunningdale agreement.²⁴³ However as time dragged on and Protestant political control became more of a distant memory, the discourse switched away from politics towards defending culture. Without the prospect of real political power on the horizon, the left within militant Loyalism became less and less relevant. In the aftermath of Ken Gibsons failure to get elected to Westminster, militants within the UVF took over the organisation and steered it away from politics and away from the left.²⁴⁴ We can see this process inverted when the dawn of peace in Northern Ireland led to the re-emergence of left wing Loyalism in the form of the UDP and the PUP.

Prison gave loyalists a place to educate themselves and reflect on their position within Northern society. The UWC strike gave the working-class members of paramilitary organisations real control and a sense of power for the first time in their history. The emergence of ghost groups such as the UCA is evidence that this turn to the left was a serious one, if one which was later reversed, and the positions the VPP adopted on social issues leaves us in no doubt that the narrative of the early stages of ‘the Troubles’ put forward in *Principles of Loyalism* as a time of self discovery for the Loyalist working-class is a valid one.

²⁴³ Moore & Sanders, *Formations of Culture: Nationalism and Conspiracy Ideology*, p.12.

²⁴⁴ Cusack & McDonald, *UVF*, p.152.

Figure One



Political mural on the Shankhill Road, Belfast
Photo taken by Ross Frenett 8th April 2009

Description:

The dominating image of the mural is of a street which has been burned out by 'republicans'. Overall message is one of hope, with the primary text reading 'Can it change? We believe.' The text on the left hand side of the image is reputedly taken from the *Belfast Telegraph*:

Several hundred familys [sic] were forced to flee their homes last night as houses came under attack from republicans. The number of homeless is running into several thousand, more people moving out of riot areas today. The women and children have been offered shelter in cites across the sea. Security forces moved in to bring calm into riot areas.

On the far right, just out of the image, those who ‘fell defending their homes from republican petrol bombings’ are remembered.

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ⁱ The Northern Ireland Office (NIO) kept scrap books of press clippings throughout ‘the troubles’. These have now been donated to the Linen Hall Library, and are the source of some of the newspaper citations.

ⁱⁱ NIPC- Northern Ireland Political Collection, Linen Hall Library, Belfast

ⁱⁱⁱ PRONI- Public Records Office of Northern Ireland