

***THE
LEAGUE OF
COMMUNIST
REPUBLICANS
1986-1991***

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PART ONE

Following the 1986 Sinn Fein Ard Fheis where it was decided to end the policy of abstentionism, between 80 and 100 Provisional Republican prisoners in Long Kesh resigned from the organisation. The process was taken informally. That was approximately 20% of the movement, which had then over 400 prisoners. This wave of resignation was limited to Long Kesh; as no similar movement took place in Portlaoise. Those who resigned did it for all sorts of reasons. *“There was no unified block among those who resigned”* explained a former prisoner¹ who had then resigned; before rejoining the Provisionals later. A great number of those who resigned simply retired from political activity (because they were tired of it), others later applied to rejoin the Provisionals, and only two prisoners switched their allegiance to Republican Sinn Fein. In this context, in November 1986, a number of those prisoners who had resigned formed the “League of Communist Republicans”². Those prisoners had been an internal prison opposition since the early 1980s; after the Hunger Strikes. They had developed an orthodox Marxist-Leninist line, and saw dangerous conservative consequences in Sinn Fein’s electoral interventions. The prisoners also had doubts about the utility of the IRA’s armed campaign. Both the electoralism and the armed campaign led away from mass struggle. The dropping of abstentionism appeared to them as the irrefutable proof that the Provisional Republican Movement was going irreversibly to the right; and thus left the movement. (those aspects will be examined later) The two main figures behind the LCR were Tommy McKearney and Pat Mullin³; both from county Tyrone. They were the main theoreticians who developed the ideas of the group as well as its principal organisers. In 1985, the then Chief of Staff of the Provisional IRA, Ivor Bell, had been excluded from the organisation after failing to oppose the Adams line. If the Chief of Staff had failed, there was no way the prisoners could succeed in reforming the movement from within. No existing organisation was suitable, so there was an objective need to set up a new one. It was called “League” as opposed to “Party” or “Group” because it was a flexible term. Tommy McKearney wrote its programme.

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- *Work at an acceptable wage.*
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To allow the Workers' and Small Farmers' State exercise control, it is imperative that the commanding heights of the economy, Finance, Trade, Industry, Production and Communication, be brought under the Democratic control of the Revolutionary Democratic Workers' and Small Farmers' Republic.⁴ “

He sent it as a “comm” to other comrades he knew in other blocks. The people he sent it to were friends, or acquaintances of his, that he knew shared their position. From an initial nucleus of about five people, the League soon grew to approximately twenty to twenty five members. There were four or five sympathisers in Portlaoise, but none in England. Membership of the League remained constant; it neither experienced gradual growth nor gradual decrease. The setting up of the League of Communist Republicans was not an easy process. The prisoners were scattered around seven of the eight H-Blocks of Long Kesh, and communication between them was difficult. Members were prisoners, and the group had no base outside the jails. From early 1987, the League of Communist Republicans was able to set up a network of about twenty five sympathisers, friends and relatives outside the prison. The LCR had “*no substantial support on the outside*”⁵. Members of the group predominantly came from rural areas: Tyrone, Armagh, Derry, Monaghan. Its sympathisers were in those areas, as well as in Shannon, Dublin and Limerick. Belfast had no significant influence in the group. The background of the people involved in the group suggests that they were bound by local as well as political ties. Angela McKearney (Tommy's sister) organised two fund-raising social events in Tyrone and Armagh, through which the League was able raise over £500. That money allowed the group to publish its journal⁶, *Congress '86: Quarterly Journal of Communist Republican Prisoners and their Associates*. The first issue came out in June 1987. Between 500 and 1000 copies were printed. It was on A4 format, with between 12 and 20 pages. The paper was distributed by sympathisers outside the prison. Between 1987 and 1991, 14 issues of the paper were published. From issue 9 onwards, the paper became simply *Congress*. Almost two thirds of the articles in the LCR paper were of a theoretical nature, dealing with various aspects of Marxism,

⁴ Reproduced in *From Long Kesh to a Socialist Republic* pp.15-16

⁵ Tommy McKearney, Interview with author, Monaghan, Saturday 11 August 2001

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Republicanism or strategic matters such as the use of physical force, electoralism, etc.

Unlike the later split with the 32-County Sovereignty Movement, the LCR split was not well publicised. Apart from some obscure journals of tiny Marxist organisations, the media didn't pay any attention to the formation of the League of Communist Republicans. That might have been justified if one thought that the LCR was just a tiny group without influence outside the prisons. However, looking back fifteen years later, the formation of the LCR is a fact of far greater significance. What is significant is that a group of Republican prisoners thought that it was impossible to reform the Republican movement from within, and that it was necessary to break away from it and form a new organisation. In 1986, many of the prisoners (and we are not even talking here of people outside the jails) who were for one reason or another critical of the direction Adams was taking the organisation in, believed that it was still possible to change the Provisional Republican movement from within. *"The course of time has fallen on the side of those who argued that there was no internal means of changing the Republican Movement."*⁷ Fifteen years later, *"there's no opposition, those who dissent are forced to leave or are thrown out"*⁸. Also of significance is that the LCR had foreseen back in 1986 the increasingly right-wing and reformist drift that the Provisional Republican Movement would take during the next fifteen years –even if they could not predict then the form and circumstances this would take. They believed that this drift would be ineluctable and non-reversible. For those two reasons, the LCR was right before its time. The LCR were the first of the Republican "dissidents" that would emerge in the second half of the 1990s. What differentiated the LCR from Republican Sinn Fein (who had also left in 1986) is that it engaged in a process of critical reflection on the nature and strategy of Irish Republicanism and their limits, whereas Republican Sinn Fein was a group of the fundamentalist variety.

Isolated in prison, the League of Communist Republicans tried to put their strategy into practice on the outside. One of the most important difficulties is that no significant movement of opposition on the outside to whom the LCR could have related existed. Early in 1987, its associates outside the prison tried to organise an independent political campaign against Diplock courts in county Tyrone, as a beginning in the task of setting up a mass anti-imperialist movement. Sinn Fein took immediate action against the group, seeing it as a threat and a rival. Brendan Hughes and Jimmy Mullan were sent to Tyrone by the leadership in Belfast in a bid to prevent the campaign getting off the ground. All Sinn Fein personnel in Tyrone were instructed to resist every move made by the anti-Diplock group and a message issued under full IRA authority was circulated in the prison describing those who initiated the move as "counter-revolutionaries" and "people offering assistance to the enemy". Today,

⁷ Anthony McIntyre, Interview with author, Belfast, Sunday 2 September 2001

⁸ Tommy McKearney, Interview with Author, Monaghan, Sunday 12 August 2001

Brendan Hughes (who has since become a well-know “dissident” himself) explains with regrets that he was then “so naïve”⁹. This opposition from Provisional Sinn Fein and the IRA on the ground made it extremely difficult for the small League of Communist Republican to make any practical intervention outside publishing – and with difficulty- its paper. Small in size, restricted to the prisons, unable to organise any activities outside the publication of their journal, the LCR was not able to develop.

Following the 1986 Sinn Fein Ard Fheis where it was decided to end the policy of abstentionism, between 80 and 100 Provisional Republican prisoners in Long Kesh resigned from the organisation. The process was taken informally. That was approximately 20% of the movement, which had then over 400 prisoners. This wave of resignation was limited to Long Kesh; as no similar movement took place in Portlaoise. Those who resigned did it for all sorts of reasons. “*There was no unified block among those who resigned*” explained a former prisoner¹⁰ who had then resigned; before rejoining the Provisionals later. A great number of those who resigned simply retired from political activity (because they were tired of it), others later applied to rejoin the Provisionals, and only two prisoners switched their allegiance to Republican Sinn Fein. In this context, in November 1986, a number of those prisoners who had resigned formed the “League of Communist Republicans”¹¹. Those prisoners had been an internal prison opposition since the early 1980s; after the Hunger Strikes. They had developed an orthodox Marxist-Leninist line, and saw dangerous conservative consequences in Sinn Fein’s electoral interventions. The prisoners also had doubts about the utility of the IRA’s armed campaign. Both the electoralism and the armed campaign led away from mass struggle. The dropping of abstentionism appeared to them as the irrefutable proof that the Provisional Republican Movement was going irreversibly to the right; and thus left the movement. (those aspects will be examined later) The two main figures behind the LCR were Tommy McKearney and Pat Mullin¹²; both from county Tyrone. They were the main theoreticians who developed the ideas of the group as well as its principal organisers. In 1985, the then Chief of Staff of the Provisional IRA, Ivor Bell, had been excluded from the organisation after failing to oppose the Adams line. If the Chief of Staff had failed, there was no way the prisoners could succeed in reforming the movement from within. No existing organisation was suitable, so there was an objective need to set up a new one. It was called “League” as opposed to “Party” or “Group” because it was a flexible term. Tommy McKearney wrote its programme.

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Relationship with the IRA inside the prison gradually deteriorated. In the beginning, the IRA authorities within the prisons were tolerant of the League of Communist Republicans. But as time passed, there were growing tensions. The tensions were personal as well as political in nature. LCR members started to receive threats from the Provisionals. The risk of tensions degenerating into open violent confrontations was a sufficient reason for the prisoners to request transfer to Maghaberry prison in 1988. The last LCR batch left the H-Blocks on the 26 of July 1989. However, in spite of tensions, relatives of LCR members were never deprived of Prisoner’s Dependent Funds or of transport for prison visits etc. Anthony McIntyre has remarked that the fact that LCR left the H-Blocks had been counter-productive because it effectively ended debate and opposition to the Adams leadership within the prisons. Tommy McKearney replies that “*the debate was effectively over*”¹⁹ by then. The movement was irreformable: people such as McIntyre had no luck in changing the movement from within. But the fact that the LCR had left Long Kesh removed it from the main centre where Republican prisoners were present, which placed it even further in the margins.

Apart from the Provisionals, what were the relations between LCR members and other prisoners? They had “*quite good relations*” with IRSP/INLA prisoners both in Long Kesh and Maghaberry (including the late Gino Gallagher); although the disastrous 1987 feud with the IPLO made political work difficult. So-called “Ordinary Decent Criminals” “*had little interest in political events avoided political disputes*”²⁰, and were supportive of the bigger group. They

¹⁸ Conversation with Brendan Hughes, Belfast, Friday 7 September 2001 (Witnessed by Anthony McIntyre and Tommy Gorman)

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Tommy McKearney, Interview... for the rest of the quotes of the chapter

had contacts “*on a personal basis*” with loyalists in Maghaberry, as it was an integrated prison. Some loyalists were willing to listen to a socialist argument, it was “*educational rather than an opportunity to tie*”. The LCR had quite a few contacts with political groups outside the prisons, some as far as Palestine. Two groups the LCR had significant ties two were the Communist Party of Ireland and Republican Sinn Fein. They received a lot of literature from the CPI, and the party distributed the LCR journal. If in terms of ideology the CPI and the LCR shared the same orthodox Marxism-Leninism, the practical collaboration between the two groups did not go very far as the CPI was more interested in getting the LCR condemning the armed campaign of the IRA. Although LCR members had reservations about the politics of Republican Sinn Fein, “*it remains and retains the integrity of the old Republican Fenian tradition*”. For Tommy McKearney, the spirit of rebellion and insurrection is more present in Republican Sinn Fein than it is in the Provisional. The twenty five prisoners belonging to the LCR sent a solidarity message to the first Ard Fheis of Republican Sinn Fein.

The LCR can be said to have disappeared after the last issue of its journal was published during winter 1991. What were the reasons why the LCR project ended ? If the LCR had always been small, from the late 1980s onwards, the LCR became organisationally less and less significant. No significant developments happened to the groups since its formation. The number of people active in the LCR never increased, and as time passed by, people drifted away. This process was accelerated as individual members were being released from prison. There were no political structures existing on the outside to support those who were being released, as the impact of the LCR had remained limited to the jails. “*There was nothing outside the prison that was indigenous to outside the prison.*” This raises the question as to whether the LCR can be analysed essentially as a prison phenomenon; that the fact that it had no impact on the outside can be explained that it only made sense within the context of prison politics. The LCR was certainly very much of a prison phenomenon, however, we believe that it was far more than just that. There were other movements towards socialism among Irish Republican prisoners earlier in the century (in the 1940s for example) but what made the LCR different was the ambitious nature of their task: nothing less than re-generating Republicanism. Towards the end, issues of *Congress* were being written entirely by Tommy McKearney. Added to lack of money and growing discouragement, the final blow was the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. “*It removed a major impetus*”. It is no coincidence that the last issue of the LCR journal appeared in December 1991, the same month that the Soviet Union came to an official end. With Communism gone, it was extremely difficult to argue in Ireland that it provided a better socio-economic organisation of society, and that made the LCR redundant.

PART TWO

The League of Communist Republicans was not a split from Sinn Fein, but from the IRA. Or more precisely, it was a group of IRA prisoners who resigned from the organisation. What was the LCR's position regarding physical force in general and the current IRA campaign in particular ? Under the pseudonym "Liam O'Connor", Tommy McKearney wrote a number of articles on the question²¹, calling for a re-assessment of armed tactics and developing a number of fundamental criticisms of the IRA campaign.

First of all, the LCR was opposed to a type of politico-military organisation, such as Sinn Fein and the IRA, where the illegal armed wing is dominant. *"In terms of the use of an armed wing, the LCR was saying "no", this concept of a political party firmly allied to an armed wing, in which the armed wing controls the party, we were very opposed to that.*²²" For the LCR, *"the primacy of politics over the gun"*²³ is essential at all times. The LCR advocated mass activity, as opposed to elitist small groups, and open democratic as opposed to conspiratorial methods of organisation. Its position can be summarised as *"Mobilise – Not Militarise"*²⁴. An example of such *"mass mobilisation"* is the Land War in the 19th century, opposed to *"militarist elitism"* of the 1956 Border Campaign.

The LCR had *"a Marxist attitude to the use of physical force"*²⁵. As Marxists, the LCR members were no pacifists, and had no problems with the use of physical force for political purposes as such. *"There are circumstances in which the use of force is not just justifiable, but to be encouraged: in the defence of the people or the defence of the revolution, you are entitled to use force.*²⁶" For the LCR, the use of physical force is above all a matter of tactics, not principles.

*"Let us have no fetishes about physical force. Neither an obscene worship of the sanctifying properties of blood letting nor a cowardly horror of the battle. Physical force is the ultimate recourse for effecting change and is neither an agent of propaganda nor a means never to be contemplated.*²⁷"

What conditions have to be met in order for the use of physical force to be legitimate ? The LCR put forward a number of conditions. The first is whether constitutional methods have been tried. By "constitutional", the LCR does not mean so much parliamentary methods as peaceful methods. Force is something which is ONLY to be used when all else has failed, and ONLY then. *"Should constitutional progress prove impossible, then arises the question of*

²¹ "Critique of the Propaganda War", *Congress '86*, (Issue 2, 1987 ?), pp.5-8, "Marxism and Force", *Congress '86* (Issue 4, 1988), pp.8-9, "Continuing the Debate", *Congress '86*, (Issue 5, Winter 1988), pp.17-18

²² Tommy McKearney, Interview with Author, Monaghan, Saturday 11 August 2001

²³ "The Primacy of Politics", *Congress '86*, (Issue 4, 1988), p.2

²⁴ "Mobilise – Not Militarise", *Congress '86*, (Issue 6, Spring 1989), p.12

²⁵ Liam O'Connor, "Marxism and Force", *Congress '86*, (Issue 4, 1988), p.8

²⁶ Tommy McKearney, Interview...

²⁷ Tommy McKearney, "Tories Out North and South", *Congress '86*, (Issue 5, Winter 1988), p.11

*popular support for insurrectionary action*²⁸.” By popular support, the LCR does not mean something like popularity in some Gallup Poll, but “*general participation, or mass active involvement*”. That is the second condition; lack of active popular support means that it is doomed. “*A simple fact of life though is that without popular support, physical force is a doomed tactic. Claims that a burst of gunfire is sufficient to win mass support borders on dangerous nonsense. Irish history is littered with examples of these misconceptions from Emmet’s failure to that of the 1956 Border Campaign.*”²⁹

The third condition is that physical force is to be used only where it has a reasonable chance of success. “*You win or you loose, but don’t settle for a stalemate with revolution*³⁰”.

On the basis of those criteria, the LCR set to assess the current IRA campaign. For the LCR, “*the limitations of legality have never really been tested.*³¹” More significantly, the current campaign “*does not enjoy broad, popular active support*”. Although there is evidence for some mass participation and support (safe houses, duration of struggle, people on marches, etc.) the fact that seventy per cent of the nation is apathetic to the IRA campaign, there is effectively no mass participation. And thirdly, the IRA campaign (in the late 1980s) was stuck in a stalemate. For the LCR, the IRA campaign was not a people’s war like in Vietnam or Nicaragua, but was essentially a matter of “propaganda by the deed” more reminiscent of the individual acts of terrorism of anarchists.

The LCR’s overall assessment of the IRA campaign is a bleak one. “*Current republican difficulties stem not only from muddled political direction, but also from basic military ineptitude. Failure to say so is at best political cowardice. The consequences of which are dismal. A doomed campaign of force merely fritters away activists, energy and morale. All this, while the final day of reckoning is postponed as the “other way” is left untried.*”³²

It is not surprising that the LCR’s criticisms of the IRA campaign were very badly received by the Republican Movement. The LCR was perceived as anti-physical force and arguing for a ceasefire. A journalist with alleged close links to British intelligence even wrote that the LCR were “calling for an end to IRA violence”.

“Nobody calling themselves revolutionaries could call on the IRA to countenance a general cease-fire while the armed defenders of imperialism stalk our streets, with full support of the coercive state machinery, north and south, at their disposal. Such a call could only serve Britain’s interests by contributing to the demoralisation of the best militants in the country. On the

²⁸ “Marxism and Force”, p.8

²⁹ “Tories Out...”, p.11

³⁰ “Marxism and Force”, p.9

³¹ Ibid

³² “Marxism and Force”, pp.8-9

*other hand, it is our duty as Leninists to comment and criticise the tactics of republicanism and to indicate what we believe to be the alternative.”*³³

What assessment can be done of the LCR's position on physical force and the IRA's campaign? As such, the LCR's position was not extremely original. Many left-wing organisations had developed similar criticisms of the IRA campaign over the years. What was original about it, was that it was made by IRA prisoners in Long Kesh. Retrospectively, the LCR was right to question the utility of the armed campaign, and above all to develop a basis on which the campaign could be concretely assessed. However, the LCR was wrong to see the IRA's campaign as something to do with a "propaganda war" or "propaganda by the deed". It was less a matter of propaganda than a political catalyst³⁴.

Apart from the armed campaign, a lot of the energy of the Provisional campaign in the 1980s was centred on electoral interventions. This culminated with the dropping of abstentionism in 1986 in order to participate in elections in the South. The LCR saw this as a reformist move. The LCR claimed *"that electoral necessities would entail a step by step abandonment of principles"*, and predicted that before long, *"the promotion of the party would take priority over gaining the objective of a Sovereign Republic"*.³⁵ Sinn Fein was a party of votes rather than a revolutionary party. Such a party needs to increase its share of votes, and this will necessarily mean a move towards the political centre. Concerning electoral participation, the LCR preferred extra-parliamentary to parliamentary tactics: *"the primary concentration should be on extra-parliamentary action, it must be obvious that no exaggerated expectations should be held for any parliamentary path."*³⁶ There is no parliamentary road to socialism. But following Lenin's views on whether Communists should participate in Bourgeois Parliaments, they agreed with tactical interventions. But in the Irish context, this could only be done in the South. *"This means that the responsibility for making a tactical intervention in parliaments must be kept open. Reality dictates that this can only be done successfully in Leinster House. It is there that a pragmatic intervention stands the best chance of destabilising the establishment. No such option exists in Westminster. Under present circumstances, and for the foreseeable future, attendance at the British House of Commons would serve no purpose other than to validate the British imperial claim to sovereignty over Ireland."*³⁷

³³ "The Primacy of Politics", *Congress '86*, (Issue 4, 1988), p.2

³⁴ See Liam O'Ruairc, "The Physical Force Argument", *Fourthwrite*, (Issue 6, Summer 2001)

³⁵ "The League of Communist Republicans", in Special Supplement, *Congress '86*, (Issue 4, 1988)

³⁶ "Tories Out..", p.11

³⁷ *Ibid*

*“The anti-imperialist movement in Ireland today is weak, divided and largely ineffective.”*³⁸ For the LCR, the armed actions of the IRA and Sinn Fein ‘s electoral strategy were going nowhere. So the question is “What is to be done ?” To this question on the way forward, the LCR proposed the following strategy: the Republican Congress and the Vanguard Party. They are the elements necessary for a revolution in Ireland. The revolution is made by the masses, but how do you get the “mass movement” that is necessary to make the revolution ? For this, the LCR proposed the “Republican Congress”. This Congress could form the basis on which a mass movement could be built. A Congress is a popular front, an alliance of radical groups centred on demands that have immediate appeal to large amount of people in the mass.

The idea of a Republican Congress had originally been put forward in the 1934. But the original Republican Congress had not succeeded. What was the LCR’s analysis of its failure, and what grounds did it advance to think that it could be successful now³⁹ ? There were objective and subjective factors that explained the failure of the original Republican Congress. The first mistake was that it tried to out-De Valera De Valera, which made it difficult to see the differences between the Republican Congress and Fianna Fail. *“There was no clear slogan to distinguish between the honest demands of the Republican Congress and the bogus claims of Fianna Fail.”*⁴⁰ For the LCR, the Workers Republic slogan should have been adopted instead. This was a major strategic error, because it left no distinction between what Frank Ryan was asking for and what De Valera was asking for. They attempted to steal De Valera’s clothes rather than try to create a party of Connolly. The second mistake was on the party. Those who argued that a party was necessary were right, however *“They were mistaken, though, in how to develop such a party. It could not have come about overnight or as a result of a forced amalgamation of different groups. Rather, it would have emerged in the course of action undertaken by the Congress.”*⁴¹ However, it was above all objective factors that were responsible for the failure of the original Republican Congress. *“In the final analysis, however, the situation in Ireland of the 1930s probably militated against early success of a Republican Congress.”*⁴² People then still thought that the major socio-economic and political problems could be solved by Fianna Fail. A Republican Congress in the 1980s operated in different circumstances: there were no chances that Fianna Fail (or Fine Gael, or even Sinn Fein) could solve the massive economic problems in the 26 counties. And the LCR thought (see below) that there were objective grounds to think that a Republican Congress could take off the ground, and that it had the right strategy of party building.

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ See the LCR’s analysis in “For A Republic “, *Congress ’86*, (Issue 3, 1988 ?), pp.2-3

⁴⁰ “For a Republic”, p.2

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid

This concept of a Republican Congress or popular front must be differentiated from other concepts such as a “broad front” or “pan-nationalist front” . The Republican Congress is “*qualitatively different*” (interview) from a “broad front” or a “united front”, especially of the “pan-nationalist” variety. The RC was something that “*had the potential to transform society*”, whereas pan-nationalism “*kept society where it was*” (interview). Sinn Fein’s “anti-imperialist” or “pan-nationalist front” is made of the “*broadest range of political and social forces*”⁴³ (SDLP, Fianna Fail, etc.) This is what the LCR has to say about such pan-nationalism:

*“Anti-Imperialism (in a capitalist epoch) which fails to recognise the leading role of the Working Class, is little more than Bourgeois Nationalism. It is not enough that working class issues be taken into account –which admittedly Sinn Fein seems to be trying to do. In the democratic revolution, the working class is not incidental, it is central.”*⁴⁴

The difference between Sinn Fein’s “Pan-Nationalist Front” and the RC are on the nature of the social forces involved as well as the objective. The first is centered round the “lowest common denominator” (ie the Republic) with the leadership by petit-bourgeois nationalism, while the second is the Workers and Small Farmers Republic under the leadership of the Working Class⁴⁵.

There are interesting parallels with the 1934 Republican Congress. In 1934, the Republican Congress had made the mistake of trying to out-De Valera De Valera instead of opting for the Workers Republic. In the same way in the late 1980s, Sinn Fein tried (and later successfully did) to out-SDLP the SDLP and out-Fianna Fail Fianna Fail. The Congress is socialist in nature. It was not possible in the 1980s to argue simply for the Republic, as the majority of the population in Ireland already had a Republic.

*“A Republican Congress must demand the independent sovereignty of a Republic under the Revolutionary Democratic control of Workers and Small Farmers. Less we won’t settle for. More we’re prepared to argue for when that day comes.”*⁴⁶

The LCR also insisted on the Vanguard party. Like a bird without wings can’t fly, for the LCR a “broad front” without Vanguard will not succeed⁴⁷. A Broad Front doesn’t recognise the need for a Vanguard Party. The Republican is not just a United Front (whose purpose is simply to bring different people and groups together), its purpose was in the final instance to build a Vanguard Party. The Republican Congress “*was a step forward towards something*” (interview). The Republican Congress is able to go beyond “single issue” campaigns (i.e. emigration, unemployment, housing etc.) that address -on their own- only the symptoms of imperialism and capitalist crisis, not its roots. Single issues have a tendency to drift away and end up in isolation. But what they are trying to

⁴³ “The Sinn Fein Ard Fheis”, *Congress ’86*, (Issue 6, Spring 1989), p.3

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ “The Broad Front”, *Congress ’86*, (Issue 7, Summer 1989), p.20

⁴⁶ James Tierney and Eugene Byrne, “We Call for a Congress”, in Special Supplement, *Congress ’86* (Issue 4, 1988)

⁴⁷ “The Broad Front”...

address are not separated and unrelated problems. For the LCR they are expressions of the dependence on imperialism. The Republican Congress avoids the problems associated with both a “lowest common denominator” approach and a sectarian or too restricted programme. The Republican Congress is able to develop a platform that is not too minimalist, nor yet too maximalist.

*“The logic for a new Congress is to provide a central focus around which a mass movement can be built. A mass movement with a programme which is neither too narrow nor too sweeping. Too narrow in the sense that it only includes one or two areas such as housing or health cuts. While these areas are important concentration on them alone would risk building a campaign which might stop well short of airing or basic problems. Too sweeping and we would simply have Pan-Nationalism. In other words the type of campaign where just about anyone capable of humming “The Rise of the Moon” would be welcomed.”*⁴⁸

The Congress will unite socialists, trade-unionists, community activists, etc. and organise mass mobilisation on the basis of the following three key demands:

“In the struggle to realise this programme we intend to support the right of every citizen:

- *To have a job with an acceptable wage, and to have it in Ireland too.*
- *The right to a home, to an education and to proper health care.*
- *The right to effectively influence government decisions, and not just through the sleight of hands which parliament is.”*⁴⁹

This programme sounds very “moderate”. Who wouldn’t agree with it? But in the context of the Ireland of the second half of the 1980s, where immigration was a huge problem, they were strategically explosive. Those demands are difficult to be met within a capitalist framework.

The Republican Congress would organise (in a negative sense) mobilisation against imperialism in its repressive aspects (i.e. Diplock Courts, Strip Searching, Extradition, PTA, Offences Against the State, Section 31, etc.) as well as against attacks on living standards (emigration, unemployment, cuts on education and health services etc.) and for (in a positive sense) full employment, education for all etc.

The LCR also argued that amongst the tools needed to effect political change in Ireland, a “Programme of Reconquest” is required. A concrete Programme is required in order to avoid the dangers of spontaneism. *“Without the vision to act, political movement simply becomes dependent on spontaneity. A Programme of Reconquest would provide that vision.”*⁵⁰ The LCR never set out to develop that “Programme of Reconquest” for the Congress, beyond the key demands around which mass mobilisation and the new Republican Congress could be built.

⁴⁸ “We Call for a Congress”...

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ “Programme of Reconquest”, *Congress '86*, (Issue 5, winter 1988), p.3

A revolution *“will not and cannot come about spontaneously”*⁵¹. In order for a revolution to be possible, a Vanguard Party is necessary. The LCR argued not just for a Republican Congress, but also for a Leninist Vanguard Party. A Sinn Fein electoral machine type party is not adequate to the task, for the LCR only a Leninist type party will. It is not necessary to develop here the LCR’s conception of the party, first because there was nothing original in it –it was the standard Leninist argument-, secondly because as a group isolated in the prisons, it was at this stage totally utopian to think that it could even think of setting up a party, vanguard type or not. However, what was original, was the LCR’s strategy of party-building.

The LCR highly opposed what McKearney called “voluntarism” in the building of the party. It is not possible to build a party if two or three people proclaim themselves the party. *“You are not speaking of an elitist group of generals, you’re speaking of a mass party; and if you want a mass party, you need a mass of people”*⁵². Parties don’t just fall from the skies, the Republican Congress is a good way to gather the people likely to form a party. *“Out of the Congress will emerge the objective necessity for a party.”* The Republican Congress is a stepping stone towards the party. *“We thought that the Vanguard Party would eventually evolve from the Republican Congress, we didn’t envisage the two coming simultaneously.”* (interview).

The ideas of the LCR remained in the state of germs, and never had a chance to be developed. However valid the ideas developed by the LCR may look on paper, there is still the problem of putting transforming them into practical reality

The first criticism that can be made is that the LCR called for a Republican Congress without preparation, without trying to find out first what common ground there is between organisations and individuals likely to join the Congress. *“The idea is to first bring people together to see what common ground there is, not to super impose a common platform prior to people sitting down –this presuppose everybody is going to agree with it.”*⁵³ It was a mistake to presume that everybody would agree with the platform. The second weakness is that the LCR didn’t pay sufficient attention to the sources of divisions that make left (or Republican) unity difficult⁵⁴. The third problem is that not popular front or Republican Congress can grow over spontaneously into a communist revolution. For this a party is needed, as the LCR itself recognises. But where the problem lies is that no popular front can create the necessary conditions for the fusion of radical elements into the nucleus of the kind of party

⁵¹ “The Vanguard”, *Congress ’86*, (Issue 1, 1987), p.3

⁵² Tommy McKearney, Interview with Author, Monaghan, Saturday 11 August 2001, the same for the other quotes in the paragraph

⁵³ Gerry Ruddy, Interview with Author, Belfast, Tuesday 4 September 2001

⁵⁴ In November 2000, the author attended (along with Tommy McKearney and Anthony McIntyre) a left unity meeting in Dublin. It was despairing. What we had were Trotskyists shouting at each other and screaming ridicule slogans such as “Defend China !” and “Ken Livingstone is an imperialist pig !”

that is required. (even if the LCR makes the point that *“the sum being greater and vastly more dynamic than the simple addition of the parts”*⁵⁵) To establish that party, one must establish its programmatic basis (what programme, strategy, tactics, ...) first.

It could be objected that even if the Republican Congress had been created, it would have gathered only tiny politically irrelevant far left sects. *“It is always a risk. But the alternative is to do nothing”*⁵⁶. So, it is better to do something that doesn't work than to do nothing. *“You cannot build the next revolution, all you can do is prepare for it. You have to start at some stage and make a start.”* Whatever one thinks, it was an attempt, a proposal to start building the type of organisation required for a social revolution. It could also be objected that Leninist Vanguard parties only generate totalitarianism. If today Tommy McKearney still sees the necessity for a political party and says that a lot can be learnt from the Leninist conception of the party, he doesn't see it as being necessarily as the way forward. *“Leninism has to be reviewed in the light of experience, and possibly in Rosa Luxemburg's criticisms.”* The LCR's ideas may be criticised, but it was nevertheless a serious attempt to trace a way forward. This attempt has to be revisited in the light of today's crisis of leadership.

⁵⁵ *Congress '86* (Issue 1, 1987), p.2

⁵⁶ Tommy McKearney, Interview... ; the same for the other quotes in the paragraph

PART THREE

The socialist project defined as an answer to humanity's need for a better way of life will continue to exist as long as there is injustice. *"For these reasons alone the philosophy of Socialism will never fade while Capitalism exists."*⁵⁷ But what about Marxism? Hasn't it been refuted by the collapse of the Soviet Union? After the Fall of the Soviet Union, McKearney wrote that *"Marxism remains the core of our analysis. Not a dogmatic interpretation, but Marxism as a guide to action. We see class struggle remaining the crucial ingredient within social relations in today's world. In turn, we recognise the need for struggle towards creating a classless society."*⁵⁸ This is still the case today. The LCR are not afraid of standing against the tide: *"It takes a brave man or woman to stand by their convictions in the face of hostile orthodoxy. A very mature person is required to go one step further and defy temporary popularity in order to deliver an explanation of 'the other way'."*⁵⁹ Whatever one thinks of scientific socialism, it is difficult to argue that nothing of value can be found within it.

One potential objection that could be made is that by adopting Marxism and Leninism, the LCR became isolated, because of the lack of popularity of those doctrines in Ireland. Had the LCR decided to adopt a less Marxist-Leninist approach (they could have adopted some "socialist republicanism"), would this have made things easier? So why did the LCR adopt this Marxism-Leninism? It was essentially a question of identity. The main reason was that it was imperative for the LCR *"to create a clean, clear distinctive profile for its politic^{60s}"*. The LCR wanted to establish itself a clear profile, and to have a distinctive mark that would demarcate the group from other organisations. *"Whatever little we would have gained in popularity, we would have lost in terms of a clear profile."* Had the LCR adopted a less distinct profile, the recuperation by the Provisionals or some left-wing organisations would have been easier. It was not just a question of establishing a clear profile for the group, but establishing a clear profile for the alternative. *"Why would people come to an alternative, if it really isn't an alternative?"* The alternative is not just some variation of Republicanism, but something altogether different. So the LCR made a heavy emphasis on what made it different from other groups.

One of the striking features of the LCR, is the importance they gave to Gorbachev's perestroika from early 1989 onwards. It is not our purpose here to judge the accuracy of the LCR's analysis of Gorbachev, but to see the political reasons for the group to support Gorbachev, and the political effects of this. For the LCR, if Gorbachev's policies *"had features unique to the USSR, its ramifications were universal. What was at stake was the regeneration of*

⁵⁷ "Where the Socialist Cause Now Stands", *Congress*, (Issue 14, Winter 1991), p.3

⁵⁸ Ibid. See also the article "Socialism is Alive and Well", *Congress*, (Issue 8, Spring 1990), pp.6-7

⁵⁹ "Surrendering to Spontaneity", *Congress*, (Issue 8, Spring 1990), p.15

⁶⁰ Tommy McKearney, Interview with Author, Monaghan, Saturday 11 August 2001, as well as all the other quotes in this paragraph

international socialism."⁶¹ Elsewhere, the LCR wrote: *"Reconstruction in the USSR has implications which are truly international. The face, and maybe the fate of socialism in the 21st century will be determined to a large extent by the outcome of the current struggle for perestroika."*⁶² This last point is important, because in the late eighties it became clear that the LCR's project was very much linked to Gorbachev's policies. The LCR was trying to revitalise the left republicanism in Ireland. The LCR's analysis was the following: if the process of democratisation and satisfaction of consumer needs had succeeded, it would have made socialism very attractive. The LCR hoped that thanks to Gorbachev's policies, *"the Soviet Union will be an example worthy of emulation."*⁶³ Communists in Ireland could then for example point out *"at all the Russians taking the sun in Bundoran"* expressing an attractive lifestyle. *"Socialism hasn't worked because it was neither popular nor democratic."* (interview) It was not popular, because Socialist countries were according to the Westerns that visited them *"It's like Ballymun without the glitter"*, and pointing to Lada cars as an example of failure to satisfy consumer demand *"if that's the high point of socialist man, where are we ?!"* (interview) It was not democratic because it is impossible to "impose" socialism on people against their will⁶⁴. In spite of the "lethargy" in which socialism had fallen, there were "reformers" such as Alexander Dubcek and others that tried to revitalise socialism and make it popular and democratic. *"Gorbachev actually was beginning what was beginning what many had been demanding for a quarter of a century."*⁶⁵ Gorbachev's reforms tried to do away with "authoritarian central planning" or "old command/administrative system", which was good to get hospitals etc. but was unable to increase production in the consumer sector. That was the purpose of Perestroika (economic restructuring). He also tried to do away with "dogmatic political authoritarianism", and bring democracy (glasnost). *"Whatever his shortcomings, Gorbachev remains the best hope for restructuring the USSR along democratic and socialist lines Nobody should forget that the prospects for socialism depend to a great extent on present developments in the Soviet Union"*⁶⁶. Tommy McKearney sees the events in 1989-1991 in Eastern Europe partly as a counter-revolution and partly as a

⁶¹ "Where the Socialist Cause...", p.4

⁶² "Restructuring the USSR: Contents, Targets, and Main Tendencies", *Congress*, (Issue 8, Spring 1990), p.10

⁶³ *Ibid*, p.12

⁶⁴ In the course of the interview, Tommy McKearney pointed out in order to work, socialism shouldn't require *"every third citizen in the Stasi"*—or in Sinn Fein the author added. With a note of humour, Tommy replied to my remark that *"the difference was that the Stasi was a bit more democratic since they had more people—one in every three citizen of the GDR was working for the Stasi. So it was a mass popular movement."* (Tommy McKearney, Interview with Author, Monaghan, Saturday 11 August 2001)

⁶⁵ "Where the Socialist Cause...", p.4

⁶⁶ "Soviet Difficulties – Socialism's Difficulties", *Congress*, (Issue 12, Spring 1991), p.5

democratic revolution. *“I don’t take a black and white attitude towards the collapse of communism. While there was counter-revolution involved, there was also a democratic instinct⁶⁷.”* If there was certainly a mixture of elements, the point is to decide which one is dominant. Subsequent events provided the tragic answer...⁶⁸. But it clearly saw the collapse of communism as a setback. After the events of summer 1991, Congress had a five pages article (almost half the issue) on “Where the socialist cause now stands” : It qualified the attempted coup in Moscow in August 1991 as *“nothing short of criminal lunacy”* but as a major setback as well: *“There’s no escaping the fact that the events of August 1991 were a setback. No longer do we have a socialist bastion –flawed as it was- in Europe. Nor, for the time being, do we have a credible communist party in Lenin’s homeland. Worst of all: Gorbachev’s delicate strategy for revolutionising the USSR has been severely disrupted.”*

“In practice, we have supported the broad trust of M. Gorbachev’s restructuring programme of the USSR. Subsequently, we see recent happenings in Eastern Europe as setbacks albeit severe ones, rather than terminal calamities.⁶⁹” The LCR understood this as a setback rather than a terminal calamity through a historical analogy with bourgeois revolution:

“Bourgeois Parliamentarism didn’t come about overnight, nor did it have a trouble free introduction either. Cromwell’s Commonwealth only lasted eleven years before the Restoration. The French Republic was overthrown several times before it became a permanent fixture. Such is the dialectic of history. So too is the dialectic of socialism.⁷⁰” Like the French Republic had been succeeded by Restoration, before becoming a permanent feature of political life in France, the LCR thought that socialism might be re-established. If it remains to be seen if socialist societies are going to be, it is clear that capitalism has failed to deliver better than socialism. *“The difficulties faced by people in Eastern Europe and around the world cannot be solved by capitalism, so we have to revisit socialism.”⁷¹*

The LCR’s view of Gorbachev would just be a historical curiosity, if the international consequences of perestroika wasn’t emphasised so much by them. It seems that not only is there a certain analogy between what Gorbachev was doing for Soviet socialism and what the LCR was doing for Republicanism, but that to a large extent the success of the LCR making communism attractive to Ireland was dependent upon Gorbachev’s reforms succeeding. It is not entirely a coincidence that the last issue of Congress came out during the winter of 1991, as in December 1991, the Soviet Communism ceased to exist. With Gorbachev gone, there wasn’t much sense for the LCR to argue the case for Gorbachev-type reforms.

⁶⁷ Tommy McKearney, Interview with Author, Monaghan, Saturday 11 August 2001

⁶⁸ See for example, “East Germany’s Unemployment Rate Soars”, *Congress*, (Issue 10, Autumn 1990), p.8, and on page 12 of the same issue “Unity or Annexation ?”

⁶⁹ “Where the Socialist...”, pp.3-4

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p.4

⁷¹ Tommy McKearney, Interview with Author, Monaghan, Saturday 11 August 2001

There is an analogy between what was Gorbachev was doing and what the LCR was attempting to do. Like Gorbachev wanted to make socialism democratic and popular, the LCR wanted to make Irish Republicanism popular and democratic. As much as Gorbachev placed himself in the tradition of the likes of Ducek, The LCR placed itself in the tradition of the likes of the Republican Congress that attempted to make Irish Republicanism more popular and democratic. The failure of Gorbachev certainly damaged the LCR's project. *"It removed a major impetus⁷²"*. With Gorbachev gone, the hope of having some attractive form of communism that could be promoted in Ireland as an alternative to the current socio-economic organisation of society vanished away. It was then very difficult to argue the case for communism and made the LCR's position untenable.

⁷² Ibid