

Danny Morrison - Daily Ireland, 7 June 2006

Danny Morrison refutes Richard O'Rawe

In a forthcoming BBC documentary Richard O'Rawe once again will be claiming that the republican leadership rejected a deal from the British government shortly before the death of Joe McDonnell on July 8th 1981. Richard is a former blanket man and PRO in the H-Blocks. Whilst in jail Richard never raised his claims with the leadership in prison or the leadership outside. After Richard's release he worked with me in the Republican Press Centre for a year and never mentioned the allegations he now makes.

He neither approached Brendan 'Bik' McFarlane, O/C of the prisoners, nor me to ask us our recollections of this period when he was preparing for his book. Last year Richard alleged that in late July 1981 I sat at a meeting with hunger strikers' families with a deal from the British government in my back pocket and didn't tell them. When I pointed out that I had been in hospital in Dublin during that period Richard realised his memory was false and discreetly dropped the claim. He claims he wrote the book out of concern for the relatives, yet he never told them. Instead, he published extracts from the book in the 'Sunday Times'.

Morrison article in today's Daily Ireland

On July 4th 1981, four days before Joe McDonnell's death, Richard, as PRO, issued a statement aimed at breaking the deadlock. It said that the British could settle the hunger strike without compromising their position by extending prison reforms to the

entire prison population. At this time the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace was engaged in a mediation exercise. Behind the scenes the British government re-opened a 'back-channel' to the republican leadership.

The 1981 hunger strike came out of the 1980 hunger strike. The British sent a document to the prisoners which they claimed could be the basis for a settlement. However, the prisoners had already ended the strike before they received the document. The British reneged on their assurances almost immediately. That was why the second hunger strikers were to demand verification of any deal to end their hunger strike.

In July 1981 the British government had various public and private positions. Privately it outlined two different offers, one to the ICJP and another to the republican leadership. I was one of those who described to the hunger strikers, including Joe McDonnell, on July 5th what the British were saying to us. The prisoners told me they wanted the offer clarified and verified in person through a senior British representative. We passed this on to the British. However, the British would not verify to the hunger strikers their various 'offers'. Six times they were asked by the ICJP to explain their position to the prisoners and six times they refused before Joe McDonnell died.

In his comms [communications] from July, August and September 1981 which were released as press statements, Richard makes it clear there was no deal. On July 23rd, two weeks after Joe McDonnell's death, he accuses the British of deliberate ambiguity and demands clarity, yet in his book he claims that on July 6th the republican leadership rejected 'a deal'.

PO 35/198(3)

Richard's comms – which are contemporaneous accounts of the time - contradict the allegations he is making a quarter of a century later.

On July 7th, the day before Joe's death, Richard wrote: "We are very depressed at the fact that our comrade Joe McDonnell is virtually on the brink of death – especially when the solution to the issue is there for the taking. The urgency of the situation dictates that the British act on our statement of July 4th now. Finally, we advise our supporters to be cautious and vigilant and to disregard the volume of rumours that seems to be in circulation. We ask everyone to analyse and understand our July 4th statement and to be on guard for any dilution of the situation contained in that statement."

On July 8th, the day of Joe McDonnell's death, he wrote: "The British government's hypocrisy and their refusal to act in a responsible manner are completely to blame for the death of Joe McDonnell... The only definite response forthcoming from the British government [to the prisoners July 4th statement] is the death of Joe McDonnell..."

This morning [Secretary of State] Mr Atkins has issued us with yet another ambiguous and self-gratifying statement... That statement, even given its most optimistic reading, is far removed from our July 4th statement. At face value it amounts to nothing."

On July 23rd, nine days before Kevin Lynch died, Richard wrote: "The [ICJP's] proposals were vague but even at that we did not believe they contained a just settlement. After Joe McDonnell's death on July 8th the British government issued their present policy statement which in substance and even given an optimistic

reading was a dilution of the diluted package attained initially by the I.C.J.P...

"It is vital also that everyone realises that the I.C.J.P. have been victims of British perfidity [sic] and that the ambiguity which accompanies all British statements is deliberate...

"The death of our comrade Joe McDonnell on July 8th plus the Humphrey Atkins' statement of the same day, and the evolution of bitter claim and counter-claim between the British and the I.C.J.P. left one thing clear – that intermediaries, and this is no slight on the I.C.J.P., are dangerous and that only direct talks between the British and ourselves based on our 4th July statement can guarantee clarity and sincerity and thus save lives."

In relation to a very late intervention by the Red Cross at the invitation of the British, in the same statement Richard wrote: "They [the British] hoped to brinkmanship us in a mediating situation hoping that we would accept a cosmetic settlement..."

He accused the British government of having "no intention of genuinely ending the hunger strike..."

"At present the British are looking for what amounts to an absolute surrender. They are offering us nothing that amounts to an honourable solution and they have created red herrings, that is, their refusal to allow Brendan McFarlane to represent the hunger strikers, to cover their inflexibility..."

"Lastly we hope that it is clear that we cannot end the hunger strike unless justice is

done and that ultimately lies in the hands of the Brits.”

On August 8th, the day Tom McElwee died, Richard attacked Humphrey Atkins: “For a man to claim he has stated his position clearly in relation to ‘what will happen when the protest ends’, despite the fact that no one really knows what is on offer, shows the insensitivity/ insanity of his position and policy.

“We suggest that he won’t outline his policy because No1 he hopes to about turn – at sometime, and No2, he knows he is offering so little that even moderate opinion would be insulted...

“Very much prominent in their [the British] thinking is the belief that sooner or later we are going to pack up and give in. They have a rude awakening awaiting them.”

Three weeks after the death of Micky Devine, the last hunger striker to die, Richard accuses Fr Faul of being divisive. On September 11th, 1981, he wrote:

“Several weeks ago, Fr Faul publicly stated that he believed that our statements were not authentic in that someone, not a prisoner, was responsible for their composition. When confronted by myself as P.R.O. in the company of Brendan McFarlane Fr Faul retracted his allegation...

“In the same statement Fr Faul referred to what he described as ‘the elusive chain of command’. In the same confrontation with Brendan McFarlane and myself he acknowledged that there was no ‘elusive chain of command’ and that we prisoners were in complete command of the hunger strike and protest...

"Fr Faul should know by now not to underestimate either our resolve or durability for we have the volunteers for hunger strike and the determination to continue the hunger strike indefinitely."

Richard 's own words show clearly there was no deal. All surviving hunger strikers from that period are of the same view. In his book Richard alleges that the republican leadership ordered the hunger strikers not to accept a deal, yet, as his own words of the time attest, "there was no 'elusive chain of command' ... we prisoners were in complete command of the hunger strike and protest..."

I hope this closes this sorry episode and I would like to apologise to the families of the hunger strikers for the suffering and distress that this has perpetuated. But I feel that the false claims have to be answered and settled.

It was the British government who withdrew political status, introduced criminalisation and was responsible for creating the conditions for a hunger strike.

Timeline – Joe McDonnell's Death

29 June

Four hunger strikers have already died - Bobby Sands on day 66, Francis Hughes on day 59, Raymond McCreesh and Patsy O'Hara on day 61 of their hunger strike.

Joe McDonnell is on day 52 without food. Secretary of State, Humphrey Atkins reaffirms that political status will not be granted and that implementing changes in the

areas of work, clothing and association present 'great difficulty' and would only encourage the prisoners to believe that they could achieve status through "the so-called 'five demands'".

3 July

Irish Commission for Justice and Peace [ICJP] has eight-hour meeting with Michael Alison, prisons minister.

4 July

ICJP again meets Alison who gives its representatives permission to meet the eight hunger strikers in prison hospital. They are shocked at the condition of Joe McDonnell. Prisoners later issue statement saying British government could settle the hunger strike without any departure from 'principle' by extending prison reforms to the entire prison population. ICJP tells prisoners' families that they are 'hopeful' but that prisoners deeply distrust the authorities.

British government representative (codenamed 'Mountain Climber') secretly contacts republican leadership by 'back channel'. Insists on strict confidentiality.

5 July

After exchanges, Mountain Climber's offer (concessions in relation to aspects of the five demands) goes further than ICJP's understanding of government position. Sinn Fein's Danny Morrison secretly visits hunger strikers. Separately, he meets prison OC Brendan McFarlane, explains what Mountain Climber is offering should hunger strike be terminated. McFarlane meets hunger strikers. Morrison is allowed to phone out from the doctor's surgery. Tells Adams that prisoners will not take anything on trust,

and prisoners want offers confirmed and seek to improve them. While waiting for McFarlane to return Morrison is ordered out of the prison by a governor [John Pepper]. ICJP visits hunger strikers and offers themselves as mediators. Hunger strikers say they want NIO rep to talk directly to them. Request by hunger strikers to meet McFarlane with ICJP is refused by NIO. Mountain Climber is told that prisoners want any offer verified.

6 July

Gerry Adams confides in ICJP about secret contact and the difference in the offers. Commission is stunned by disclosure. It confronts Alison and demands that a guarantor goes into the jail and confirm what is on offer. Alison checks with his superiors and states that a guarantor will go in at 9am the following morning, Tuesday, 7 July. Hunger strikers are told to expect an official from the NIO.

7 July

Republican monitors await response from Mountain Climber.

11.40am: Bishop O'Mahoney [ICJP] telephones Alison asking where the guarantor is. Alison suggests he and the ICJP have another meeting. O'Mahoney tells him he is shocked, dismayed and amazed that the government should be continuing with its game of brinkmanship. He says: "I beg you to get someone into prison and get things started."

12.18pm: ICJP decides to hold 1pm press conference outlining what had been agreed by the government and explain how the British had failed to honour it.

12.55pm: NIO phones ICJP and says that an official would meet the hunger strikers that afternoon.

1pm: ICJP calls off its press conference.

4pm: NIO tells ICJP that an official will be going in but that the document was still being drafted.

5.55pm: ICJP phones Alison and expresses concern that no official has gone in.

7.15pm: ICJP phones Alison and again expresses concern.

8.50pm: NIO tells ICJP that the official will be going in shortly.

10pm: Alison tells ICJP that no one would be going in that night but would at 7.30 the next morning and claims that the delay would be to the benefit of the prisoners.

Republican monitors still waiting confirmation from Mountain Climber that an NIO representative will meet the hunger strikers. The call does not come.

8 July

4.50am Joe McDonnell dies on the 61st day of his hunger strike.

9am: An NIO official visits each hunger striker in his cell and reads out a statement which says that nothing has changed since Humphrey Atkins' policy statement of 29 June, thus suggesting that there was no new document being drafted as claimed by the NIO at 4pm on 7 July.

ICJP holds press conference and condemns British government and NIO for failing to honour undertaking and for "clawing back" concessions.

10 July

ICJP leaves Belfast