



■ **BEHIND CLOSED DOORS:** Now with its very future in question, rumours rumble on about the sequence of events in the Maze prison during the time of the hunger strikers

# Allegations of a rejected deal spark fury among republicans

By Catherine Morrison

**S**ENIOR republicans last night rejected controversial claims in a new book that Sinn Féin and the IRA blocked a deal which could have saved the lives of six hunger strikers.



Richard O'Rawe, left, spokesman for the Provisional IRA in the Maze prison during the hunger strikes, said he accepted a British government deal just days before the fifth hunger striker, Joe McDonnell, died in July 1981.

In *Blanketmen: An Untold Story of the H-Block Hunger Strike*, Mr O'Rawe claims fellow prisoners' leader Brendan 'Bik' McFarlane had shared details of a "substantial" offer from Margaret Thatcher's government, conceding four of the five IRA demands.

The only point the British had refused to concede was the free association of prisoners on the IRA wing.

Mr O'Rawe, who was serving eight years for robbery, claimed both men agreed that the offer, which was tabled by a mysterious middleman called the Mountain Climber, was sufficient to call off the hunger strike.

However, on July 6, the IRA's army council ruled the offer was not sufficient and the hunger strikers should hold out for more concessions.

Less than 48 hours later Joe McDonnell died.

On July 22, prisoners were told that the Mountain Climber had been in touch again, but that nothing more was on offer.

Five more prisoners were to die before the protest was eventually called off in October, on less favourable terms, but after the politically critical Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-election.

In his book, Mr O'Rawe suggests that one interpretation of events was that six hunger strikers were sacrificed for political gain, to ensure Owen Carron's election to the seat left vacant by his fellow striker Bobby Sands.

"Perhaps getting a republican elected in Bobby's former constituency of Fermanagh/South Tyrone and thus kick-starting the shift away from armed struggle and into constitutional



■ **HUNGER STRIKER:** A controversial new book claims that a deal could have saved the life of Joe McDonnell

politics was the real reason they balked at accepting what appeared to be a very sellable deal," he writes.

"If that were so, Joe and the five other hunger strikers who died after him were used as cannon fodder.

"No matter which way one views it, the outside leadership alone, not the prison leadership, took the decision to

play brinkmanship with Joe McDonnell's life.

"If Bik and I had had our way, Joe and the five comrades who followed him to the grave would be alive today."

Owen Carron was successfully elected to the seat in August 1981.

Now a teacher in Co Leitrim, he refused to comment when asked by *the Irish News* for his views on Mr O'Rawe's book.

"I am working, I am not going to say anything about this," he said.

However, Brendan McFarlane strenuously denied the claims in the book, published yesterday.

"I was the person receiving communications - there was no substantive deal at all," he said.

"The hunger strikers had actually told the ICJT (Irish Commission of Justice and Truth) that there was nothing of substance.

"It did not happen. No deal was offered to the hunger strikers whereby they could say it was acceptable.

"Richard's whole thrust here is that the army council were responsible some how for hunger strikers dying.

"That is scurrilous, it is wrong and absolutely inaccurate.

"The hunger strikers took the decisions themselves from the first hunger strikers, from Bobby Sands right through to Mickey Devine - they took the decision themselves.

"This is a slander and a slur, this is pointing up Richard's own idea and how he wants to sell his book. I have no idea why he is saying this."

Danny Morrison, a former Sinn Féin press officer who was also involved with the hunger strike negotiations at the time, said the claim in the book that the army council had turned the deal down was

"totally untrue".

"After the disgraceful things that were written in that book, Richard O'Rawe should hang his head in shame for what he has said and for the allegations he has made," he said.

"I explained to them [hunger strikers] what was on offer and we talked about it.

"We all agreed that this could be a resolution but we wanted it to be guaranteed - we couldn't go on a whim.

"Richard said it was there in black and white, it wasn't - this was all notional stuff."

Magherafelt Sinn Féin councillor Oliver Hughes, whose brother Francis died on hunger strike in May 1981, also claimed the author's allegations "did not ring true".

"I am outraged by Mr O'Rawe's claims that the republican leadership around the time of Joe McDonnell's death ordered the prisoners not to accept an offer from the British," he said.

"Having visited my brother on the blanket I think I can say with some authority that that was never the relationship between the IRA and the prisoners."

Former Sinn Féin president Ruairi O'Bradaigh also said it was "not the policy" of the republican movement to prolong the hunger strike until the by-election which followed Bobby Sands' death.

"I believed then, and still do, that the terms for the settlement were a matter for the H-block prisoners themselves," he said.

However, Mr O'Rawe insisted yesterday: "This is the boys closing ranks and that is the bottom line here.

"The families are entitled to know what happened as is everybody, including the ordinary blanketmen."

## 'DID MY FATHER DIE FOR A PR EXERCISE?'

THE SON of a Derry hunger striker has said if reports that the IRA blocked a possible deal after four prisoners had died are true, it would mean his father died for 'PR' reasons.

Michael Devine, whose father 'Red' Mickey was the last of the 10 hunger strikers to die, was speaking following the publication of *Blanketmen: An Untold Story of the H-Block Hunger Strike*.

Author Richard O'Rawe has claimed the British government offered four of the hunger strikers' five demands following the death of Derry man Patsy O'Hara, but this was rejected by the IRA army council.

Mr Devine (31) last night said that if Mr O'Rawe's claims were true, it could mean his father need not have died. Stressing he wished to find out more about the claims, he

said: "If this is true I would be very concerned that my father and five other men died for them (the republican movement) to gain support."

Mr Devine added: "My thoughts are that it may have been a PR exercise to gain support."

But Derry Sinn Féin assembly member Raymond McCartney rejected Mr O'Rawe's claims.

Mr McCartney, who was on an earlier hunger strike in 1980, went on to be Officer Commanding of the IRA in the Maze in the late 1980s.

"From my own personal experience, as someone who was on hunger strike, the decision to go on it and the decision to come off it was always that of the individual," he said.

Mr McCartney said he was in the prison throughout the

period from 1981 to 1994, during which time he discussed the hunger strike with hundreds of people.

"Never have I heard anyone saying at any time that the IRA leadership vetoed a deal; there was never any suggestion that a deal being offered at all."

He said he served time on a prison wing with Mr O'Rawe and met him occasionally outside prison, but the writer had never mentioned such a deal.

"I also find it very striking that someone would write a book of that sort of nature and not discuss it with people, particularly like 'Bik' (McFarlane), even to square up his recollections with Brendan McFarlane who he names in the book," Mr McCartney said.

Seamus McKinney





■ IN MEMORY: The twentieth anniversary Mass for the hunger strikers at Clonard Monastery, Belfast

PICTURES: Irish News library

## Hunger strikes gave way to new Sinn Féin

THE 1981 hunger strike is seen as one of the most important episodes of the Troubles. The events leading up to it began in March 1976 with the withdrawal of 'political' or 'special category' status for republican and loyalist prisoners in Long Kesh. At the same time the Northern Ireland Office opened up a new prison on the Co Antrim site. The government knew it as the Maze, but to republicans it became known as the H-blocks. IRA man Kieran Nugent was the first republican convicted under the new 'criminalisation' process in September 1976 and immediately refused to wear a prison uniform, beginning what became known as the 'blanket' protest. By 1978 nearly 300 republican

prisoners were refusing to wear prison uniforms. In March of that year, the protests escalated to a 'no wash' or 'dirty' protest in which prisoners refused to leave their cells, alleging assaults from prison officers. Prisoners also began to daub excreta on the walls of their cells. Then Catholic primate Cardinal Tomás O Fiaich said the scenes reminded him of the sewers in Calcutta. The conflict between the 'blanket' protesters and the British government culminated in the announcement of a hunger strike in October 1980. The hunger strikers were Tom McFeeley, Brendan Hughes, Raymond McCartney, Leo Green, John Nixon, Tommy McKearney and Sean McKenna.

On December 1 they were joined by IRA women prisoners Mairead Farrell, Mairead Nugent and Mary Doyle in Armagh jail. However, by December 18, with Sean McKenna close to death, a deal appeared to have been brokered between the hunger strikers and the British government. As part of the agreement republicans would be allowed to wear their own clothing. But within days there was a dispute over the government's issuing of 'civilian-type' clothing instead of prisoners' own clothes. As both sides bitterly accused the other of betrayal, tensions in the H-Blocks escalated. On February 5 1981, republican prisoners warned of a second hunger strike if political status

was not restored. The IRA leadership outside the prison was against the hunger strike, fearing that its failure could seriously damage morale in republican ranks. Despite the objections, on March 1 republican prisoners announced they were going ahead. The 'dirty' protest ended the next day as Bobby Sands began a 66-day hunger strike which would end in his death on May 5. Up to 100,000 people attended the funeral of Mr Sands, who had been elected MP for Fermanagh/South Tyrone. The hunger strike ended on October 3 when more families began to ask for medical intervention once hunger strikers slipped into a coma. By the end Bobby Sands, Francis Hughes, Patsy O'Hara, Raymond

McCreesh, Kieran Doherty, Kevin Lynch, Joe McDonnell, Martin Hurson, Tom McElwee and Michael Devine had died. Within days then Secretary of State Jim Prior announced a series of initiatives which were unofficially seen as meeting the main demands of the hunger strikers. But it was arguably the aftermath of the 1981 hunger strike which would prove to be one of the key turning points of the Troubles. The emergence of Sinn Féin as a political force was demonstrated in the winning of two Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-elections and other electoral successes in the Republic. Within 18 months Gerry Adams had been elected as MP for west Belfast and the growth of Sinn Féin as a political force had begun.



■ TURNING POINT: The funeral procession of Bobby Sands

## Monsignor Faul regrets his 'late intervention'

By Catherine Morrison

A KEY player in the 1981 hunger strikes last night said he regretted not intervening earlier in the protest.

Monsignor Denis Faul, right, was a regular visitor at the Maze prison at the time and a supporter of the prisoners' families. Mgr Faul described how, by the end of June 1981, he believed the strikes were all but over.

Four prisoners had died agonising slow deaths from starvation, but unbeknownst to Mgr Faul at the time, six more would die before the protest was brought to an end.

"The prisoners had gotten to wear their own clothes and I remember distinctly going into the prison at the end of June, and many [prisoners] were of the opinion the strike should stop," he said.

"I went on holiday - I thought the whole thing was over."

But by the time Mgr Faul returned to the prison, two more men - Joe McDonnell and Martin Hurson - had died.

"I called a meeting on 28 July in



Toomebridge - all the relations were there and they all decided unanimously that they wanted the strike ended," he said.

"We headed down to Belfast to meet Adams at 12 midnight and had a long discussion until about 2.30am. We told him he was to get an order from the IRA [to stop the strike]."

"We pushed our point and were very blunt about it. The families had a clear cut request. "They [the republican prisoners] had got the clothes and if they stopped, they would get the rest."

Mgr Faul recalled Gerry Adams agreeing to the families request, and said he would go to the

Maze to talk to the prisoners. "But the next day Mr Adams phoned me and said he was bringing somebody into the prison with him - Owen Carron. "My heart sank.

"I was suspicious, was this for political reasons?"

"We gave the IRA the opportunity to end it. I went back to the families and told them to take them off the strike as soon as the men became unconscious.

"But by that stage the political aim had been met and the election was over."

Richard O'Rawe, in his book *Blanketmen: An Untold Story of the H-Block Hunger Strike*, contends that the IRA army council and Sinn Féin leadership may have decided to keep the strike going for political gain.

If that was the case, Mgr Faul said, that claim is potentially devastating for the republican leadership and more so, for the families of the hunger strikers.

"If these men died for votes it would be a sad event," he said.

"I mean, what was important - the votes or their lives? It is damaging if it is true and I regret I did not intervene earlier."

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