

Bloody Sunday, Northern Ireland: 50th Anniversary Commemoration. Derry Delegation Visits Detroit

A wide-ranging discussion was held on the historical links between the African American and Irish civil rights and liberation struggles

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On January 30, 1972, British military forces opened fire on a peaceful demonstration of 15,000 in Derry, Northern Ireland leaving 14 dead and many others wounded.

This massacre became known as Bloody Sunday where the Catholic residents of Derry were protesting against the discrimination and oppression instituted by a British occupation of the territory which extended back several centuries.

Paul Doherty of the Bloody Sunday Justice Campaign, whose father Patrick was killed on fateful day, and Ciara O’Connor, Project Coordinator of the Museum of Free Derry, were in the Detroit area to speak and meet with local organizers. Both of these activists and scholars are committed to preserving the legacy of the civil rights and liberation movements of Northern Ireland against British occupation.

An event held on April 2 at the First Unitarian Universalist Church in Detroit’s Midtown District heard Doherty and O’Connor lecture on the events surrounding the 1972 massacre. The program was jointly sponsored by the Moratorium NOW! Coalition, the Detroit MLK Committee and EMEAC.

Since the 1960s, there has been striking similarities between the African American movement demanding quality education, fair housing, universal suffrage and self-determination and the campaigns in Northern Ireland for the same objectives. There were those who preferred nonviolent resistance to discrimination and others that embarked upon an armed struggle drawing inspiration from the 1916 Easter Rising led by Irish Republican nationalist and socialist leaders such as James Connolly and the subsequent War of Independence which lasted up until 1921-22.

During 1967, the Civil Rights Association was formed in Northern Ireland. They carried out demonstrations during the period and in 1968 were met with stiff opposition from the

Protestant community whose allegiance remained with the British government. Therefore, the Civil Rights Association was fighting the British Loyalists and the security forces occupying the country.

The Derry Housing Action Committee was established in early 1968 to fight discrimination and substandard conditions. These demands parallel those in the U.S. when mass demonstrations and rebellions erupted between 1964 and 1970 over the deplorable conditions of African Americans and Puerto Ricans living in various cities such as New York, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, among many more.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was martyred on April 4, 1968. The visit by Doherty and O'Connor coincided with the 54th anniversary of the assassination of King in Memphis, Tennessee. King and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) were in Memphis to assist over one thousand predominantly African American sanitation workers who were on strike seeking recognition under the banner of the American Federation of State and Municipal Employees (AFSCME).



Irish march on Westland Street in Bogside, January 1972 (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

After the assassination of King, the Fair Housing Act was passed and signed into law by the U.S. Congress and then President Lyndon B. Johnson. Nonetheless, in the U.S. this measure, considered the last of the Civil Rights Acts passed from the late 1950s through the 1960s, has never been fully enforced since African Americans, People of Color Communities and the working poor have never enjoyed any semblance of a guarantee for quality housing.

Doherty and O'Connor noted that:

“There remains a polarization between the Catholic community in Northern Ireland and

the Protestants who are seen as settlers and loyal to the British crown. We want them included as a part of the Irish culture and nation. However, no one should be forced to accept British culture. Sometimes we cannot understand our working class protestant people maintaining their allegiance to the Democratic Unionist Party. A recent census may indicate that there is a Catholic majority in Northern Ireland which could prompt a referendum on the status of the area in relationship to its continued ties with London.”

In the U.S., People of Color communities are rapidly approaching a combined majority over the European Americans. The African American, Latin American, Asian, Indigenous and Middle Eastern population groups are therefore under extreme pressure by successive Democratic and Republican administrations viewing this emerging majority as a potential threat to the racist status-quo.

Compounding the problems in Northern Ireland is the recent withdrawal by Britain from the European Union (EU). Most people in the Republic of Ireland in the South and the Northern region did not agree with many British Conservatives and other forces which voted in favor of severing ties with the EU. The question of the border between Ireland and the EU countries is still an unresolved issue in the United Kingdom.

Historic Links from the Abolitionist Movement to the Irish Liberation Struggle

This author chaired the session on April 2 and began the discussion on the role of Ireland in the struggle to end African enslavement in the U.S. Frederick Douglass, one of the leading proponents of abolition and the total freedom of African people in the U.S. travelled to Ireland in 1845. While there he gained tremendous support for the abolitionist cause and was able to reprint his Slave Narrative which was widely distributed internationally.

A review of a book entitled “Frederick Douglass in Ireland, In His Own Worlds” by Christine Kinealy, was partially read at the beginning of the program. [The review](#) was published by the Irish Times and was written by Brendan Kelly in 2018, says that:

“While Douglass’s work was unfinished at the time of his death – and remains incomplete today – his contribution to the abolition of slavery was inestimable and his personal story full of unexpected turns. In 1845, he published the memoir for which he is best known, ‘Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave,’ which placed him at risk of recapture. He fled to the United Kingdom and spent several months campaigning in Ireland, speaking at events in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Wexford, Waterford, Celbridge, Belfast, Lisburn, Hollywood and Bangor. Douglass heard (Daniel) O’Connell speak at a public meeting in Dublin on September 29th, 1845 and was immediately entranced: ‘It seems to me that the voice of O’Connell is enough to calm the most violent passion, even though it were already manifesting itself in a mob. There is a sweet persuasiveness in it, beyond any voice I ever heard. His power over an audience is perfect.’”

Since the U.S. Civil War and the ascendancy of the Civil Rights and Black Liberation Movements, the work of the African American people still remains unfinished. With respect to Northern Ireland, O’Connor and Doherty recognized the progress which has been made since the 1960s and 1970s, although Ireland remains partitioned between the North and South.

As in the U.S. and other geo-political regions, many activists took up arms after repressive

institutions of the colonial and racist states closed all avenues of nonviolent resistance and change. In Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Vietnam, and other formerly colonial territories won their independence through mass action and guerrilla warfare.



Detroit event to commemorate Bloody Sunday (Photo by Paul Jackson)

In Ireland, the Citizen's Army and the Republican Army (IRA) of the early 20th century waged an armed struggle to break the colonial yoke imposed by Britain and to unite the country. James Connelly, the co-founder of the Irish Citizen's Army, was captured and executed by the British military in 1916 after the Easter Rising. Later an Irish War of Independence began which was able to liberate vast swaths of territory inside the country. Eventually, during the early 1920s, the country was partitioned by Britain and is still divided today.

The reemergence of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), later known as the Provisional IRA, which originally grew out of the period leading up to the War of Independence (1919-1921), was a cause for concern by the British. However, the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 resulted in a ceasefire between the IRA and the British government. A referendum on a power-sharing agreement was approved by the majority of voters in Northern Ireland and the Republic in the South.

Nonetheless, these developments have not resolved all of the outstanding issues related to a complete break with Britain and unification with the Republic of Ireland. In the U.S., despite the passage of numerous Civil Rights Bills and other measures, institutional racism and state repression remain major factors in the character of relations between African Americans and the majority white population.

The discussions on April 2 in Detroit illustrated once again the convergence of the struggles for civil rights and national liberation on an international scale. Ireland and the oppressed peoples of the globe will inevitably continue their organizing work until their strategic objectives are completely achieved.

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