

= 1981 Irish hunger strike =

The 1981 Irish hunger strike was the culmination of a five @-@ year protest during The Troubles by Irish republican prisoners in Northern Ireland . The protest began as the blanket protest in 1976 , when the British government withdrew Special Category Status for convicted paramilitary prisoners . In 1978 , after a number of attacks on prisoners leaving their cells to " slop out " , the dispute escalated into the dirty protest , where prisoners refused to leave their cells to wash and covered the walls of their cells with excrement . In 1980 , seven prisoners participated in the first hunger strike , which ended after 53 days .

The second hunger strike took place in 1981 and was a showdown between the prisoners and the Prime Minister , Margaret Thatcher . One hunger striker , Bobby Sands , was elected as a Member of Parliament during the strike , prompting media interest from around the world . The strike was called off after ten prisoners had starved themselves to death ? including Sands , whose funeral was attended by 100 @,@ 000 people . The strike radicalised Irish nationalist politics , and was the driving force that enabled Sinn Féin to become a mainstream political party .

= = Background = =

There had been hunger strikes by Irish republican prisoners since 1917 , and twelve had previously died on hunger strike , including Thomas Ashe , Terence MacSwiney , Seán McCaughey , Michael Gaughan and Frank Stagg . After the introduction of internment in 1971 , Long Kesh ? later known as HM Prison Maze ? was run like a prisoner of war camp . Internees lived in dormitories and disciplined themselves with military @-@ style command structures , drilled with dummy guns made from wood , and held lectures on guerrilla warfare and politics . Convicted prisoners were refused the same rights as internees until July 1972 , when Special Category Status was introduced following a hunger strike by 40 Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) prisoners led by the veteran republican Billy McKee . Special Category , or political , status meant prisoners were treated similarly to prisoners of war ; for example , not having to wear prison uniforms or do prison work . In 1976 , as part of its policy of " criminalisation " , the British government brought an end to Special Category Status for newly convicted paramilitary prisoners in Northern Ireland . The policy was not introduced for existing prisoners , but for those convicted of offences after 1 March 1976 . The end to Special Category Status was a serious threat to the authority which the paramilitary leaderships inside prison had been able to exercise over their own men , as well as being a propaganda blow .

= = Blanket and dirty protests = =

On 14 September 1976 , newly convicted prisoner Kieran Nugent began the blanket protest , in which IRA and Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) prisoners refused to wear prison uniform and either went naked or fashioned garments from prison blankets . In 1978 , after a number of attacks on prisoners leaving their cells to " slop out " (i.e. , empty their chamber pots) , this escalated into the dirty protest , where prisoners refused to leave their cells to wash or slop out . To mitigate the build @-@ up of flies , they smeared their excrement on the walls of their cells . These protests aimed to re @-@ establish their political status by securing what were known as the " Five Demands " :

- the right not to wear a prison uniform ;
- the right not to do prison work ;
- the right of free association with other prisoners , and to organise educational and recreational pursuits ;
- the right to one visit , one letter and one parcel per week ;
- full restoration of remission lost through the protest .

Initially , this protest did not attract a great deal of attention , and even the IRA regarded it as a side @-@ issue compared to their armed campaign . It began to attract attention when Tomás Ó Fiaich , the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Armagh , visited the prison and condemned the conditions there .

In 1979 , former MP Bernadette McAliskey stood in the election for the European Parliament on a platform of support for the protesting prisoners , and won 5 @. @ 9 % of the vote across Northern Ireland , even though Sinn Féin had called for a boycott of the election . Shortly after this , the broad @- @ based National H @- @ Block / Armagh Committee was formed , on a platform of support for the " Five Demands " , with McAliskey as its main spokesperson . The period leading up to the hunger strike saw assassinations by both republicans and loyalists . The IRA shot and killed a number of prison officers ; while loyalist paramilitaries shot and killed a number of activists in the National H @- @ Block / Armagh Committee and badly injured McAliskey and her husband in an attempt on their lives .

= = 1980 Hunger strike = =

On 27 October 1980 , republican prisoners in HM Prison Maze began a hunger strike . Many prisoners volunteered to be part of the strike , but a total of seven were selected to match the number of men who signed the Easter 1916 Proclamation of the Republic . The group consisted of IRA members Brendan Hughes , Tommy McKearney , Raymond McCartney , Tom McFeeley , Sean McKenna , Leo Green , and Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) member John Nixon . On 1 December three prisoners in Armagh Women 's Prison joined the strike , including Mairéad Farrell , followed by a short @- @ lived hunger strike by several dozen more prisoners in HM Prison Maze . In a war of nerves between the IRA leadership and the British government , with McKenna lapsing in and out of a coma and on the brink of death , the government appeared to concede the essence of the prisoners ' five demands with a thirty @- @ page document detailing a proposed settlement . With the document in transit to Belfast , Hughes took the decision to save McKenna 's life and end the strike after 53 days on 18 December .

= = 1981 Hunger strike = =

In January 1981 it became clear that the prisoners ' demands had not been conceded . Prison authorities began to supply the prisoners with officially issued civilian clothing , whereas the prisoners demanded the right to wear their own clothing . On 4 February the prisoners issued a statement saying that the British government had failed to resolve the crisis and declared their intention of " hunger striking once more " . The second hunger strike began on 1 March , when Bobby Sands , the IRA 's former officer commanding (OC) in the prison , refused food . Unlike the first strike , the prisoners joined one at a time and at staggered intervals , which they believed would arouse maximum public support and exert maximum pressure on Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher .

The republican movement initially struggled to generate public support for the second hunger strike . The Sunday before Sands began his strike , 3 @, @ 500 people marched through west Belfast ; during the first hunger strike four months earlier the marchers had numbered 10 @, @ 000 . Five days into the strike , however , Independent Republican MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Frank Maguire died , resulting in a by @- @ election . There was debate among nationalists and republicans regarding who should contest the election : Austin Currie of the Social Democratic and Labour Party expressed an interest , as did Bernadette McAliskey and Maguire 's brother Noel . After negotiations , and implied threats to Noel Maguire , they agreed not to split the nationalist vote by contesting the election and Sands stood as an Anti H @- @ Block candidate against Ulster Unionist Party candidate Harry West . Following a high @- @ profile campaign the election took place on 9 April , and Sands was elected to the British House of Commons with 30 @, @ 492 votes to West 's 29 @, @ 046 .

Sands ' election victory raised hopes that a settlement could be negotiated , but Thatcher stood firm in refusing to give concessions to the hunger strikers . She stated " We are not prepared to consider special category status for certain groups of people serving sentences for crime . Crime is crime is crime , it is not political " . The world 's media descended on Belfast , and several intermediaries visited Sands in an attempt to negotiate an end to the hunger strike , including Síle de Valera ,

granddaughter of Éamon de Valera , Pope John Paul II 's personal envoy John Magee , and European Commission of Human Rights officials . With Sands close to death , the government 's position remained unchanged , with Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Humphrey Atkins stating " If Mr. Sands persisted in his wish to commit suicide , that was his choice . The Government would not force medical treatment upon him " .

= = = Deaths and end of strike = = =

On 5 May , Sands died in the prison hospital on the sixty @-@ sixth day of his hunger strike , prompting rioting in nationalist areas of Northern Ireland . Humphrey Atkins issued a statement saying that Sands had committed suicide " under the instructions of those who felt it useful to their cause that he should die " . Over 100 @,@ 000 people lined the route of his funeral , which was conducted with full IRA military honours . Margaret Thatcher showed no sympathy for his death , telling the House of Commons that " Mr. Sands was a convicted criminal . He chose to take his own life . It was a choice that his organisation did not allow to many of its victims " .

In the two weeks following Sands ' death , three more hunger strikers died . Francis Hughes died on 12 May , resulting in further rioting in nationalist areas of Northern Ireland , in particular Derry and Belfast . Following the deaths of Raymond McCreesh and Patsy O 'Hara on 21 May , Tomás Ó Fiaich , by then Primate of All Ireland , criticised the British government 's handling of the hunger strike . Despite this , Thatcher still refused to negotiate a settlement , stating " Faced with the failure of their discredited cause , the men of violence have chosen in recent months to play what may well be their last card " , during a visit to Belfast in late May .

Nine protesting prisoners contested the general election in the Republic of Ireland in June . Kieran Doherty and Paddy Agnew (who was not on hunger strike) were elected in Cavan ? Monaghan and Louth respectively , and Joe McDonnell narrowly missed election in Sligo ? Leitrim . There were also local elections in Northern Ireland around that time and although Sinn Féin did not contest them , some smaller groups and independents who supported the hunger strikers won seats , e.g. the Irish Independence Party won 21 seats , while the Irish Republican Socialist Party (the INLA 's political wing) and People 's Democracy (a Trotskyist group) won two seats each , and a number of pro @-@ hunger strike independent candidates also won seats . The British government rushed through the Representation of the People Act 1981 to prevent another prisoner contesting the second by @-@ election in Fermanagh and South Tyrone , which was due to take place following the death of Sands .

Following the deaths of Joe McDonnell and Martin Hurson the families of some of the hunger strikers attended a meeting on 28 July with Catholic priest Father Denis Faul . The families expressed concern at the lack of a settlement to the priest , and a decision was made to meet with Gerry Adams later that day . At the meeting Father Faul put pressure on Adams to find a way of ending the strike , and Adams agreed to ask the IRA leadership to order the men to end the hunger strike . The following day Adams held a meeting with six of the hunger strikers to outline a proposed settlement on offer from the British government should the strike be brought to an end . The strikers rejected the settlement , believing that accepting anything less than the " Five Demands " would be a betrayal of the sacrifice made by Bobby Sands and the other men who had died .

On 31 July the hunger strike began to break , when the mother of Paddy Quinn insisted on medical intervention to save his life . The following day Kevin Lynch died , followed by Kieran Doherty on 2 August , Thomas McElwee on 8 August and Michael Devine on 20 August . On the day Devine died , Sands ' election agent Owen Carron won the Fermanagh and South Tyrone by @-@ election with an increased number of votes . On 6 September the family of Laurence McKeown became the fourth family to intervene and asked for medical treatment to save his life , and Cahal Daly issued a statement calling on republican prisoners to end the hunger strike . A week later James Prior replaced Humphrey Atkins as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland , and met with prisoners in an attempt to end the strike . Liam McCloskey ended his strike on 26 September after his family said they would ask for medical intervention if he became unconscious , and it became clear that the families of the remaining hunger strikers would also intervene to save their lives . The strike was

called off at 3 : 15 pm on 3 October , and three days later Prior announced partial concessions to the prisoners including the right to wear their own clothes at all times . The only one of the " Five Demands " still outstanding was the right not to do prison work . Following sabotage by the prisoners and the Maze Prison escape in 1983 the prison workshops were closed , effectively granting all of the " Five Demands " but without any formal recognition of political status from the government .

= = = Participants who died on hunger strike = = =

Over the summer of 1981 , ten hunger strikers had died . Their names , paramilitary affiliation , dates of death , and length of hunger strike are as follows :

The original pathologist 's report recorded the hunger strikers ' cause of death as " self @-@ imposed starvation " . This was later amended to simply " starvation " , after protests from the dead strikers ' families . The coroner recorded verdicts of " starvation , self @-@ imposed " .

= = = Other participants in the hunger strike = = =

Although ten men died during the course of the hunger strike , thirteen others began refusing food but were taken off hunger strike , either due to medical reasons or after intervention by their families . Many of them still suffer from the effects of the strike , with problems including digestive , visual , physical and neurological disabilities .

= = Consequences = =

The British press hailed the hunger strike as a triumph for Thatcher , with The Guardian newspaper stating " The Government had overcome the hunger strikes by a show of resolute determination not to be bullied " . At the time most thought the hunger strike a crushing defeat for the republicans , a view shared by many within the IRA and Sinn Féin , but Sands ' by @-@ election win was a propaganda victory , and the hunger strike became a Pyrrhic victory for Thatcher and the British government . Thatcher became a republican hate figure of Cromwellian proportions , with Danny Morrison describing her as " the biggest bastard we have ever known " . As with internment in 1971 and Bloody Sunday in 1972 , IRA recruitment was boosted , resulting in a new surge of paramilitary activity . There was an upsurge of violence after the comparatively quiet years of the late 1970s , with widespread civil disorder in Northern Ireland and rioting outside the British Embassy in Dublin . Security forces fired 29 @,@ 695 plastic bullets in 1981 , causing seven deaths , compared to a total of around 16 @,@ 000 bullets and four deaths in the eight years following the hunger strikes . The IRA continued its armed campaign during the seven months of the strike , killing 13 policemen , 13 soldiers , including five members of the Ulster Defence Regiment and five civilians . The seven months were one of the bloodiest periods of the Troubles with a total of 61 people killed , 34 of them civilians . Three years later the IRA tried to take their revenge on Thatcher with the Brighton hotel bombing , an attack on the Conservative party conference that killed five people and in which Thatcher herself only narrowly escaped death .

The hunger strike prompted Sinn Féin to move towards electoral politics . Sands ' election victory , combined with that of pro @-@ hunger strike candidates in the Northern Ireland local elections and Dáil elections in the Republic of Ireland , gave birth to the armalite and ballot box strategy . Gerry Adams remarked that Sands ' victory " exposed the lie that the hunger strikers ? and by extension the IRA and the whole republican movement ? had no popular support " . The election victories of Doherty and Agnew also had political impact in the Republic of Ireland , as they denied power to Charles Haughey 's outgoing Fianna Fáil government . In 1982 Sinn Féin won five seats in the elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly , and in 1983 Gerry Adams won a seat in the UK general election . As a result of the political base built during the hunger strike , Sinn Féin continued to grow in the following two decades . After the United Kingdom general election , 2001 , it became the largest nationalist party in Northern Ireland and after the 2014 local and European elections held on

both sides of the border , asserted it was now the largest party in Ireland .

In 2005 , the role of Gerry Adams was questioned by former prisoner Richard O 'Rawe , who was the public relations officer inside the prison during the strike . O 'Rawe states in his book Blanketmen that Adams prolonged the strike as it was of great political benefit to Sinn Féin and allowed Owen Carron to win Sands ' seat . This claim is denied by several hunger strikers and Brendan McFarlane , who was OC inside the prison during the hunger strike . McFarlane claims O 'Rawe 's version of events is confused and fragmentary , and states " We were desperate for a solution . Any deal that went some way to meeting the five demands would have been taken . If it was confirmed in writing , we 'd have grabbed it . . . There was never a deal , there was never a " take it or leave it " option at all " .

= = Commemorations = =

There are memorials and murals in memory of the hunger strikers in towns and cities across Ireland , including Belfast , Dublin , Derry , Crossmaglen and Camlough . Annual commemorations take place across Ireland for each man who died on the hunger strike , and an annual hunger strike commemoration march is held in Belfast each year , which includes a Bobby Sands memorial lecture . Several towns and cities in France have named streets after Bobby Sands , including Paris and Le Mans . The Iranian government also named a street running alongside the British embassy in Tehran after Bobby Sands , which was formerly called Winston Churchill Street .

A memorial to the men who died in the Irish Rebellion of 1798 , the Easter Rising and the hunger strike stands in Waverley Cemetery , Sydney , Australia , which is also the burial place of Michael Dwyer of the Society of United Irishmen . In 1997 NORAIID 's Hartford Unit in the United States dedicated a monument to Bobby Sands and the other hunger strikers . The monument stands in a traffic circle known as " Bobby Sands Circle " , at the bottom of Maple Avenue near Goodwin Park . On 20 March 2001 Sinn Féin 's national chairperson Mitchel McLaughlin opened the National Hunger Strike Commemoration Committee 's exhibition at the Europa Hotel in Belfast , which included three original works of art from Belfast @-@ based artists . A separate exhibition was also launched in Derry the following month . Three films have been made based on the events of the hunger strike , Some Mother 's Son starring Helen Mirren , H3 (which was co @-@ written by former hunger striker Laurence McKeown) , and Steve McQueen 's Hunger .