



coiste.comm

Coiste na nIarchimí

OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2006 VOLUME 8 ISSUE 3



Basque minister meet with Irish former political prisoners

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COISTE MEETS BASQUE JUSTICE MINISTER

■ JIM 'FLASH' McVEIGH

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» COISTE NEWS

Coiste's Dublin office closes

Coiste's Dublin office closed on 31st December 2006. Despite vigorous representation that the job of ensuring full citizenship for former republican prisoners had not yet been achieved, the Dublin government arbitrarily withdrew funding.

We are very grateful to Ann O'Sullivan, Dixie Dickson and all the former staff members and volunteers who worked so diligently on behalf of Coiste, Dublin. Ann had previously worked as the Head of Sinn Féin's POW Department and has vowed to continue her work on prisoner issues in a voluntary capacity until the last prisoner is released.

"With the IRA's declaration of an end to its armed campaign all IRA prisoners should have been released.

"Instead of this, eight years after the Good Friday Agreement and over a year after the IRA formally ended its campaign, IRA prisoners remain in prison.

This is due to a lack of political will, especially by the Dublin government, and must be challenged. Four of the men still in jail, the Castlereagh men, are qualifying prisoners under the Good Friday agreement and should have been released long ago.

We've been to court five times in relation to their case. We've been to the High Court, to the Supreme Court twice, to the United Nations Committee on Human Rights and we have a case at the European Convention of Human Rights awaiting a judgement.

And whilst the big issue

is the release of the men the conditions they endure whilst still imprisoned remains a concern. In recent years, and especially during the term of the current Minister for Justice, access to paroles has been severely limited.

Paroles that would have been granted in the mid-

Month' we will ever have."

Coiste na nIarchimí wishes Ann well in her future endeavours.

Political Tours Project

On a more positive note, Coiste received EU Peace Extension funding from the

Positive approach adopted by Age Concern

Coiste recently met with Age Concern staff to discuss a case raised by an ex-prisoner who is now a pensioner. This individual was seeking the best insurance for his home and became aware that Age Concern had a special deal for older people.

When he applied for the insurance, he was refused because of the fact that he was a former POW, having spent time in jail in the early '70s. As part of Coiste's work seeking to end discrimination against ex-prisoners, we approached Age Concern and asked them to review their approach.

While they explained that they are only brokers for a large insurance firm based in England, they indicated that they had since changed their contract and were now with a different insurance company.

Following extensive conversations with their partner, Age Concern is now satisfied that there is no reason for ex-prisoners not to access their special deals on insurance. Age Concern also outlined their inter-generational project which seeks to build contact, awareness and understanding between younger and older people.

Coiste staff left the meeting reassured that Age Concern will not countenance discrimination against former political prisoners and their families. We are grateful to Age Concern staff for the positive attitude taken on this issue.



Ann pictured at coiste's Summer School 2006

eighties when the IRA was at war are now regularly refused. This is a major issue for us.

December is traditionally regarded by republicans as 'Prisoners Month'. It is my fervent wish that December 2006 was the last 'Prisoners

Community Foundation for Northern Ireland towards the end of 2006 to support the development of our political tours project.

We will be appointing staff in January 2007 and look forward to the project's development.



(L-R) Rosie McLarnon, Una Murray, Emma Rea and Fra McGuinness

»HEALTH AWARENESS

Tár Anall Male Health Days

Tar Anall recently held a series of health awareness events funded by North and West Trust which included a 'Male Health Day', a 'Young Male (under 25) Health Evening' and a 'Coffee Morning' on behalf of MacMillan Cancer Support. The emphasis of these days was to raise awareness of men's health and well-being and also to raise funds for the MacMillan nurses.

We enlisted the services of 'Men to Men' who were able to give full body MOTs - checking blood pressure, cholesterol, diabetes and also offering advice on testicular cancer. Falls Swim Centre provided an excellent service by preparing personal exercise plans, measuring weight and height, and offering guidance and information on healthy eating and training. We also had therapists offering aromatherapy massage, reflexology, Indian head massage and sports injury therapy. While waiting to be seen, the men had an opportunity to get a free hair cut which

kept the craic going during the wait.

All of the events were very successful and the numbers in attendance way beyond our expectations. The feedback from medical staff showed a high rate of referrals to GPs. Of the 47 men examined, 28 (59.5%) were referred for high blood pressure, 16 (34%) for high cholesterol, and 13 (27.5%) for diabetes. This shows the need to do follow-ups for those who attended and continue with further health days for others who were unable to be seen on the day.

Action Cancer provided an information stall and a member of staff was on hand offering advice on a one-to-one basis to people on issues such as the long-term effects of smoking and the signs and symptoms of different types of cancers. We were very lucky to have a young member of our community who has suffered from testicular cancer to give a talk to the young men at their Health Evening to help raise awareness of this disease and give advice on how to carry out self-examinations.

To end the week's events we held a Coffee Morning to raise funds for MacMillan Cancer Support. This event was another success and our efforts raised £1,849.00. Former republican prisoner, Chris Moran, donated £1,309.00 to this event which he raised by running in the Belfast Marathon.

Tar Anall will be running more of these events in the future. We are already meeting various community organisations in the area (Heart Project, Clan Mór (Sure Start) and Blackie Community) to combine our resources to cater for the needs of the whole community on a range of issues around health and well-being. We are hoping to hold a week of events in March 2007 and have Action Cancer on site with all the services they provide.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all those involved with the Health Days for providing the services and making the events a great success. We look forward to working with them all in the near future.

Fra McGuinness
Training & Education coordinator

»WW1 + WW2

Coiste Tour of WW1 Graves and WW2 Concentration Camp

On 26th September 2006 a group of republican ex-prisoners from Coiste set out on a four day tour of historical grave sites in Belgium and France. Among the group were Tony McCabe, Mary McArdle, Seán Osborne and Seán 'Ginty' Lennon as well as Coiste representatives Dominic Adams and Rosie Mc Corley.

A number of members of An Eochair, the Official IRA ex-prisoner group, were also part of the group.

This trip was facilitated by the ICTU, four of whose members also participated. The purpose of the visit was to explore the reasons behind the huge numbers of Irish people who volunteered to fight for the British army during WW1.

Another activity planned was a tour of Breendonk Concentration Camp which was used for the imprisonment, torture, and murder of Belgian citizens during the Second World War.

In a very informative and thought provoking visit, the delegation toured the battle-sites of the Somme, Messines and Ypres.

The scale of death and destruction and the sheer futility of it all were some of the most poignant aspects which struck people as they made their way around cemetery after cemetery.

Our tour guide, Fearghal, pointed out the various trenches where Canadians, New Zealanders, Newfoundlanders, Irish, British, and of course, German soldiers fought and died.

Some particular burial sites were brought to our attention such as Willie McBride's (immortalised in the song 'The Green Fields of France') and that of Willie Redmond, brother of John Redmond.

While standing at Redmond's grave, Fearghal pointed out Kemmel Hill behind us, the safe place from which the generals observed the slaughter of their own footsoldiers.

Thousands upon thousands of grave-stones, many bearing



Visits to the Irish Tower and Ulster Tower flagged up the make up of the various Irish Divisions - unionists opted to fight in the 36th Ulster Division while nationalists chose the 10th and 16th Irish Divisions

the inscription 'Unknown soldier of the Great War', endlessly blotted the landscape.

When visiting the German graveyard it was impossible not to notice the different way that those graves were treated.

We were shocked to be told that a relatively small concrete rectangle contained the remains of some 25,000 soldiers.

Surrounding this rectangle were a further 19,000 graves with their headstones lying flat on the ground as opposed to standing upright like in the non-German cemeteries.

Fearghal explained that the Belgian people allowed these bodies to be buried there, but only in such a way that they wouldn't have to look at them,

hence their lying flat on the ground.

The German government is charged a rent for their cemeteries in Belgium.

It is perfectly understandable that the Belgian nation would feel hostility towards those Germans who had invaded and destroyed Belgium and murdered its people over two world wars. For those of us from Ireland, this gave us cause to ponder.

The hostility is natural, but in the context of these two wars which claimed an obscene number of lives, surely German soldiers were deluded into believing they were performing an honourable task, just as surely as those footsoldiers in the British and other armies were convinced of their own



'just cause'.

Visits to the Irish Tower and Ulster Tower flagged up the make up of the various Irish Divisions - unionists opted to fight in the 36th Ulster Division while nationalists chose the 10th and 16th Irish Divisions. For the most part, nationalists believed they were fighting to achieve Home Rule in Ireland while unionists were convinced they were guaranteeing it wouldn't happen.

As it turned out, most of them were probably deluded.

Having completed our tours of graveyards, we next paid a visit to the Messines School of Peace Building, an impressive project which was officially opened in June of this year.

Each evening after the day's tours, a facilitated discussion took place among the participants on the themes of 'The involvement of Irish people in the British Army during WW1' and 'The IRA and alleged support of Nazism'.

Enjoying a scenic setting in the Messines area, this peace building enterprise is comprised of a number of separate accommodation blocks and a main building which contains a large meeting hall, a bar, and a dining hall. This project, which originated in Ireland, has been funded with the aid of the Belgian government and is currently being used to house visiting youth groups.

Another important part of our visit was a tour of the National Memorial of the Fortress of Breendonk. Described as one of the best conserved camps in Europe, it has been renovated with the utmost respect for the historical truth.

During WW2, the Nazis used Breendonk

to detain Belgian people of varying political viewpoints (and none) and became a place of torture, misery, starvation and murder.

With the future tour element of Long Kesh in mind, Coiste was particularly interested in observing the tour guiding methods used by the Breendonk administration.

The use of handheld audio devices was extremely impressive and Coiste believes that this is one of several methods which could be adapted to suit the Long Kesh situation.

Each evening after the day's tours, a facilitated discussion took place among the participants on the themes of 'The involvement of Irish people in the British Army during WW1'

and 'The IRA and alleged support of Nazism'.

Although people were naturally tired and weary after the day's activity, all were keen to participate in the evening discussions.

As a means of winding down at the end of our visit to Belgium the group travelled to the beautiful city of Bruges where we spent our remaining time admiring the stunning architecture and sampling the delicious ice-cream in a street café.

The four days of touring in Belgium and France were extremely well organised and all thanks go the ICTU for facilitating such an enriching and memorable experience.

Rosie McCorley

The Official Version

'The Official Version', a new play written by Laurence McKeown and directed by Pam Brighton of Dubblejoint Theatre, performed to packed theatres and community halls in Ireland during September and October.

The play is set in the present-day and follows four characters as they make a visit to the former prison at Long Kesh. The prison has been closed for six years now and plans are already advanced to develop the site including proposals to preserve part of it, including the prison hospital where ten men died on hunger strike in 1981.(see article on P???)

Two of the characters in the play, Annie McArdle and her daughter, Theresa, had a son and brother, Gerard McArdle, imprisoned in the H Blocks during the protest. As Annie and Theresa tour the prison they share their experiences of that period of prison protest and small intimate stories are revealed that tell them as much about one another as they do about the events that took part in the prison.

At the same time, Julie Taggart, a researcher at Queen's University, has arrived to visit the camp as part of her studies in modern Irish history. Her interest in the site and the history of what happened in it challenges the views of Robert, a former prison governor who accompanies her around the prison.

As the two groups complete their tour of the site it is clear that everyone has still much to learn about what happened within those walls during the time that it was a prison from 1972-2000.

Jennifer Hughes, Research Associate for the project, 'In Place of

War' based at the School of Arts, Histories and Cultures at the University of Manchester watched the play.

"The project I am involved with documents theatre projects in places of conflict internationally

process. I visited Belfast and Derry a few weeks ago, met Pam Brighton and was really pleased to see The Official Version in the Roddy McCorley Club - one of the most intense experiences I've had in theatre for a long while.

"It was really my kind of play. I like arguments presented from so many different perspectives, all centred on such a complicated, difficult, and emotional problem that has affected so many people. Someone I was sat with said they thought it was too wordy, but I felt the audience in the Roddy McCorley club were absolutely thirsty for what was being expressed, and not at all put off by the amount of words. This is what made it such a stunning event as a piece of theatre for me - the dynamic between the audience and the actors on stage was a real experience.

I also enjoyed/identified with the character of the naïve researcher!

"I'm really interested in the use of a 'tour' to tell a story on stage - I was only in Belfast for a few days, but it was clear that there were many different tours I could have taken, all with different perspectives on the place, trying to reinvent the space in some way to lay out a better path for future generations, without betraying history and so much loss. It was really interesting to then see a play about a tour...I wonder if you could actually do the play in the space of the prison

some day. If that would be appropriate?"

The Official Version will be on tour again in 2007 commencing in Belfast on 9 April at the Rock Theatre



and with refugees in the UK, as well as commissions new practical projects (www.inplaceofwar.net)

"Most recently, I've been trying to find out more about the work going on in N Ireland, especially since the beginning of the peace



(L-R) Maria Caraher, principal of Bunscoil an Iúir, Conor Murphy, MP for Newry and south Armagh, Laurence McKeown

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Laurence McKeown and Denis O'Hearn pictured in Derry at the launch of the biography of Bobby Sands for younger readers

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» BASQUE VISIT

Coiste representatives meet Basque Justice Minister

A delegation from the Basque government made a visit to Ireland in the first week of October 2006 to learn about the Irish peace process.

This visit was facilitated by Harold Good from the Methodist church who has become renowned for his role as one of the independent observers of the IRA's weapons being put beyond use in 2005.

The delegation which included the Basque Minister for Justice, Joseba Azcarraga, and Jon Landa, the Human Rights Director, met with republican and loyalist ex-prisoners. Tom Roberts and Tom Winstone represented EPIC, while Dominic Adams and Rosie Mc Corley attended as representatives of Coiste.

Present also was Kieran McEvoy from the Law De-

Basque Minister for Justice together with Human Rights Director meet with republican and loyalist ex-prisoners

partment of Queen's University Belfast.

Dominic and Rosie made a joint presentation on the role of republican ex-prisoners in the conflict, the legal barriers faced by them, and how they have made very positive contributions to their communities and the peace process after their release. They touched also on the issue of how imprisonment has impacted on the families of prisoners, particularly in relation to the hardship of travelling long distances to visit imprisoned rela-

tives.

Agreeing with much of the republican experience, Tom Roberts spoke from the perspective of the role of loyalist prisoners while Kieran McEvoy spoke of the findings of his research into ex-prisoners as well as the legal framework around the early release programme.

The Justice Minister listened intently to the speakers as the interpreter, Rocco Caira did a simultaneous translation. Afterwards he asked a number of questions such as had prisoners been

consulted by their political leaders in the run-up to the Good Friday Agreement? And why had loyalists failed to decommission their weapons and would they accept the democratic outcome if that were to be a united Ireland? It was clear from the comments and questions of the minister that he had fully absorbed and considered what he had heard from the ex-prisoners and Kieran McEvoy.

His questions were thoughtful and incisive, showing that he had formed a clear impression of the important issues around ex-prisoners and their role in a developing peace process.

It was agreed by all afterwards that the engagement had been very useful and positive for all concerned.



» HUNGER STRIKE COMMEMORATION IN CUBA

Five days in Cuba

Former hunger strikers Raymond McCartney and Mary Doyle visited Cuba for five days in October to attend a commemoration in honour of those who died on hunger strike in the H Blocks of Long Kesh in 1981. Their packed schedule included visits to schools where they donated art materials provided by Tar Anall, Belfast. The delegation also visited medical facilities in Havana. Mary Doyle said the visit had a huge impact on her.

"The visits to different museums depicting all aspects of Cuban history and the many phases of struggle leading to the Castro-led revolution and the present day Cuban society was an inspiration and very educational. A poignant and particularly emotional part of the visit for me was taking part in the commemoration for the hunger strikers in Havana.

"I felt so honoured and proud. A group of children from the Sierra Maestra school put on a specially written mi-

ni-drama for the occasion.

"I found this ceremony exceptionally emotional and touching.

"During our trip we met with high-ranking Cuban officials to brief them on the state of the Irish peace process and to learn from them how they tackle their many social programmes such as health and education delivery.

"We visited the Sierra Maestra School for special needs students from four to eighteen years old. To see the approach to learning at this school was inspirational.

"The students are taught every aspect of skills required for independent living. While the required emphasis is put on writing, reading and maths the students are also taught subjects such as horticulture, woodwork, electrical, domestic science, hairdressing etc to equip them for life's experiences."

The delegation travelled to Santa Clara to see the memorial to Ché Guevara and to visit the Interpretative Centre depicting his role in the Cuban revolution.

During the visit the delegation, which also included Seán McMonagle of Tar Abhaile (the ex-prisoners' group based in Derry), visited the International Medical Academy at which over 3000 students from third world and other Latin American countries are trained free of charge.

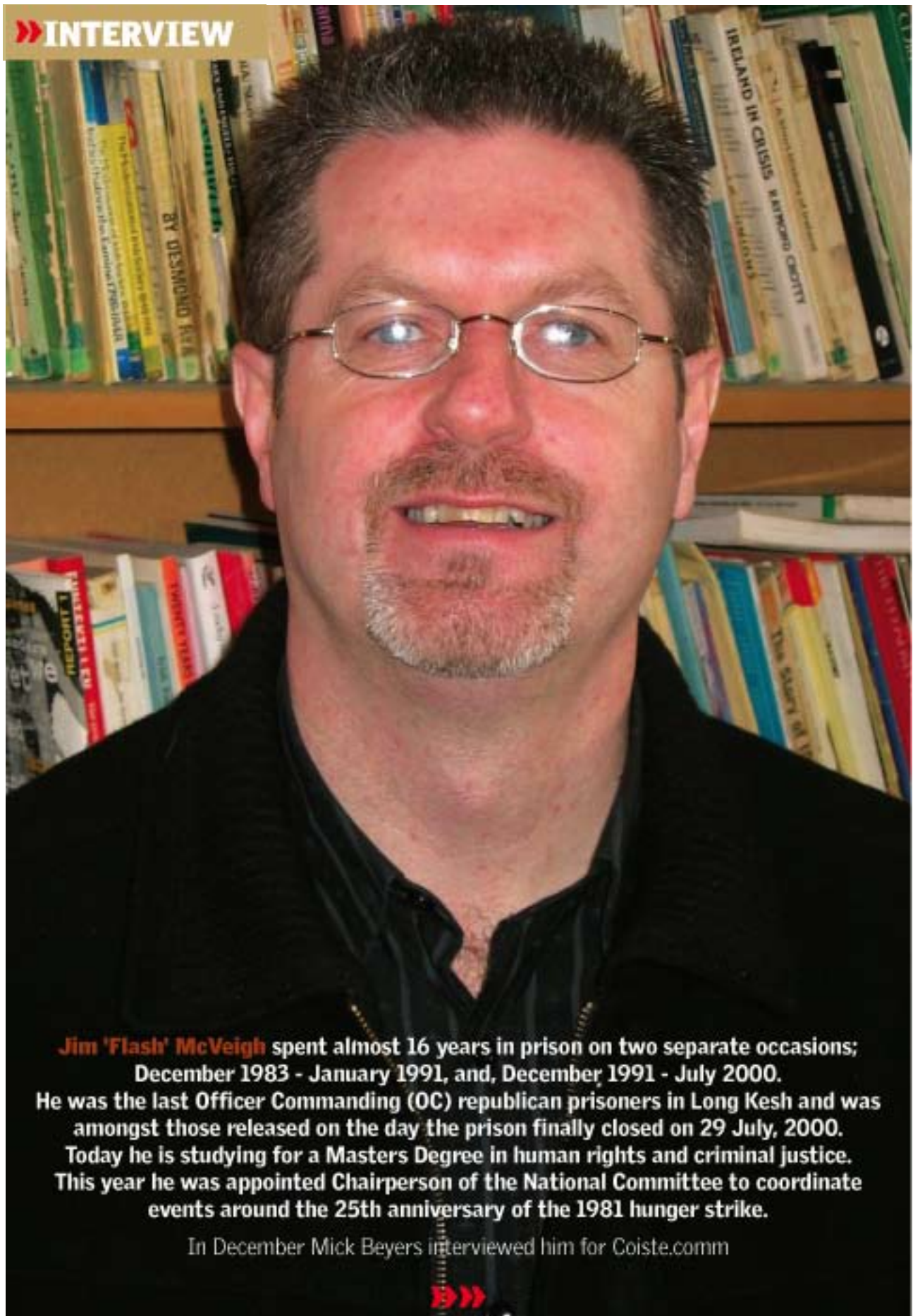
The training enables the students to return home equipped to provide first-class healthcare to their own people.

Mary Doyle said the warmth of the Cuban people was immense.

"It is difficult to highlight any one particular aspect of the trip.

"Whether youth leaders, teachers, medical professionals or political leaders, the constant threads throughout those we met was the sense of camaraderie with the people of Ireland and our peace process, and the humanity of the Cuban people and pride in what their revolution has achieved."

During the trip the delegation donated pens and art materials to the school which had been provided by Tar Anall, Belfast.



» INTERVIEW

Jim 'Flash' McVeigh spent almost 16 years in prison on two separate occasions; December 1983 - January 1991, and, December 1991 - July 2000. He was the last Officer Commanding (OC) republican prisoners in Long Kesh and was amongst those released on the day the prison finally closed on 29 July, 2000. Today he is studying for a Masters Degree in human rights and criminal justice. This year he was appointed Chairperson of the National Committee to coordinate events around the 25th anniversary of the 1981 hunger strike.

In December Mick Beyers interviewed him for Coiste.comm

Jim, you've been coordinating events for the 25th anniversary of the 1981 hunger strike. What was the thinking behind such a coordinated approach?

It's important to say at the start that I was chairperson of the national committee but there were a number of other people including Seando Moore, Dodi McGuinness, Irene Sherry, Bik McFarlane and of course a whole network of people throughout the country. So, it was a group effort and obviously as we approached this year everybody recognized that it was a hugely significant anniversary for us. The committee was established late last year and we had already begun to talk about how best we could commemorate the sacrifice of 1981 but to also talk about the politics and the political legacy, to remind people that the struggle they died for, we're still very much in the middle of it.

Can you describe the range of events organised and geographically where they took place?

We had two roles. There were a number of national projects that we decided to organize and then the other role was to be a catalyst, to go into the areas and encourage others to get organized. The good thing about this anniversary was that people were highly motivated. We decided after some discussion and consulting with leadership, talking to people locally, that we would revamp and update the hunger strike exhibition and we took that on the road. We tried to ensure there were a number of publications, such as Denis O'Hearn's biography on Bobby, as well as the version for young adults, a collection of essays, as well as several other publications. There were new songs, there was poetry written, as well as the unveiling of monuments, plaques, commemoration dinners, marches and rallies all over the country. We developed a logo that we thought was suitable to promote the year and which I think was quite successful. We also put together a group of speakers who would travel the country, former prisoners, both male and female, who had been involved in the protest and/or the hunger strikes, and people who had been involved in the protests on the outside at the time. These people traveled all over the country, the length and breadth of Ireland, some to well-established places and some to strange and unusual places. We took the exhibition and speakers to Britain, France, Greece, to America, Cuba and Australia. That was very intensive.

How do you think the events were received?

I found that almost everywhere that people went there was a great turnout. Myself and Bik attended a commemoration in Mountbark?? <I think Mountrath but may

also be Mountmellick>, Co. Laois and it was the Sunday of the All-Ireland final. The event was in a little parochial hall and there were 50 people at it on a Sunday afternoon right in the middle of the All-Ireland final. Bik was the main speaker and they listened entranced to the story of the protest and the strike, young and old, as well as quite a few families. And there were many events like that, events in a local community hall with hundreds of people and others where the numbers were less but for the area in which they were held was significant.

Were there any particularly memorable moments for yourself?

I suppose the highlight of the year was the big rally in Belfast on August 13th. That exceeded everybody's expectations. As we were walking, we had the opportunity to look back and see what was behind us. We were standing with the families and the side of the road was crammed with people and you could see the ex-prisoners walking, and the section of men and women in blankets which was just behind us, and it was just electrifying. The families of the hunger strikers were just completely overwhelmed when they looked back and they could see



all those people. And of course when we were going into Casement Park there were still people coming down the Falls. We said at the start of the year that we would be really ambitious, particularly with the rally. It was a huge turnout on the day - 30,000 people. Also we developed a very good relationship with the families through Seando (Moore) in particular, who was our liaison with the families and did a great job. After the rally what stuck with me was taking all the families and extended families

for a meal, there were 150 there and they were absolutely over the moon at the attendance. They felt very humbled. And that's what you're concerned about, that the families at times probably wonder 'was it worth it? Have they been forgotten about?' It's difficult to mobilize for anything and politics can be quite cynical, but everybody was just elated by the turnout, the color, the theatre and the pageantry. At the rally a lot of people commented about the family member reading out the biography of the hunger striker from their family. For example when Joe McDonnell's daughter, Bernie, read out his biography and she referred to her father as opposed to 'Joe' everybody was touched very, very much.

I'm conscious that these events are particularly salient for former prisoners but do you feel that others were also impacted by this year's events?

One thing that struck me was the appetite for the events among young people. Young people are idealistic.



They want something they can look to and be inspired by. I think that the hunger strikers resonate with young people because here is someone, take Bobby, who is idealistic, a young man, brave, and he gave up his life for his ideal and for his comrades. And in a cynical political world that resonates with people and I found that young people wanted to know about the hunger strikers and were inspired by them because they had fought for what they believed in and had given their lives in such a fashion.

Do you think these events were particularly important to republicanism at this point in time?

Yes. We were emphatic at the start that it was important we made the best of the anniversary from a political standpoint. The lads that died, died for the same cause that we continue to struggle for today. And of course, we said let's use the anniversary to bring young people in and older people too and educate them about that period. And let's use it as a good year to remember and to commemorate, let's use it to remind everybody what the struggle is for.

What would you say to those who claim that republicans spend too much time looking at the past?

I don't think we do, I think we have the right balance. You need to look back and be prepared to learn the lessons of history, to draw upon the rich experience of history. You should never look back in some sort of blinkered way, to replicate the past or the decisions of the past. We do need to look back to remember, to never forget, the sacrifices of the past. And we have a leadership which is looking forward, even in looking back this year we were looking forward. In looking back we've said what legacy have they laid, how far have we come, how far do we need to go? Let's take the energy of the anniversary to drive the struggle forward.

As someone who has been imprisoned on two occasions do you feel that the prison struggle was an integral part of the overall struggle?

Yes. The shorthand answer is of course yes. Our enemies chose to make the prison a battleground in terms of the wider struggle and in many respects we were forced to respond to the conditions the British chose. I think it's very clear looking back - reading the memoirs and the things that were written by those in the establishment, that it was part of a wider struggle. Of course Thatcher was very clear that it was part of a wider struggle, part of the battle for hearts and minds, so she was very much aware. I think we were forced into a battle that we didn't necessarily want but when we saw what was at stake we had to pick that challenge up.

Were you able to apply the experiences from the inside to the outside, particularly in relation to the education programme that the prisoners devised and the politics of today?

Absolutely. I think we miss an opportunity. I think, particularly ex-prisoners, we don't reflect enough in documentation or interviews or socially, just how the prison struggle changed, the tactics changed, how they had to change fundamentally - the blanket protest, the hunger strikes, the battle for segregation, and then the phase in the mid to late 80's which is very similar to the stage of struggle that we are in now. We had to develop a more flexible strategy in terms of how we acted tactically, we developed a strategy that relied upon negotiation. We pushed negotiation with the prison authorities, we saw that as a site of struggle. We pushed the whole thing about engaging other groups - the church, the board of governors, anybody else who was useful to us in terms of propaganda. We weren't afraid to protest, but it was at a time and place of our choosing. You see that - that's where we're at now. Thinking on the psychological battles between ourselves and the screws, one of the integral parts of that period was the 'conditions' and we said, listen, if we can achieve this, this body of changes together, the culmination of that will take us to where we want to be in terms of the regime. We wanted an end to red books, an end to lock up and we wanted free association. They were the three big ones, but there were 99 others... which we graduated in terms of significance.

Right from the start we knew what the Brits would do, they'd give us the least to try and defuse us, to undermine our campaign. We knew it would happen, we expected it and we said look, take everything that we can get. I think this is identical to where we are now: take every single little thing we can get, and if we get it on a Monday go out on Tuesday and ask for something else; and, if we get something on a Wednesday go out on the Thursday and ask for something else.

We said from the start they are going to take us on a merry dance here for a year or two on the minor issues. However we said, 'see those three big issues - red books, lock up and free association - if we could get two of those three or three of those three that will transform our lives in the prison'.

And what happened over the next two, three, four, five years? We chipped away. We chipped away, we campaigned, we pressurized, we demanded, we protested when we thought it was appropriate and it was disciplined, and every time we got something we asked for more.

We were relentless. We never lost sight of where we wanted to go. And I think that is analogous of where we are now. We have nothing to fear. We have nothing to fear from change now even if it falls short of where we want to go, the establishment of a new Republic.

There are direct parallels between that period post-hunger strike in the H-blocks and Armagh, and this phase of the struggle now. If you look at the journey from the protest, through all the change, the political struggle now and the Good Friday Agreement, if people see that as the end of the struggle then I can see why they would be disillusioned. We are only at one point in the struggle, there is plenty of potential there and we need to squeeze it out and move beyond it.

Coiste publishes a biography of Bobby Sands

Earlier this year Denis O'Hearn launched his biography of Bobby Sands, *Nothing but an Unfinished Song*, published by Nation Books (New York) and Pluto Press (London). Even before the book was published, however, Denis and former hunger striker and Research Coordinator with Coiste, Laurence McKeown, were working on an adaptation of the biography for younger readers.

The result was 'I arose this morning', published by Beyond the Pale Publications and an Irish language version, 'D'éirigh mé ar maidin', translated from the original by Rath na Gaeilge, edited by Seán Mac Aindrea and published by Coiscéim. Both books also contain illustrations by Thomas 'Dixie' Elliot, a former blanket man from Derry who shared a cell with Bobby Sands for a time.

Laurence McKeown described the work as another important contribution to this year's 25th anniversary events commemorating the hunger strike. "The hunger strike period is now being discussed in schools as part of the curriculum so Denis and I thought it would be good to have a book specially written for younger readers and in particular to have it in Irish given that events in the H Blocks contributed significantly to the revival of the language.

"Many former prisoners are today Irish language teachers and indeed, principals of Irish language schools, which is testament to the role they have played upon release."

Denis O'Hearn is equally delighted that his biography of Bobby Sands will now reach a wider audience. "The original biography asked how people like Bobby Sands become activists and then strengthen their beliefs to the degree that they willingly make tremendous sacrifices and do extraordinary things.

"Writing for young people adds a new dimension to this question because we directly addressed the ethical dilemmas that Bobby and others faced in joining the IRA and then doing things that were quite controversial. Young people face hard choices nearly every day and we hope this book will encourage them to think about the consequences of the choices they make, even if they are less dramatic than those that Bobby Sands faced."

D'éirigh mé ar maidin was launched in Derry in November as part of the Oireachtas programme of events held there and afterwards Laurence, and Newry and Armagh MP Conor Murphy, officially presented copies of the book to Bunscoil an Iúir. Conor is a former republican prisoner and was instrumental in the establishment of the Irish language school. His children attended it as do Laurence's.

Copies of the book in both English and Irish are available from Coiste or local bookstores at £5.99 and €7.50 respectively

Blocks to Employment

Abhaile Arís, the Republican ex-prisoners' group based in Letterkenny, Donegal, ran a very successful seminar on Tuesday 28 November in the Clanree Hotel entitled, "Blocks to Employment". Gillian Kennedy the Education and Training Officer with the Immigrant Council of Ireland (ICI) and Michael Culbert from Coiste addressed the seminar.

Gillian Kennedy gave a very comprehensive account of the problems that foreign nationals experience whilst looking for work and outlined in great detail the pitfalls they encounter. The main issues for migrant workers she said were: low pay, long hours, poor working conditions, the work permit system, and the lack of recognition of qualifications that they may hold. She went on to outline the many social welfare restrictions citing the Habitual Residence condition introduced in 2004. She explained that migrants cannot access many of the payments unless they have two years residency in the common travel area and went on to outline some of the ICI recommendations to help fight against these restrictions.

Our next speaker was Michael Culbert who outlined the difficulties that republican ex-prisoners have been experiencing since their release from prison. He pointed out that 99% of those imprisoned during the political conflict in Ireland would never have seen the inside of a jail if it had not been for the political situation and all of them certainly did not see themselves as having a criminal record. They could not understand, therefore, why they were discriminated against when seeking employment. He went on to say that whilst they had made great progress with the British Government on this issue they had made none with the Irish Government, but that Coiste would continue to pursue the matter. Michael then told of ongoing cases in the Labour Relations Court in the North in relation to two ex-prisoners denied employment (even though they were the successful candidates in an interview process) when they revealed they had served

a prison sentence. The case is supported by the Equality Commission and a verdict is expected shortly. After the two speakers we had a Question & Answer session with those present and a selected panel of guests made up of Sean O'Reilly SIPTU; Brian McCormack, Letterkenny Chamber; Suilemain Adeyoola, a foreign national; and Una O'Connor, from Fás. The panel was chaired by Councillor Padraig Mac Lochlainn. Sean O'Reilly gave a good run down on current employment regulations and made some very good observations outlining the current work that SIPTU are involved



The people in the photo (back row) L-R Neil Gallagher, Abhaile Arís; Michael Culbert, Coiste; Suilemain Adeyoola, Foreign National Group; Sean O'Reilly, SIPTU; Brian McCormack, President of Letterkenny Chamber.

in, pledging support to anyone who finds themselves in difficulties with their employers. Mr Adeyoola gave a very personal account of the difficulties he himself experienced whilst looking for work here in Donegal. Una O'Connor ended the meeting by outlining the services that Fás provide for migrant workers. Gerry Mc Monagle thanked all who attended and especially those on the panel and had a special word of thanks for the two speakers who travelled from Dublin and Belfast to take part in the proceedings.

The legacy of the 1981 Hunger strike seminar

This event on the 29 November was organised as part of Abhaile Arís's Processes of Nation Building (PNB) programme, modelled on the work first begun by Coiste under PEACE 1.

The format for the seminar was to watch a short film entitled '81, set in Belfast at the time of the hunger strike, depicting the impact the strike had on two families, one from a Unionist background and the other from a nationalist background. This was followed by a

had been imprisoned at that time, saying that whilst they had empathy with the hunger strikers they still felt they were the enemy. This confusion was compounded by the reaction of their own community to the hunger strike which was one of "could not care less how many died".

Raymond Millar talked about marching for civil rights only to later abandon this when he seen it being taken over by republicans and as a protestant could not support that.

Kevin Campbell talked about the time he was first imprisoned in the Cages of Long Kesh and had political status but when imprisoned again years later he was sent to the H-Blocks of Long Kesh where his previous political status was now removed. He outlined how the hunger strike was not just about the prisoners' 5 demands but also about the attempts by the British Government to criminalise the overall republican struggle on the outside through its stated criminalisation policy of that time.

Mary Nelis spoke about how as a mother she coped with having three sons imprisoned during that period and how she had come to terms with her first son, Donnacha, being one of the first prisoners to embark on the blanket protest. She described how she and other mothers, girlfriends, sisters and grandmothers got together and formed the Relatives Action Committees around

the country with the purpose of raising public awareness about the plight of the protesting prisoners. She said, "We hadn't a clue what to do at the beginning but we were not long catching on. The first thing we did was to take off our clothes and don blankets like the prisoners. We carried out many protests like this around the world chaining ourselves to railings around Government Buildings, churches etc." Billy Mc Quiston talked about there being two processes at the minute - one, the political process, and the other the peace process and whatever about the

political process being in a doldrums the peace process is still flourishing with an ever increasing number of ex-combatants playing their part especially at interface areas in Belfast and Derry. Ex-prisoners and former combatants he said are certainly taking the risks to help build the peace despite the reluctance of some politicians to do likewise. Kevin Campbell agreed with this saying that the communities have more in common than not. They suffer the same deprivation and social and economic ills and whilst their position on the constitutional issue may be fundamentally different he felt that could be dealt with in the future when confidence and trust has been built on both sides.

The audience was invited to ask questions of the panel and this led to a very interesting, healthy, and very frank debate. I believe all could see the common ground we share with one another which augurs well for future debate and discussion especially on socio-economic issues in the North of Ireland and indeed across the whole island.

This was a groundbreaking seminar for us at Abhaile Arís and I believe it is the first time ever in this kind of scenario that such a panel was brought together to discuss what was at the time a very divisive year in our recent history. The fact that we were able to bring about this seminar was a success in itself but to have it conducted in such a friendly and conducive manner says a lot for the wishes of ex-prisoners and former combatants for the peace process to succeed.

The comments of the audience on leaving were very rewarding and reassuring. Many of them stopped to congratulate the panellists and organisers for a very thought-provoking evening and requested that there be follow-ups to this type of engagement.

I would like to thank the panellists for their frank views and would like to say a special word of thanks to Ciaran O'Donnell who chaired the event so well and insured that not only were the hard questions asked but that they were answered.

**Gerry Mc Monagle
Outreach Worker Abhaile Arís**



Abhaile Arís; Gerry Mc Monagle, Abhaile Arís; Michael Culbert, Ciaran O'Donnell, S.I.P.T.U.; (front row) Gill Kennedy, Immigrant Council Of Ireland; and Una O'Connor, of F.A.S

panel discussion including; former loyalist prisoners, Billy Mc Quiston and Raymond Millar; and former republican prisoner, Kevin Campbell and Mary Nelis, a republican activist. Ciaran O'Donnell from the Donegal Democrat/People Press newspaper chaired the discussion.

Ciaran first got the panel to outline their personal reflections on the time of the hunger strike and I think there was some surprise amongst the audience to the responses given by the loyalist ex-prisoners. They talked about the confusion they had felt, especially those who

» TAR ISTEACH RESIDENTIAL



Tar Isteach (New Lodge) and Fáilte Abhaile (Dundalk) youth groups came together on the 2nd and 3rd December at Tí Chulainn Heritage Centre in South Armagh to explore the opinions and thoughts of young people on various issues relating to Irish society. Participants were aged 10 to 16.

The recently appointed youth group in Tar Anall, Eamonn, Patsy, Seán, Dee and Alex facilitated the workshop-based residential. The workshops were based on the past, present, and future, of Ireland. In the 'past' section, the participants spoke of their earliest memories of the conflict. Here are just some of the contributions.

"I was out for a walk with my daddy when the Peelers arrested him. I was left on my own in the street." Another said, "One time the Brits raided the house looking for my daddy. They said his name and as it's the same name as mine, I thought I was being arrested. I near shit myself."

One young girl described her early years of visiting her daddy in Long Kesh and each time receiving a box of Roses chocolates but also said, "I hated the buses that brought you to Long Kesh. They were always cold and people smoked too much. The screws scared me and I blamed them for not letting my daddy out."

One boy had both his parents in jail and he was cared for in the 26 Counties. He couldn't work out why the other kids' accents were different from his and thought this was something to do with his parents being in jail.

"The other kids told me I was English and not Irish because I spoke different from them."

Another said, "My daddy was in jail with the hunger strikers and was friends with them. I am proud because he was part of Irish history." When it was time to deal with the 'present' the contributions continued:

An 11-year-old girl said, "My granda was in the 'Ra but I'm not able to talk about him in school as my school's in Lisburn but I'm still proud of him."

Another said, "I think my daddy was in the IRA but he says he won't tell me about it until Ireland is free."

A 13 year old resents his parents not allowing him to throw stones at the PSNI.

"When the Peelers come into our street, my mates stone them but I have to go into the house or my Ma' and Da' will ground me. They say it's different now but it's not as if they didn't stone them when they were young."

This prompted another to say that his daddy helps to stop the rioting at the 12th.

The 'future' session was based around 'Fantasy Ireland' and the participants had to describe their Ireland 20 years from now.

"The tricolour should be up at Stormont with the British flag" said one, which prompted another to say, "Why do you want a British flag? This is Ireland."

One 14 year old said that he wanted to play GAA with Protestants. "It's better than soccer and more chances to score."

There was consensus among the young people on subjects such as; peace; equality; no sectarianism/racism; "same rights for everybody"; and the need for more education about drugs, under-age sex and drink.

The most positive outcome of the 'Fantasy Ireland' discussion for me was this; in 20 years the young people will have to deal with 'normal' societal issues (negative and all as they are) but there won't be political prisoners, sectarian murders and armed British soldiers and RUC on our streets. That is one positive I look forward to.

Dominic Adams
PNB Youth Worker



South Armagh

As part of the events around the 25th anniversary of the 1981 hunger strike Laurence McKeown was invited to St Joseph's Secondary School, Crossmaglen, to speak to students and to present copies of the recently published biography of Bobby Sands for Younger Readers. The event was organised by Francis Smith, Head of History, who commented afterwards;

"When engaging students with "Human Rights" issues we must be mindful that students may grow to accept that such 'abuses' only occur in post colonial countries and that Western Governments are above such actions.

"If the hunger strike of 1981 teaches us nothing else it should serve as a glaring reminder of just how abusive *any* Government can become in its treatment of dissent voices. It also gives reference to the lengths to which people may feel they must go to in order to secure basic human rights and respect. Having Laurence address the students was a very worthwhile exercise and very important that they met him.

It enabled the students to relate to the



» TOUR OF ARMAGH JAIL

On 28th October 2006, several republican ex-prisoners' children were among a group who visited the site of Armagh women's jail. The jail closed in 1986 but during the conflict had housed many women republican prisoners. The tour was facilitated by Armagh City and District Council and was led by two former women prisoners, Jennifer McCann and Pauline Quinn. Both women spoke of their time there and recounted the conditions under which the women were held and the various situations which arose throughout the years. These included an escape attempt, the no-wash protest, the hunger strike of 1980 and strip-searching.

There was a touch of nostalgia as Jennifer showed Fionnuala Stanton the cell in which her mother, Kathy, gave birth to her older sister, also called Kathy, when she was imprisoned there in 1985.

Jennifer and Pauline also recalled the many women who had passed through Armagh but have since passed away.

students engage with history



Students at St Joseph's Secondary School, Crossmaglen pictured with Laurence McKeown who gave them a valuable insight into events surrounding the 1981 hunger strike to them

context in which such dramatic decisions were made while also seeing that Laurence was very much an ordinary guy who happened to live through remarkable times. Feedback from the students following Laurence's visit was great and the subject of

much debate in the classroom.

Lots of angles were covered such as; the motivation of the prisoners; the stance of Government; the 5 demands; the emotions of families; and what was Laurence's life like today.

» WOMEN AND POLITICAL IMPRISONMENT



Rosie McCorley, Outreach Coordinator with Coiste, pictured with Professor Phil Scraton and Shadd Maruna of the School of Law, Queen's University, Belfast. Rosie was invited to make a presentation on the legacy of women and political imprisonment to the School's two-day seminar, *Rethinking Reintegration*, which was held on the 28/29 November as part of the ES-RC 'Life after Punishment' series.

(L to R) Rosie McCorley, Professor Phil Scraton and Shadd Maruna

