

There had been Irish republican hunger strikes since 1917. The deaths of Frank Stagg and Michael Gaughan on hunger strike in the 1970's are often remembered alongside those of 1981. In 1976, as part of the policy of Ulsterisation and "criminalisation", the British government ended its previous policy of giving Special Category Status to paramilitary prisoners in Northern Ireland prisons. Special Category, or political, status meant prisoners were treated very like prisoners of war, not having, for example, to wear prison uniforms or do prison work. 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. The policy was not introduced for existing prisoners, but rather phased in for those newly convicted.

First hunger strike

Provisional IRA and INLA prisoners (the first was Ciarán Nugent) began the blanket protest in which prisoners would refuse 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 not granted political status refused to wash and smeared the walls of their cells with excrement. These protests aimed to re-establish their privileges by securing what were known as the "Five Demands":

1. The right not to wear a prison uniform;
2. The right not to do prison work;
3. The right of free association with other prisoners;
4. The right to organise their own educational and recreational facilities;
5. The right to one visit, one letter and one parcel per week.

Initially, this protest did not attract a great deal of attention, and even the Provisional IRA regarded it as a side-issue compared to their armed struggle. 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 blanketmen, and won 5.9% of the vote across Northern Ireland, even though Sinn Féin had called for a boycott of this election. Shortly after this, the broad-based Smash H-Block Campaign 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 a campaign of assassination carried out by both sides. The IRA shot and killed a number of prison officers; at the same time, loyalist paramilitaries shot and killed a number of activists in the Smash H-Block Campaign and badly injured McAliskey and her husband in an attempt on their lives.

In October 1980, seven republican prisoners in HM Prison Maze (alternatively known as "Long Kesh") began a hunger strike. After a few weeks they were followed by three prisoners in Armagh Women's Prison, and then a short-lived hunger strike by several dozen more prisoners in Long Kesh. A number of Loyalist prisoners also started their own hunger strike after a few weeks, but they were accused of opportunism, attempting to win concessions on the backs of republicans without risking death or serious damage to their health. (No Loyalists or Armagh women took part in the 1981 hunger strike.) In a war of nerves between the PIRA leadership and the British government, with one prisoner close to death, the British government appeared to concede the prisoners' right to wear their own clothes. The strike was called off in December before any prisoners died.

Second hunger strike

After a few weeks it emerged that the British government were simply intending to give the prisoners the right to wear civilian-style clothing supplied by the prison, and had duped the hunger-strikers in the belief that no new hunger-strike would occur. On March 1, 1981, under the new PIRA Officer Commanding in

Long Kesh, Bobby Sands, a second hunger strike began, with Sands himself the first to refuse food. The political atmosphere outside the prisons became electric, all over Ireland, with widespread rioting in nationalist areas of Northern Ireland. Shortly after the beginning of the strike, the independent Irish republican MP for Fermanagh & South Tyrone died and precipitated a high profile by-election. Sands was nominated as an Anti H-Block candidate, and was elected to the House of Commons on April 9, 1981 with 30,492 votes to 29,046 for the Ulster Unionist Party candidate Harry West.

Three weeks later, Sands died from starvation in the prison hospital. The announcement of his death prompted several days of riots in nationalist areas of Northern Ireland. Over 100,000 people lined the route of his funeral.

Over the summer, nine more hunger strikers also died. The names of these people, their paramilitary affiliation, hometown, dates of death, and length of hunger strike are as follows:

- Bobby Sands, Provisional IRA, Belfast (Twinbrook), 5 May, 66 days
- Francis Hughes, PIRA, Bellaghy, 12 May, 59 days
- Raymond McCreesh, PIRA, Camlough, 21 May, 61 days
- Patsy O'Hara, INLA, Derry, 21 May, 61 days
- Joe McDonnell, PIRA, Belfast (Lenadoon), 8 July, 61 days
- Martin Hurson, PIRA, Cappagh, 13 July, 46 days
- Kevin Lynch, INLA, Dungiven, 1 August, 71 days
- Kieran Doherty, PIRA, Belfast (Andersonstown), 2 August, 73 days
- Thomas McElwee, PIRA, Bellaghy, 8 August, 62 days
- Michael Devine, INLA, Derry, 20 August, 60 days

A number of protesting prisoners contested the general election in the Republic of Ireland in June. Paddy Agnew (who was not on hunger strike) and Kieran Doherty were elected in Louth and Cavan/Monaghan 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 did support the hunger strikers had a few successes, e.g. the Irish Independence Party won 21 seats, while a joint campaign by the Irish Republican Socialist Party (the INLA's

political wing) and People's Democracy (a Trotskyist group) won four seats on Belfast City Council.

The British parliament rushed through emergency legislation 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. This by-election was won in August by Owen Carron, who had been Sands' election agent, standing as the prisoners' proxy candidate, with an increased vote.

In late summer, the hunger strike began to break, thanks in large part due to the actions of the radical Catholic priest, Fr. Denis Faul, who intervened with hunger strikers' families after they had lost consciousness to urge them to give consent to the prison authorities for their relatives to be fed by drip. The first prisoner whose family intervened was Paddy Quinn. After this happened with a number of other prisoners, on 3 October 1981, the PIRA and INLA called off the hunger strike.