

## **Basic Background**

From July of 1972 Irish Republican prisoners in the six counties of the north of Ireland were given Special Category Status as Prisoners of War by the British government. This was withdrawn March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1976 by the British Labour government in response to the government again enacting the policy of “criminalization” of the Irish Republicans fight for freedom of the counties.

With this withdrawal of POW status male Irish Republican Prisoners would now be sent to The H Blocks prison (known by the government as HMP The Maze) and required to wear a prison uniform, and do prison work. The women in Armagh prison, while allowed to wear their own clothes were denied political status also and were no longer on a separate political wing in the prison. The women chose to protest by making their cloths most like a paramilitary uniform and refusal to do prison work.

Kieran Nugent was the first to be convicted in a diplock court under these new terms. When he arrived at the H Blocks and was handed the prison uniform; he refused to wear it and was instead given a blanket to wrap around his body. This was the beginning of the Blanket Protest, as more Irish Republican men and women were convicted and sent to the H Blocks and Armagh prison, many chose not to wear the prison uniform and instead embarked on the blanket protest.

The refusal to wear the prison uniform also meant the refusal to do prison work and the men and women on the blanket also lost privileges such as packages and visits.

The blanket protest became the no wash protest, then the dirty protest; both in the H Blocks and in Armagh prison. The prisoners were asking for 5 specific demands:

1. The right to not wear the prison uniform (the right to wear their own clothes)
2. The right not to do prison work
3. the right of free association with other prisoners, and to organize educational and recreational pursuits;
4. the right to one visit, one letter and one parcel per week;
5. The full restoration of remission lost through the protest.

The escalation of the protest was not getting the prisoners what they wanted: The return of Special Category/Political Status, so the decision was taken by OC of the Irish Republican Prisoners, Brendan (Darkie) Hughes to take the inevitable next step and begin a Hunger Strike. Hunger strikes had been used by Irish Republican prisoners in previous campaigns as they fought for Political Status since the British always tried to criminalize the struggle.

The first prisoner to pay the ultimate price was Thomas Ashe who died after being force fed in 1917, in the 1920's six men died while on hunger strike. The hunger strike was also used in the 1940's with another three deaths and in the 1970's with the deaths of Michael Gaugan (1974) and Frank Stagg (1976) both men died from force feeding while on hunger strike.

The 1980 Hunger Strike began on October 27<sup>th</sup> with six IRA and one INLA prisoner. In December they were joined by three women in Armagh Prison. With Sean McKenna slipping into a coma and the word that the British had a possible offer on the table; Brendan decided to save McKenna's life and end the Hunger Strike on December 15, 1980. Once the strike was called off the British reneged on the possibility of any offer.

In January 1981, Bobby Sands, now OC of the IRA prisoners began discussion of re-starting the Hunger Strikes. This time would have the men begin their strikes on a staggered schedule; with Bobby as the first to begin.

The women of Armagh again stepped up to join their comrades on hunger strike; however, the decision was made for this to be an action by the men only. Sands also decided he would step down as OC so he would not have to make any important life and death decisions while on strike, and Brendan "Bik" McFarland became the OC.

On March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1981; Bobby Sands refused food....thus began the second hunger strike.

## **Books**

Nor Meekly Serve My Time: The H-Block Struggle 1976=1981 Brian Campbell

Out Of Time: Irish Republican Prisoners Long Kesh 1972-2000 Laurence McKeown

Ten Men Dead: The Story of the 1981 Hunger Strike David Beresford

Blanketmen: An untold story of the H-Block hunger strike Richard O'Rawe

On the Blanket: The Inside Story of the IRA Prisoners "Dirty" Protest Tim Pat Coogen

Nothing But An Unfinished Song: Bobby Sands, The Irish Hunger Striker Who Ignited a Generation Denis Hearn

Kevini Lynch and the Irish Hunger Strike Aiden Hegarty

Hunger Strike: Reflections on the 1981 Hunger Strike Edited by Danny Morrison

The Armagh Women Nell McCafferty

## **Websites**

<https://www.bobbysandstrust.com/>

<http://www.hungerstrikes.org/>

<http://www.theirisharchives.com/articles/view/97/The-Women-Hunger-Strikers-Of-Armagh-Prison>

<https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/hstrike/hstrike.htm>

<https://www.anphoblacht.com/contents/26514>

<https://sulondon.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Syracuse-London-Questioning-Borders-Wimmer-article.pdf>

<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/timeline-of-1981-hunger-strike-1.2555682>