

PART TWO: THE AFTERMATH OF THE 1981 HUNGER STRIKE

After the hunger strikes ended, James Prior, the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, said that he would grant much of what the prisoners had been demanding. Even though the Northern Ireland office had issued a statement earlier in 1981 that said "if we conceded their demands, we would be handing over the prisons to the prisoners," Prior announced his planned reforms with the comment that "the Government has always said that once the hunger strike was out of the way, there were certain reforms that could be introduced." Prior made good on his promises. On October 6, he announced that all prisoners, including the ones protesting, would be able to wear their own clothes all day long. The only restrictions imposed were that this clothing could not be a form of IRA uniform and the clothing could not resemble the guards' uniforms. Additionally, prisoners would receive much of the remission they had lost while on the protest, and association between prisoners, while not "free," was reorganized to better suit the prisoners' wishes. The demands concerning mail, parcels, and visiting privileges, which had been conceded earlier, were formalized. Initially, no concessions were made concerning prison work, but the actual work was redefined in such a way that prisoners who refused to work for the prison system would not receive much of a penalty. The end of the hunger strikes saw both sides declaring victory. The British claimed that they had never given into the prisoners, for the government never acknowledged the Republicans' political status. The hunger strikes in effect had collapsed because of the family and Church intervention; they had not ended because of any British promises.

Yet the IRA had succeeded in many ways as well. Most importantly, contrary to the prison officials and British government's claims otherwise, the prisoners' demands *had been conceded*. Even though officially the British did not recognize the prisoners as POWs, allowing the Republican men and women in jail to wear their own clothing and associate with one another was equal to political status in the minds of the IRA prisoners. The election of Bobby Sands to the Westminster Parliament demonstrated the support for Republicanism in the Catholic community, and the thousands who turned out for rallies and hunger strikers' funerals confirmed this support. Coming out of a period of decreasing morale and public support for the IRA, the dirty and blanket protests, and above all, the hunger strikes, led to a remarkable upsurge in support for the IRA and Sinn Féin. Although the British government could not acknowledge formally the "war" and the existence of political prisoners of war, there were few people who could have denied it.

No one will ever forget the terrible human sacrifice needed to create these conditions in the prisons, the deaths of ten Irishmen who would rather give their young lives than capitulate to Britain's attempts to criminalize them. Their names will be remembered when freedom dawns in Ireland.

Submitted by: Anne Foody, Irish Historian, Division #87
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See: <http://www.irishhungerstrike.com>; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1981_Irish_Hunger_Strike
<http://larkspirit/hungerstrikes>



Sands
5 May 81
66 days

Hughes
12 May 81
59 days

O'Hara
21 May 81
61 days

McCreesh
21 May 81
61 days

McDonnell
8 July 81
61 days



Hurson
13 July 81
46 days

Lynch
1 Aug 81
71 days

Doherty
2 Aug 81
73 days

McElwee
8 Aug 81
62 days

Devine
20 Aug 81
60 days

“Everyone, Republican or otherwise has their own particular part to play. No part is too great or too small, no one is too old or too young to do something.”

--Bobby Sands