

# The Labour government's agenda in the Irish peace process

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The British Labour government's proposal for an inquiry into the 1972 shooting of Catholic demonstrators, known as Bloody Sunday, is part of a "peace process" that lacks any basis for providing genuine peace in the north of Ireland.

Evidence uncovered last year showed that the British army was responsible for the murder of 14 unarmed civil rights marchers on that day in Derry. But Prime Minister Tony Blair has already promised the inquiry will not undermine confidence in the armed forces, and the judge heading the inquiry has indicated that no legal proceedings will be taken against the soldiers involved in the killings. There is to be no criticism of the British government's imperialist role in Ireland, and Bloody Sunday is to be treated as an unfortunate mistake.

In fact Bloody Sunday was part of an escalation of the military occupation of the northern province at a time of mounting social tensions. The massacre helped to drive the beleaguered Catholic working class enclaves in Derry and Belfast behind the previously small IRA. It led to direct rule from London as the local Stormont parliament collapsed. Since then a pattern has been established of army involvement in beatings, torture and murder, all designed to exacerbate sectarian divisions.

Labour's proposal for this neutered inquiry is a ploy to sweeten relations with the Irish government and nationalist politicians in the north, who have the job of selling power-sharing proposals to an increasingly skeptical population. It is a high-risk strategy that has infuriated army top brass, who could respond by giving covert support to unionist paramilitaries, as they have in the past. At the same time, any suggestion of a cover-up by Blair will undermine Sinn Fein's participation in the peace talks and strengthen the breakaway republican groups that have opposed the peace process.

The Labour government is proceeding recklessly because of the ever more strident demands of its big business backers. Corporations and banks have reaped massive profits from the opening of the southern Irish economy to investment. They are exploiting its young and educated work force as cheap labor and enjoying the added inducement of tax incentives for a range of high-tech industries.

The so-called Celtic Tiger has become the fastest growing economy in Europe. But a northern province cut off by a militarized border—with the huge expense of an occupying army and an economy constantly disrupted by shootings and bombings—is a hindrance to global companies seeking access to the low-wage economy of the north as well as the south of the island nation.

Blair's proposed political arrangements for the north, which include proportional representation, hold out the hope to political leaders on both sides of the sectarian divide of a role in running a devolved regional assembly, similar to those being established in Scotland, Wales and the English regions. The establishment of some kind of cross-border body would facilitate collaboration with the Dublin government, especially over economic issues.

This new form of political rule is attractive to a layer of politicians, officials and businessmen who hope to benefit from the links with the European and global economy which will develop. Working people are being duped with the promise of greater democracy and economic prosperity. Unionist politicians will sell the new arrangement as a continued connection with Britain, while nationalists will promote the involvement of the Irish government.

That a majority of both nationalist and unionist parties and paramilitary groups have been persuaded to

take part in the talks arises from the fact that their traditional strategies have failed. Neither a nationally protected all-Irish economy nor an Ulster statelet based on a privileged relation to the British market is viable in today's global economy.

In order to get the talks going, and then restart them after they came to the brink of collapse in December, the Labour government has taken unprecedented measures. To broker the IRA cease-fire and allow Sinn Fein into the talks required acceptance of US intrusion into traditionally British concerns. Irish-American business interests have suggested they will invest as heavily in the north as they do in the south of Ireland. A further incentive to the IRA was the promise that prisoners could be released if the talks succeed: already in December the Irish government released nine IRA prisoners.

This prompted a threat by the loyalist Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) and the Progressive Unionist Party to withdraw from the talks. Mo Mowlam, British Northern Ireland Secretary, then went into the Maze Prison to talk with convicted loyalist paramilitary prisoners. Mowlam assured the commanders of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) that their prisoners would be released as part of the proposed peace settlement. This was a reversal of long-established government policy that republicans and loyalists are not political prisoners, but criminals.

Tensions rose further when Billy Wright, the paramilitary leader of the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF), was assassinated by the republican Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) inside the Maze prison on December 27. Wright broke from the UVF last year, opposing the loyalist cease-fire and participation in the talks.

There is evidence that Wright was assassinated with the connivance of the government. Finlay Spratt, leader of the Northern Ireland prison officers, produced written evidence that prison officers had warned the Maze governor of a plot to kill Wright. INLA prisoners were kept next to the LVF, and used the roof of their building to carry out the assassination. A prison officer was ordered down from the observation post overlooking the INLA and LVF blocks on the morning of the shooting.

For all the media hype, Mowlam and the Labour

government have failed to stop an increase of sectarian killings, carried out by organizations opposed to the cease-fire such as the LVF and the INLA, that appear to have tacit involvement by the Ulster Defence Association and the IRA.

The Ulster Defence Association appears to have been involved in two of the LVF killings. Their political representatives in the Ulster Democratic Party have agreed to temporarily leave the talks to avoid the embarrassment this involvement in terrorism could cause the government.

None of the proposed peace measures will bring long-term stability or overcome the sectarian divisions, the origins of which lie in the profit system and centuries of British rule. Global capitalism can only give rise to greater divisions between rich and poor. The wealth which investment has created in the Irish Republic has only benefited a tiny section of the population.

On the basis of the agreement proposed by the Labour government, demagogic politicians and paramilitary thugs in northern Ireland will continue to rule over the different sections of the community, competing for whatever advantages they may get from corporate investment in their regions and acting as the political proxies of competing imperialist powers.

In the near future, moreover, the Celtic Tiger will follow the path of the other Tiger economies. The drying up of US and other foreign investments will inevitably provoke an attempt by the various bourgeois and petty-bourgeois cliques to renew sectarian conflicts in order to divide and disorientate the working class.



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