

What social interests are being promoted in the Northern Ireland talks?

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The May deadline for an agreement in the talks over the future of Northern Ireland is approaching. The British and Irish governments aim to secure a formula governing economic and political relations between Northern Ireland, Britain and the Irish republic, and put the proposal to referendums in both the north and south of Ireland that same month.

Public debate on what the talks are setting out to achieve has been minimal. The parties directly involved confine themselves to popular demands for an end to nearly three decades of conflict.

In recent weeks, media attention has focused almost exclusively on whether Sinn Fein will be included in any agreement. This follows Sinn Fein's temporary exclusion from direct participation after the Northern Ireland police accused the IRA of breaking its cease-fire by killing a Belfast drug dealer and a Unionist gun-man.

The official line of the Tory party and the right-wing *Daily Telegraph*, which are adamantly opposed to any compromise on British sovereignty in the north, is for Sinn Fein to be permanently excluded from the talks. With the support of powerful corporate interests, however, the Blair Labour Party government has rejected this demand.

The Economist recently urged that Sinn Fein be kept on board in order to legitimise any agreement that is reached. Noting that Sinn Fein has demonstrated a willingness to accept a political settlement that will, "fall well short of their traditional goal of a united Ireland," the traditionally Tory magazine outlined four possible approaches to ending the crisis in Northern Ireland. The first two—treating the conflict as simply a security problem, or seeking a political settlement that excluded political parties with connections to sectarian violence—have both "failed repeatedly," it declared.

The Economist continued: "Despite the IRA's bloody record, Sinn Fein has the support of over 16 percent of

Northern Ireland's voters. That is too big a popular base for it to make sense to treat the IRA as simply a criminal gang.

"Approach number three is to try to reach a political settlement that involves all political parties, including those with connections to terrorism. Approach four would be for the British and Irish governments to draw up a blueprint themselves and appeal over the heads of the political parties by staging referendums north and south of the border. It is option three that has formed the basis of the current initiative; and option four is clearly being held in reserve."

The temporary exclusion of Sinn Fein was largely forced on Blair by those within the British ruling class and the Unionist movement who oppose option three because of the concessions it offers to the southern Irish government and the extent to which it allows US involvement in Irish affairs.

Following Blair's recent visit to Washington, a letter from Blair's Personal Private Secretary John Holmes to Northern Ireland Secretary Mo Mowlam was leaked to Ian Paisley of the Democratic Unionist Party. It detailed Blair's conversations with Irish-American Congressional leaders in which he said that "the important thing... was that the Unionists had signed up to north-south structures." He added that David Trimble, the leader of the main Ulster Unionist Party, "had come a good deal further than many Unionists wanted him to... It is important to remember that Trimble was under constant attack from Paisley and McCartney [extreme Unionists who refuse to take part in the talks — ed.], so that giving comfort to the Ulster Unionists was vital... Trimble had to be an advocate of change without making himself vulnerable to charges of betrayal."

The decision to exclude Sinn Fein until March 9 was taken with an eye to restoring Trimble's credibility and placating the more bellicose elements in the Unionist

camp. However, Blair is still intent on including Sinn Fein in an agreement, and Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams has worked assiduously to clear the road for re-entry.

Following meetings with Northern Ireland's business community and Irish Premier Bertie Ahern, Adams declared that Sinn Fein had no "exit policy" regarding the talks. He pledged to "continue to use our influence to stabilise the situation." Adams has also asked for discussions with Blair.

Whether or not Sinn Fein is readmitted and ultimately endorses an agreement, assuming one is reached, the fact will remain that the so-called peace process has been carried out above the heads of the masses of working people, Irish and British, Catholic and Protestant, North and South. Those involved in the talks represent major factions of the British bourgeoisie, the ruling economic and political interests in the Irish Republic, and aspiring bourgeois elements—Unionist and Republican—in the North. The genuine and independent interests of the working class are excluded.

In covering the talks, the media has never sought to explain why organisations and individuals who have been locked in a bloody, decades-long civil war now find themselves discussing an end to hostilities. What in fact unites them, for all their intrigues, is a common pro-business agenda.

The various parties were ultimately brought together by a profound crisis of capitalist rule in the whole of Ireland. Indeed, Blair did not initiate the peace talks. They began in June 1996 under Tory Prime Minister John Major, and their origins can be traced even farther back—to the signing of the Anglo-Irish agreement by Thatcher in 1985.

In the past, partition of the northern six counties of Ireland and the cultivation of sectarian divisions served to secure Britain's direct control of the most developed part of the Irish economy, while guaranteeing its indirect domination of the formally independent south of the island.

The last two decades, however, have seen enormous changes. Today Ireland is a prime investment location for global corporations seeking tax-breaks, cheap labour and access to the European market. America accounts for 75 percent of foreign investment in the Republic. Returns on this investment of 20-24 percent have been among the highest in the world.

The north's economy, in contrast, has suffered a tremendous decline, while the cost of police/military operations and welfare spending in the six counties grows ever higher. By 1993-4, close to two-thirds of the north's

Gross Domestic Product was made up of a £4 billion subsidy from Britain, for a population of only 1.5 million people. Manufacturing employment has fallen to just 25 percent of the workforce.

It became impossible to rule Ireland through the traditional political and economic mechanisms, because cross-border trade and access to Europe were now the key to Ireland's economic future. To preserve America's substantial interests in Ireland, the Clinton administration took the lead in proposing all-party talks as a way out of the political impasse. US Senator George Mitchell insisted that the sole condition for participation was acceptance of a "total and absolute commitment to the principles of democracy and non-violence," paving the way for participation by both Sinn Fein and the Unionist groups, once they declared a cease-fire.

The creation of "north-south" structures, as indicated in Blair's comments in the US, is aimed at strengthening Ireland's ability to attract international investment, to the mutual benefit of Britain and America and all sections of the Irish ruling class. That is why all the parties involved, including those representing the rival paramilitary groups, are anxious to get these new arrangements in place.

By their very nature, these talks can produce no progressive solution to the political and social problems that have for so long bedeviled the Irish people. At their root, they represent an attempt on the part of big business to create a more stable environment for its operations. This is to involve the spread of sweatshop labour and the destruction of social services, policies whose implementation will require ever greater repression directed against Catholic and Protestant workers alike.



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