

Interviews on British-Irish deal

Support for agreement mixed with reservations

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Reporters for the World Socialist Web Site spoke to Dublin residents on their attitude to the Northern Ireland agreement, interviewing those planning to vote "yes," those undecided and those against. Their comments raised many important political issues, which will be addressed in a future article on the site. The views expressed below are those of the individuals interviewed.

Brian is a retired Merchant Navy sailor:

I will certainly be voting "yes." There has been enough trouble up there. People should sort themselves out regardless what denomination they are. I have worked up there and I know how the nationalist people feel. I don't think the Agreement resolves any of the really long-standing problems that exist in Ireland, to be honest with you.

Michelle Wilkie is a secretary in a big retail store:

I will be voting "yes" because I am originally from up North and if there is any chance of making peace, why not? Something has to bring it. Whether it is going to bring it is another thing. I think it is brilliant the way the different parties have agreed to something. Before they never agreed to anything. I have loads of friends on different sides and they do not want things to carry on the way they were. They think that if this is a big chance for peace then I am going to vote for peace.

Business has a big interest in the Agreement. They think that if there is peace then this will bring more money to Northern Ireland, like for tourism. I have been living down here for a year now and have seen how some people are afraid to visit the North. It is not like you are going to get shot in the street; it's not like that. The media blows things all out of proportion. If they start investing then the economy will grow and there will be more jobs. If it creates more jobs then it is a good thing. I came down from Belfast because there were no jobs there. One thing I don't agree with was the people being let out of jail just for political reasons. They say they are prisoners of war, but it was an illegal war.

Brendan Devitt is a postgraduate student at Trinity College:

I will be voting "yes" in the referendum, because any scenario in the future that does not involve compromise on both sides is going to end up in bloodshed. One thing we would hate in the South is where we would get a united Ireland and then have loyalists blowing up Irish soldiers or planting bombs in Dublin. If we don't compromise in the South then we are in trouble if we just try and grab a united Ireland.

If we ignore the sectarian divisions that exist in the North and just assume that we can introduce a class model, it is just not realistic. People don't think that way. They should because I think that is what it is all about at the end of the day. But they are not in a position at this

point to think in class terms. What we first have to do is to stop the killing, get people 'round the table and then begin to agitate for those other issues.

There are different interests and expectations from the Agreement. Certainly capitalists will be looking to see how much money they are going to make through business investments if there is peace. I think the ordinary man or woman on the street is thinking a bit more pragmatically about the killings. They are generally in working class areas of the North, both Protestant and Catholic, where it is ordinary people who are the cannon fodder in the whole conflict.

Before we can ever raise class consciousness in the North, for people to see that this is a class issue, we are going to have to stop the conflict and the killing. The Agreement is the best way to begin that, but it is not a total solution in itself. At least with people sitting round the table you can begin to raise these other issues.

Lorcan works as a waiter and also runs a guided tour of Dublin:

I am of two minds about the Agreement. I think I should vote "yes" for peace, which is why most people are saying "yes." But when I actually read through the Agreement there are major problems with it. One is the question of the [Northern Ireland] Assembly. The 108 members are to be elected from the existing Westminster constituencies and these are just gerrymandered.

Then there are some human rights questions. It says here that the Agreement guarantees the "right of free political thought." But the thoughts in your mind are your own; who can tell what you are thinking? Then there is the right to freedom of expression of religious beliefs. But if you look at all these rights and ask yourself, where is the right to free speech? It isn't in the Agreement! It isn't there because the constitution here in the South says that you only have the right to free speech as long as you don't try to undermine the government. People were arrested last year under this provision. In a way the Agreement is just reinforcing state control, mixing our state control with Britain's. Another aspect of it is that the police will be co-operating North and South to exchange information on people. As we move towards European integration, the pressure was on the British and Irish governments to sort out the mess in the North. It's part of this development.

WSWS: If you look at the set-up proposed, it enshrines sectarian divisions. The voting procedures mean that the votes of the "others", i.e., those who reject any sort of sectarian label, do not count on major issues because what is required is a majority of "unionists" and "nationalists."

Lorcan: When I said that I would vote "yes" for peace it's because

the alternative is a resumption of hostilities. There are hidden agendas going on. When a company like Intel comes here they get massive handouts from the Irish government. For example Intel. The Irish Development Agency (IDA) gives them £10,000 for every person they employ. They get tax breaks for 10 years. After that they will say: It's too expensive here now, we are going to relocate somewhere else.

Now the South is getting dragged into the affairs of the North, which is part of what the nationalists in the North want. Britain was saying, we don't really want it any more. And the South was saying it is a sore point, as long as you keep things up there that's fine. If you start getting bombs in Dublin then that is a problem. But some people say that if someone like Paisley is calling for a "no" vote, then we should really vote "yes."

Trish works as a florist:

At first I thought I would vote "yes" and I think it is going to go through because so many people will vote "yes," particularly here in the South. Since then I have inclined more to vote "no." I don't really have any worked-out reasons; it's more of a gut reaction or feeling. I think it is unfair that so many people have fought and died for Irish independence over the years and really this Agreement is betraying them. People should vote "no" to register their dissent.

At the end of the day, Catholics and Protestants will have to work together, but there will always be some Protestants who hate Catholics and vice versa because it is so deep-rooted. There will have to be some sort of compromise on things. If you do vote "no," in a way you are tying yourself in with Republican Sinn Fein or Paisley, and I don't want to. I find it hard to put into words why I feel I should vote "no." So many people died to have a united Ireland and we are just going to sign it away.

There is also a lot of pressure to vote "yes." Every political party in the South is saying vote "yes." I don't think it is a good thing for every party in the country to take the same stance. It's the same with the Amsterdam Treaty [on support for European Monetary Union]. Apart from the Green Party they are all saying "yes" to that as well. Ordinary people do not really understand what is happening and are just doing what all the posters say. If you are going to vote "no" to the Amsterdam Treaty, then you have to vote "no" to the Agreement. I don't think that by voting "no" to the Agreement you are saying "yes" to continuing the armed struggle. I think in voting "yes" you are legitimising the RUC and British rule.

Larry is a musician in a band called Saoirse (freedom):

There will be big turnout for the referendum. Lots of people who are still undecided will still come out and vote. I don't think that the people who are undecided will vote "yes," especially in the North. There won't be a majority of Unionists voting "yes," but there will be a majority of Nationalists in the North.

There is a lot of support here for the Agreement. There is a sort of apathy towards the North. People just see peace. For most people voting "no" here, they would see articles 2 and 3 [the provision in the Republic's constitution asserting a commitment to a unified Ireland] as the important issue. For me, I grew up on the south side of the border, so I would definitely see the Agreement as a step forward towards peace and harmony and the island of Ireland being ruled by the people who live here. I don't really care what their ideals are once we are ruling our own country. That is what a lot of nationalists and republicans are voting for.

I think it is in the interests of big business to have the problem sorted out. Tony Blair is like a man with a mission, a "mission for peace." People on the ground will have different perceptions.

Someone who is staunchly republican will see the question of the occupation. If you asked someone in South Armagh they would say, look, there is a British Army watch-post up there. It is no different than it was 800 years ago. They are still occupying our country. Those people will definitely vote "no."

But I think more middle class people, middle class Catholics, want peace so they can get on with their business. So capitalism and materialism has a great influence. There is as much a class struggle going on in the North as it is sectarian. Ireland is ruled in the same way as Britain; it's all about money and taxes. We are all coming under the one umbrella now.

It is like the Irish government is trying to entice the Unionists to become part of the island of Ireland. With the money that's coming in from America and Europe, with the introduction of the Euro, there is going to be a lot more money in Ireland and the economy here will become a lot stronger at the expense of Britain.

WSWS: It is possible to oppose the Agreement based on socialist and internationalist principles without lining up with right-wing demagogues like Paisley. Who are the main forces saying no here in the south?

Larry: Basically it's Republican Sinn Fein. That's about it. If the Agreement goes through, then at least it will mean that people in the North rule themselves. I think that Sinn Fein has been underestimated and that they will grow massively in strength. They will also get a lot of support from the South. They are not political imbeciles; they are cunning and shrewd politicians. I have a great deal of admiration for Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness. They talk about true democracy and consult all the members of Sinn Fein before they make decisions.

WSWS: And yet they are supporting the establishment of an assembly that is run on anything but democratic principles.

Larry: Yes, but I think they see it as being the case that if we are not there, then we are finished. They are not just going to operate within that framework, but outside as well. Sometimes you just have to go for the middle ground. Adams is playing a certain game, as Trimble is, only he is more open and honest about it. John Hume has a brilliant mind but he is such a diplomat in comparison to Gerry Adams, who will be better fitted to stand up against Trimble. That is why they need him as part of the Assembly. But whatever Adams and Sinn Fein do, as long as the British are in occupation then there will always be another republican Sinn Fein and another IRA there. The Agreement is a stepping stone. It could be a dodgy stepping stone, but we are in a stalemate and at least the Agreement will break the stalemate.



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