

Future of Northern Ireland Agreement uncertain

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This is the first of a series of articles on the referendums to be held simultaneously in both northern and southern Ireland on Friday, May 22. Journalists from the World Socialist Web Site will be travelling to Ireland to report on the referendums and bring views from both parts of the island.

With two days remaining before Friday's referendums in the North and South of Ireland, the fate of the Northern Ireland Agreement looks increasingly uncertain. Despite most political parties calling for a "yes" vote, and a massive media campaign backing the agreement, opinion polls in the Irish Times and the Daily Telegraph show a fall in support amongst Unionists.

The Irish Times records those in favour in the North falling from 73 percent on April 14 to 56 percent on May 12-13. Those against rose from 14 to 25 percent. The Daily Telegraph records 61 percent in favour with 16 percent against.

Amongst supporters of Unionist parties, 35 percent intend to vote "yes." Forty-five percent said they would vote "no" with 20 percent undecided. Conversely, the Irish Times recorded support for the agreement in the South rising from 61 to 72 percent. The Daily Telegraph poll shows that support amongst Catholics in the North now totals 89 percent.

The agreement is likely to pass on both sides of the border, but a possible outcome, described in the Guardian as "a nightmare," is that a majority of Unionist supporters vote "no." If this were then reflected in the elections to the Assembly next month, "those opposed to the agreement will have 40 of the 108 seats--a perfect wrecking number," as the Sunday Business Post commented on May 17.

The Labour government in Britain, the coalition led by Bertie Ahern in the Irish Republic and the Clinton administration in the United States have thrown everything into winning Unionist backing for the agreement. Blair has made two trips to the province, pledging that the release of prisoners

and even the right of Sinn Fein representatives to take

seats in the assembly will be conditional on their decommissioning arms. British Chancellor Gordon Brown announced a £315 million investment package. He said this was "not conditional" on a "yes" vote but needed one in order to succeed.

At every stage, they have run into major problems. To enable Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams to swing his party behind the agreement, the Balcombe Street gang were released on parole to attend the organisation's congress, or Ard Feis. The four IRA members carried out the Guildford and Woolwich pub bombings in England during the early 1970s. The rapturous welcome they received helped Adams win a massive majority, but alienated broad sections of Unionist voters. Similar revulsion met the release of Micheal Stone, the loyalist paramilitary who shot down nationalist mourners in a cemetery, so he could attend a rally by the pro-agreement Ulster Democratic Party.

Another inducement offered by Labour was the establishing of a Minister for Victims of the Troubles, with a pledge of £5 million to the injured or bereaved. This also became embroiled in controversy when it was announced that Adam Ingram, the province's security minister, would fill the post.

Sinn Fein spokesman Martin McGuinness complained "This is the same minister who is in charge of the British Crown Forces who have been responsible for the murders of over 450 civilians in the course of the conflict."

Clinton's role in pushing for the agreement has been crucial. He has held private meetings with Sinn Fein. At the G8 summit he gave a joint press conference with Blair, calling on the North to vote for "hope." He threatened, "anybody who returns to violence is never going to be a friend of the United States. We won't tolerate it, we won't support it, we will do everything we can to affirmatively oppose it." Later he went so far as to stress his Protestant Irish background in asserting that the agreement would safeguard the future.

Yet unionist opposition continues to grow. The Ulster Unionist Party, whose leader David Trimble signed the

agreement, is divided. Seven of the ten unionist MPs are calling for a "no" vote, the latest being Trimble's predecessor Lord Molyneux. This has enabled them to increasingly dictate the political agenda with Blair's speeches sounding more and more like Trimble's.

Only the complete subservience of the Sinn Fein leadership has enabled this to take place. Supporters of the agreement have urged its opponents to recognise this new political reality. Writing in the Sunday Times, Paul Bew, professor of Irish history at Queen's University, Belfast explained:

"There is no reason for the present scale of unionist pessimism about the future. The republican movement has junked almost its entire belief system."

In exchange for ministerial posts and patronage from the American ruling class, Sinn Fein have signed up to a deal which accepts British rule so long as a majority in the North want it. They have endorsed changing the Republic's constitution to give up any claim over the six counties. They have also abandoned their long-standing opposition to taking their seats in a British parliament. In a masterful example of understatement, Sinn Fein's chairman Mitchel McLaughlin admitted, "The negative from the republican perspective is that it does, to an extent, legitimise the British State in Ireland."

When the agreement was signed less than a month ago it was hailed as the best chance ever for bringing an end to 30 years of conflict. The signatories believed that hastily organised referendums and the overwhelming desire to end sectarian conflicts would mean that no one would examine the agreement too carefully. Government spokesmen have stressed again and again that there is no other way to bring peace, and a "no" vote would mean endorsing the status quo or something even worse.

Whether this succeeds in securing a large enough mandate, the agreement cannot resolve a social and political crisis that is the product of centuries of imperialist oppression. Religious bigotry and sectarian hatred have been deliberately cultivated by the British ruling class in order to divide the working class and so preserve its rule. This will continue. The passing of legislation in the proposed Assembly is made conditional on majority support in the so-called nationalist and unionist "communities."

To this end, members of the Assembly will have to register a designation of identity--nationalist, unionist or other. This provision does two things. First, it shores up the political organizations which are based on sectarian divisions. Second, it seeks to marginalize all those who seek an alternative by calling for the unity of Catholic and Protestant workers against both British imperialism and the Irish bourgeoisie.

Essential to any lasting resolution of Ireland's problems is the need to provide secure jobs, decent living standards and democratic rights for everyone. But the essence of the agreement is an attempt to create new mechanisms of rule through which big business can continue to exploit

the working class on both sides of the border. The hope is that an end to hostilities, coupled with the development of cross-border co-operation between Britain and the Republic, will enable the North to emulate the success of its southern neighbour in attracting international investment.

Far from raising living standards for the majority, this will only produce low-paid, temporary and even part-time jobs as it has in the Republic. Further cuts in state spending, breaking up the large public sector in the North, will be demanded, in order to provide the tax breaks for investors.

Chancellor Gordon Brown's £315m financial package, for example, is less than 10 percent of the annual sum at present paid by the British government to sustain the public sector in the North. None of it will go to health, education or social welfare. Apart from £65m to fund workfare programmes, the remainder are investment handouts to business. It is significant that Labour announced the Port of Belfast as its first major privatisation since taking power. Expected to yield £100 million, it will be followed by the privatisation of whole swathes of the public sector that will lead to thousands of job losses and the destruction of social services.

Regardless of the outcome of Friday's referendums, genuine and lasting peace can only result from the independent political action of working people. Against the pro-business and sectarian agenda of the agreement, a social movement must be developed which defends the common class interests of Protestant, Catholic, Irish and British workers.



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