

The ratification of the Northern Ireland Agreement

What will it mean for the working class?

Editorial Board
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The substantial vote to accept the Northern Ireland Agreement in the May 22 referendums in the north and south has been hailed as the start of a new chapter in the troubled history of the island.

Support for the Agreement expressed the understandably widespread desire to end 30 years of conflict and a legitimate disillusionment with sectarian politics. However, further experience and more considered reflection will reveal that the claims for the Agreement--that it ushers in a period of peace, democracy and prosperity--have more to do with the propaganda campaign to secure a "Yes" vote than the actual substance of the new political arrangements which it provides for.

For Irish workers, it is above all necessary to cut through the high-sounding but hollow phrases bandied about on all sides, examine the essential social interests involved in fashioning the Agreement, and consider which classes stand to benefit.

Throughout most of this century, Britain has ruled the north as a military protectorate and thereby secured a large degree of economic control over the whole island. Political life in Ireland was dominated by the question, "for or against the union" with Britain. Yet in all the seemingly endless commentary on the Agreement, precious few have sought to address the underlying economic, social and class issues that brought Britain, Ireland and the United States together with the majority of unionist and republican parties. What are the changes that have prompted this shift in strategy?

From the standpoint of international capital, and of British imperialism itself, the previous arrangements through which Ireland was governed have become unviable. In response to the integration of production on a global basis and the domination of the world economy by transnational corporations, the south has abandoned any attempt at a relatively isolated and independent economic development. For the past two decades the Republic has pursued a policy of transforming itself into a cheap labour investment platform for corporations seeking access to the European market. Capital investment has poured into the country, which is today hailed as the "Celtic Tiger". Last year Gross Domestic Product rose by 10.5 per cent and share prices have increased by two-thirds in the past three years. Fully 45 percent of all workers in industry are employed by foreign corporations.

In contrast, the north's manufacturing base has drastically eroded. It has been unable to emulate the success of its neighbour because of three decades of military conflict and partition. This has forced Britain to spend vast sums on policing and welfare in order to preserve a measure of social stability.

The Agreement sets out to create more favourable conditions for profitable investment in the north, as well as the south, by international capital. But this means, in essence, more favourable conditions for the exploitation of the working class. The pact is a response to the demands of global finance capital and the insistence, in particular, of Ireland's largest investor, the United States.

Collaboration between the north and south will enable the free movement of capital, while a cessation of hostilities will create more

stable conditions for investment. As the *Irish News* commented in the immediate aftermath of the referendum, "All the old rubbish about the border, the long-road-to Dublin, the 'union', etc., is going into the scrap heap in the millennium as globalisation takes over from the exaggerated nationalism of the old blood-stained flags."

One thing, however, remains constant between the old and new arrangements. The cultivation of sectarian divisions in the working class has been the key mechanism through which the ruling class has prevented the emergence of an effective opposition to big business. The Agreement seeks to enshrine these religious and communal divisions as the basis of political life in Ireland.

The definition of Ireland as a cohabitation of essentially opposed religious "communities" is written into the very structure of the new Northern Ireland Assembly, whose delegates are to be elected on June 25. Thus the passage of legislation is conditional on majority support by the nationalist and unionist parties. Members of the Assembly will have to register their "designation of identity"--nationalist, unionist or other. The rival "communities" will be able to apply veto rights through a complex system of parallel consent, weighted majorities, minority petitions etc. These arrangements are designed to marginalise any organisation that rejects this basically sectarian framework and insists on the unity of interests of all workers.

What distinguishes this agreement from previous attempts to restructure the political system in the north is the inclusion of Sinn Fein. From the standpoint of international capital, this is critical for creating new social and political mechanisms for keeping the working class divided and contained. Despite their occasional socialistic rhetoric, Sinn Fein do not represent the interests of the working class, but rather a layer of the middle class who were denied social advancement by the old unionist setup. Their participation has been secured by promises of a major influence over how the north is to be administered and lucrative positions in the new government structure.

A significant insight into the considerations shaping the Agreement is provided by the *Sunday Business Post*, one of its most fervent supporters. The past months have seen a spate of strikes in the Republic's public sector, including hospital workers. In the weekend before the referendums, the *Post* warned of a dangerous growth of working class militancy and declared that the government had to take a hard line against the workers' demands. The newspaper wrote: "Clearly, large numbers of workers who are tied into multi-year pay deals which offer low annual percentage increases are beginning to feel frustration at the obvious wealth they see around them in the Celtic Tiger economy... this government cannot allow itself to be rolled over".

So with one breath this organ of Irish capital hailed the Agreement as the harbinger of brotherhood, peace and prosperity, and with the other insisted that the government act decisively to protect corporate profits by beating back workers' wage demands. Here, in a nut shell, is the essence of the "peace and prosperity" which the Agreement aims to foster.

The official propaganda of the past weeks promised that economic growth would bring prosperity to working people and relief from the desperate social problems they face. Big business and its political and media mouthpieces declared endlessly that a "Yes" vote was a vote for decent-paying jobs. Typical was this statement by the president of the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce: "Last year, the Industrial Development Board lost more jobs than it created, and that will continue as global competition takes its toll on our traditional industries. Only inward investment and expansion by indigenous firms will create more jobs, and only stability will make that happen".

This appeal evoked a definite response from workers in the north of Ireland, who are amongst the poorest in Europe. Poverty affects 38 percent of households and more than one in three children. Male unemployment rises to 25 percent in some towns and over 50 percent in some urban areas. Long-term unemployment affects 60 percent of male and 40 percent of female claimants. At the same time, average male wages are 20 percent lower than in Britain.

Notwithstanding the pro-Agreement propaganda, however, increased foreign investment will not alleviate the social crisis facing working people in the long-term. New expenditures will largely go to funding tax breaks for the major corporations and paying for the infrastructure projects they demand.

Overseas investors in the south are offered tax breaks for ten years and a subsidy of up to £10,000 for every person they employ. Leading business figures in the north are already demanding a reduction in corporate taxes and an increase in taxation on working people so they can compete against their southern rivals. Meanwhile, the British government is intent on slashing its annual £3.2 billion subsidy to the north by substantially reducing social spending, while simultaneously carrying out sweeping privatisations in the public sector.

Those who hail the "Celtic Tiger" as an economic model never address the situation confronting working people in the Republic. While the south has a corporate tax rate of just 10 per cent, a third of the population are officially classified as poor. Most of the jobs that have been created are low paid, temporary and often part-time. While profits increased by 27.8 percent for all firms in the three years 1993-95, wages have not even kept pace with inflation. The overall cost of living has increased dramatically, with house prices doubling over the past four years and rents rising accordingly.

The ruling class fears above all a united movement of working people against these plans to intensify the exploitation of labour. And their fears are well-founded. The further integration of Ireland's economy into the world market objectively opens up more favourable conditions for the political development of the working class. Part and parcel of this adaptation to globalization is a stepped up offensive against the social gains of Catholic and Protestant workers alike. Under these conditions, the class issues that have been concealed for so long will come to the fore.

Given the pro-business character of the Agreement, how has it been possible to secure such a substantial vote in favour? In the first place, the parties to the Agreement were able to capitalize on two widespread and related sentiments: a consensus that the status quo was intolerable, and a growing belief that the old programmes of republicanism and unionism offered no viable way forward. There is no question that the vote, although in a politically confused form, revealed a weakening of the grip of nationalist and sectarian politics on broad layers of the working population.

In the Republic, 94 percent of voters explicitly agreed to abandon the constitution's territorial claim to Northern Ireland. In the north, exit polls estimated that only one percent of Catholic voters opposed the Agreement, a decisive rejection of the call to continue the armed struggle by small groups like the Irish Republican Socialist Party and Republican Sinn Fein.

The narrow majority "Yes" vote amongst Protestants is less conclusive,

but significant. Unionism's hold over Protestant workers has always been based on providing them with living standards and social conditions better than in the Catholic areas of the north and superior to the conditions for workers in the Republic. Economic crisis and stagnation in the north have severely undermined this ability, and with it, the influence of demagogues like Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leader Ian Paisley, who led the "No" campaign among Protestants.

To the extent, however, that workers see no alternative perspective that articulates their own independent interests, they are vulnerable to the lavishly financed and highly sophisticated methods of mass manipulation employed by the ruling class. In any event, under the prevailing political conditions, there was no avenue for class conscious workers to express their opposition to all of the contenders in the official debate--the pro-Agreement parties, the Irish nationalist rejectionists and the die-hard unionists.

A "No" vote was associated in the eyes of the majority with either the Paisley arch-unionists and terrorists or the fringe republican advocates of endless communal violence. Most political parties, including parties claiming to be socialist, lined up behind the "Yes" campaign.

The trade unions offered no alternative. In the south they have played a key role for big business by enforcing wage restraint through tripartite agreements with the employers and successive governments--such as the present Partnership 2,000. In the north the unions, which pursue the same pro-business agenda, were staunch supporters of the "Yes" campaign.

A resolution of the profound social and democratic problems facing Irish workers cannot and will not be overcome by attempts to refurbish the existing mechanisms of capitalist rule. Sweeping away the legacy of backwardness and religious antagonism requires a radical restructuring of economic and political life. The working class is the only social force capable of mobilizing all of the oppressed to carry out such a revolutionary change. The critical question is the development of a politically independent movement of the working class, and this requires a conscious break with the politics of nationalism and reformism.

A new party of the working class must be built based on a programme that addresses the universal need of working people for decent jobs and living standards, champions the defense of democratic rights, and fights for social equality. On the basis of such a socialist programme, all sections of workers--Protestant and Catholic, Irish and British--can and must be united in a struggle against the common oppressor-capitalism.



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