

A WSWS report from Belfast

Divergent views on the Northern Ireland Agreement

A WSWS reporting team
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World Socialist Web Site reporter Richard Tyler conducted a number of interviews with political and trade union figures in Belfast in the run-up to the May 22 referendums in the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland on the British-Irish Agreement announced last April. These interviews provide an insight into the attitudes and aspirations of those whom the Agreement affects, as well as the social interests of some of the forces backing the new political arrangements.

As provided by the Agreement, elections to a new 108-member Northern Ireland Assembly are set for June 25. Some 300 candidates are contesting the election. The Ulster Unionist Party, headed by David Trimble, is fielding 48 candidates; the Democratic Unionist Party of Ian Paisley, 34; United Kingdom Unionist, 13; Progressive Unionist Party, 12; and the Ulster Democratic Party, 9. Of the nationalist parties, the Social Democratic Labour Party led by John Hume is fielding 38 candidates and Sinn Fein, 37. The small nationalist parties opposed to the Agreement are boycotting the election.

Of those claiming to oppose sectarian divisions, the Alliance Party is fielding 22 candidates; the Natural Law Party, 16; Northern Ireland Labour Party, 10; the Worker's Party, 9; the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, 8; the Greens, 3; Independent, 3; and the Socialist Party (formerly the Militant Tendency), 3.

Reflected in the 'Yes' vote in the referendums is a widespread desire to end 30 years of conflict, disillusionment with sectarian politics, and the hope that civil peace will usher in economic growth, jobs and rising living standards. The Agreement, however, cannot realise these strivings. Drawn up between Britain, Ireland and the United States (Ireland's largest

investor), together with the majority of unionist and republican parties, it sets out to create more favourable conditions for investment by international capital in the north and the south of the island. This means, in essence, more favourable conditions for the exploitation of the working class.

Nobody standing in the June 25 elections is advocating a genuine socialist alternative that articulates the independent interests of working people. Moreover, in line with the new constitutional arrangements, the rival unionist and republican parties are standing only in their traditional strongholds. The Agreement accepts the sectarian divisions between workers, historically the key mechanism through which the interests of big business have been preserved.

It defines Northern Ireland as being made up of two opposed religious 'communities', with all elected representatives to be designated unionist, nationalist or other. This is made the basis of political decision-making in the new Assembly through a complex system of parallel consent, weighted majorities, minority petitions, etc. These arrangements work to reinforce the political control of the sectarian parties, while marginalising any organisation that insists on the unity of interests of all workers.

Interviews:

Kate Fearon of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition
'Flawed as the Agreement is in parts, it can change the culture of politics here'

Paddy Lynn of the Workers Party
'I want to see mainstream politics coming back to Northern Ireland'

Terry Carling, Northern Ireland Officer of the Irish

Congress of Trade Unions

'It is the best thing for investment since the sliced loaf'

Vincent McKenna, former member of the IRA

'There has to be unity amongst working class people'

See Also:

The ratification of the Northern Ireland Agreement

What will it mean for the working class?

[30 May 1998]

British-Irish agreement enshrines sectarian divisions

[25 April 1998]



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