

“There has to be unity amongst working class people”

Vincent McKenna, former member of the IRA

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Vincent McKenna joined the youth wing of the republican movement in 1980 at the height of the H-Block hunger strikes. He was just 16. He left the IRA/Sinn Fein in 1991, having become disillusioned with their nationalist and sectarian politics. McKenna opposed the actions carried out against Protestants by the IRA in the County Tyrone and County Armagh areas during the mid-1980s as being akin to “ethnic cleansing”. “The bottom line was sectarian,” he says.

He is now a post-graduate student of politics at Queens University, Belfast. Unlike the other interviewees, McKenna is extremely critical of the Agreement and its big business agenda. He supports working people uniting on a class basis behind a socialist programme.

RT: What is your attitude towards the Agreement?

VM: If the Agreement creates the conditions for large bombs not to be dropped in London and elsewhere, it will be good. But that’s all it is going to deliver. A new Assembly is going to turn into the old status quo. The interests represented there are those in the upper echelons of society. A very small elite is going to do very well out of this Agreement, but not the vast majority of working people, other than the fact that they won’t be burying their dead as regularly as before.

RT: What do you think are the factors motivating this Agreement?

VM: From the ordinary person’s point of view, they’ve buried 3,600 people, plus tens of thousands injured. That is why there is going to be a surge towards the “Yes” campaign. As to the substance, I think that the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party, Sinn Fein and the rest know exactly what this Assembly is going to deliver. It’s going to give them absolute control over the economic means of production in this country. The transnational companies are going to be able invest in Northern Ireland and find cheap labour, a very highly skilled work force, and use this as a stepping stone into Europe. That’s the bottom line for the political elite in Northern Ireland. The British government are happy with this because it stabilises the country in a way they cannot.

RT: Why do you think there is such support in the South for a “Yes” vote?

VM: It’s a very emotive issue for most people and not a substantive one. From the government’s point of view, over the last 70 years the elite from the southern Irish state has worked very closely with the British state in terms of an economic perspective. The political process in the North was never of any political consequence to them.

Again, it is about stabilising the economy because Southern Ireland has had six years of 7 percent growth. That growth has been circulating around 3 percent of the population at the upper level and it hasn’t passed to the people. It hasn’t trickled down as we had been promised that it would. The stabilisation of Northern Ireland would mean more investment in the island. That’s why the Irish government and all the political parties in the Irish state are supporting the Agreement.

RT: How would you describe the social conditions in the North and in the South?

VM: In Dublin there is a massive housing estate with about 80,000 inhabitants and 70 percent unemployment. Nothing has changed for those people over the last 30 years. The welfare state has been cut back by governments that promised a “more efficient and effective welfare state,” because they can’t afford the expenditure.

In Northern Ireland we have seen incredible cutbacks in areas where

we absolutely need expenditure in terms of economic regeneration. People are being forced onto a cheap labour market, into the service sector, the tourist sector, with low pay, no conditions, no pension plans, no health plans, nothing. Labour's "welfare to work" is an insult to working class people and has delivered nothing but cheap labour to industry.

RT: What would you say to the point that the Agreement enshrines sectarian divisions in the whole set-up for the proposed Assembly?

VM: Of course it enshrines them. I asked Marjorie Mowlam [Labour's Northern Ireland Secretary] while she was down at the markets taking a photo opportunity, "Why 108 seats?" "We have to maximise the capacity," she replied.

What they have actually done is to ensure the smaller parties won't be included in the Assembly. One hundred eight seats is the maximum that the political elite can be given while eliminating the smaller political parties, whatever their objectives are. You might then have four seats that go to the smaller parties like the Progressive Unionist Party [PUP] and Ulster Democratic Party [UDP]. It enshrines the orange and green card, and it's still "your side against our side". It's an apartheid regime on the streets of Northern Ireland. "You have your turf we have our turf." Whoever maximises their turf will have the bigger say.

RT: What about the question of policing?

VM: That's one of the scariest elements in this whole process. They talk about restoring justice and are handing police patrols over to the paramilitaries in their own areas. This is something that Sinn Fein had really pushed for. They want to be able to police their own areas. The British government is happy to hand it over to them, because they haven't been able to police the areas controlled by the republicans.

This will bring far more effective policing in terms of oppressing the working class than the British State could ever hope to achieve. You have seen that in parts of southern Ireland. The IRA controls the drug market in the South and they are in control of the drug market in the North, along with other paramilitaries. The oppression of the people is something the British state is quite happy to buy into and call it justice.

RT: In the media they say there is no alternative to this agreement. Do you think there could be an alternative?

VM: There has to be a progressive alternative. In terms of working class politics in Northern Ireland, there needs to be unity in the first instance between the workers, where Catholic and Protestant, Unionist and Nationalist come together. But I believe that the bourgeois reformism of the trade union movement in Northern Ireland has meant that for the foreseeable future there is no one pushing for unity. They are pushing for division.

This assembly institutionalises division, that's my major concern. There has to be an alternative. There has to be unity amongst working class people behind the rallying cry of a socialist agenda. But that's not what's happening. There is no one to put that position.

RT: What do you mean by the bourgeois reformist agenda of the trade unions?

VM: The trade union movement has been bought off. Before they ever knew what was in the Agreement, they were rallying round for a "Yes" campaign in the referendum. They have spent a fortune in working class people's money simply because they daren't lose their privileged positions in society. They can sit on their salaries of £40-£50,000 while workers earn as little as £1.10 an hour. This Assembly guarantees the oppression of the working people and the division of the working class. This division in Northern Ireland has

meant that the trade union establishment has been able to maintain their position, their power blocs.

RT: Do you see any parallels between the course now being taken by Sinn Fein/IRA, who claimed to fight for "national liberation", and similar organisations like the ANC in South Africa or the PLO in the Middle East?

VM: I don't think Sinn Fein is a national liberation organisation. The republican movement has joined the status quo. If they were ever defenders of nationalism in the early days of civil strife, at the present stage in history they have bought into a process that guarantees them a privileged position in society—a privilege over their own people. They will become policemen where the police have become unable to operate. They will stabilise this society for transnational corporations. That is why the British Government has invested so much money in them and why the Irish government has been so willing to shake hands with mass murderers. They know that the only people who can stabilise this society are the Provisional IRA.

RT: What do you think of them retreating on a united Ireland?

VM: A united Ireland isn't in the immediate economic interests of Britain, Ireland or America. Today, the border, or the partition of Ireland, is of little consequence. The priority is the stabilisation of the economy: the creation of highly skilled cheap labour markets so you can subsidise transnational corporations so they can transplant their products and services into mainland Europe.

RT: Southern Ireland has been called the "Celtic Tiger". In the light of developments among the Asian "Tigers" what is your prognosis for developments here?

VM: I don't see the Celtic Tiger delivering a decent standard of living to the people of Ireland, whatever tradition, whatever background they come from. Any analysis of the economy of the southern Irish state would show that about 3 to 5 percent of the elite, politically and in industry, has done the best. Welfare has been cut back, wages have been driven down, conditions of employment have been driven down.

Under the Programme for National Recovery that has been running for 12 years, the trade union elite, the business elite and the political elite have set out to drive down the wages of the working class. The trade unions have reneged on conditions they said they would deliver 10 years ago when I was a trade union representative. They promised a minimum wage—there's no minimum wage in southern Ireland. There are still people working for £2 an hour. They implemented "core employment", where you have small numbers of "core workers" and then peripheral workers who have no National Insurance, no pension rights and no health cover.

In the year 2000 working class people will still be oppressed by the Celtic Tiger and imprisoned by the Celtic Tiger because they want them pushed into the factories. That's what is being developed.



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