

Loyalist violence claims three young lives in Northern Ireland

Editorial Board

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The deaths of three young boys at the hands of loyalist thugs epitomises the crisis facing the people of Northern Ireland following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in May.

Richard, Jason and Mark Quinn, 11, 9 and 7 years old respectively, were from a Catholic marriage. Their mother, Chrissie, lived on an estate that is 90 percent Protestant with her Protestant boyfriend and sent the boys to the local Protestant school. Her father is Catholic and her mother Protestant. Her Catholic maternal grandmother is also married to a Protestant. No family could have a greater desire to see an end to sectarian violence. Instead, they saw their loved ones burned to death in a petrol bomb attack on their home in Ballymoney, 40 miles (65 kilometres) north-west of Belfast.

The Quinn's house was just one of 130 Catholic homes subjected to arson attacks over the past few days. These were only the most brutal expressions of the violence unleashed by the loyalist Orange Order in the runup to Monday's marches celebrating William III's victory over the Catholic James I at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690.

Tensions have focussed on the demand by the Orange Order to be allowed to march through the mainly Catholic Garvachy Road at Drumcree, Portadown. The Orange march was banned by the Parades Commission, the body appointed by the British government to control such events. In the last week, Blair's government had mounted a huge security operation. Soldiers have been drafted back into the province, restoring the British security presence to its pre-IRA cease-fire strength of 18,000. Together with the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the army has cordoned off an area three miles across with trenches and razor wire to stop the march proceeding. With hundreds of petrol bombs and nail bombs being thrown and rifle shots fired, police have responded by firing rounds of plastic bullets at the demonstrators.

Drumcree has taken on great significance since 1996,

when attempts to prevent a similar march were abandoned after a siege by the Orange Order. David Trimble, the newly elected First Minister of the Northern Ireland Assembly, gained his leadership of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) by dancing in celebration at the head of that earlier march. This time he is a hate-figure for the loyalist opponents, led by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Ian Paisley, of the new Assembly.

These elements have used the ban to whip up sectarian hostilities and take their opposition onto the streets. Tens of thousands of Orangemen have gathered at Drumcree, with hundreds involved in pitched battles with the RUC. Loyalist thugs have been active throughout Northern Ireland--burning down Catholic churches and attacking Catholic housing areas. One 18 year old is on life-support after being savagely beaten on a Protestant estate.

For their part, the small nationalist groups opposed to the Agreement have unsuccessfully attempted to wage a bombing campaign against the civilian population in Britain and Ireland. Last Friday and Saturday the British and Irish police arrested 10 people in a move that is said to have thwarted a bombing campaign in London. Apparent targets included the busy shopping area of Oxford Street and the new British Library. A 700-pound bomb was also defused on the road between Moy and Armagh in the North.

What do these events portend regarding the future for Northern Ireland?

Less than two months ago, the British, Irish and American governments, together with the main Unionist party, the UUP, the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Fein, won over 70 percent backing in referendums for the Good Friday Agreement. The majority of the Catholic population and over half of all Protestants voted for the new Assembly, hoping that it could bring an end to violent conflict. Yet each day has seen the political situation deteriorate and the worst forms

of sectarianism return.

There is no doubt that under any circumstances this period would be politically volatile. Each summer hundreds of marches are held to celebrate British rule over Ireland and the Protestant domination of the North. Nevertheless, the conflict with the Orange Order is a stark warning that the Agreement cannot resolve the fundamental political problems facing Ireland.

The Agreement was drawn up between British and American imperialism and the Irish bourgeoisie and imposed over the heads of the Irish people. Its purpose is to eliminate all barriers to the exploitation of Ireland by the major corporations. To attract inward investment to the North, all parties in the Agreement were charged with curbing sectarian violence in order to stabilise the situation, thus reducing the huge expenditure on security operations by Britain in order to pay for tax concessions to corporate investors.

What the imperialist powers cannot countenance is the possibility that a weakening of the old antagonisms fostered amongst working people will facilitate the development of a unified political movement against the interests of big business. The possibility of this is heightened by the cuts in social spending necessary to make the North competitive. That is why the agreement sets out a complex system of measures that maintain the old divisions.

Under the new constitutional arrangements, not only political parties in the Assembly but all Irish people are defined as belonging to one or other 'cultural tradition', nationalist or unionist. The preservation of these disparate traditions is supposed to create the basis for peaceful cohabitation. The events of the past weeks prove the opposite is the case. It enables sectarian politicians to continue to dominate the North by claiming to be the defenders of their respective 'communities'.

As in every country in the world, attracting the international investment into the North demands the destruction of whole swathes of public services and the constant lowering of wage levels. The unionists are able to exploit the fears generated by growing unemployment and social impoverishment in Protestant areas and channel this into a fratricidal struggle against their fellow workers. This is why in the elections to the Assembly on June 25 anti-Agreement loyalist parties secured just under half of the vote amongst Protestants.

There is every possibility of a further break-up of the unionist movement, but in the absence of a progressive alternative a distinct fascist party could emerge from its

ranks. This would mobilise the loyalist gunmen to terrorise both Catholic and Protestant workers, while blaming a supposed 'Catholic conspiracy' for deteriorating social conditions. Such language can already be heard every day on the streets of Belfast.

The RUC and the British army are not a safeguard against this development. Scenes of the police attacking loyalists are unprecedented, but this is only a surprise if one accepts Sinn Fein's definition of the RUC as a 'unionist organisation'. The essential role of the RUC--as that every police force--is to defend the interests of big business. That is what they are doing at Drumcree. And that is what they will do with even greater brutality should workers seek to defend their independent interests in the future.

The central lesson of the past weeks is that peace and prosperity cannot be created by re-jigging the constitutional arrangements in Ireland while leaving the economic and social oppression of working people untouched. Only a genuine mass popular and democratic movement can overcome the legacy of colonial oppression and the desperate social plight faced by Catholic and Protestant workers alike. This requires the construction of a new political party that is not subordinated to big business; one that advances a socialist programme championing the universal need of working people for well-paid and secure jobs, decent housing and health care.

See Also:

On the historical and social roots of Orangeism
[14 July 1998]

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[18 June 1998]



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