

On the historical and social roots of Orangeism

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At Drumcree the Orange Order claims its right to march is a question of preserving a distinct cultural tradition stretching back hundreds of years. But Orangeism has historically served as a bulwark of the British ruling class. The Orange Order was founded in 1793. After the defeat of the United Irishmen uprising in 1798, it was developed by the English and Northern Irish ruling classes as a bastion to preserve their rule.

During the nineteenth century, Orangeism was directed not only against Irish nationalism but, more specifically, against the dangers of the development of a unified movement of working people.

As Belfast emerged as the main industrial centre of Ireland, big business became adept at exploiting the religious differences between the relatively better-off Protestant workers and the incoming Catholic workers attempting to escape the desperate poverty of the agricultural south. As Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald described it in 1910:

'In Belfast you get labour conditions the like of which you get in no other town.... It is maintained by an exceedingly simple device.... Whenever there is an attempt to root out sweating in Belfast the Orange big drum is beaten.'

The local government in the North, which was set up in 1921 and consolidated after the defeat of the Irish Republican Army and the setting up of the Irish Free State in 1922, was based on the Orange Order and Protestant supremacy. Thousands of Catholic workers were driven out of the factories and shipyards by loyalist thugs. The Ulster Unionist Labour Association (UULA), which organised the attacks, was set up during the mass strike movement of 1918 and 1919 to purge the trade unions of socialists and republicans. Its function was to pit Protestant workers against their Catholic brothers instead of their bosses, by a

combination of terror and Orange ideology, a role it has played ever since.

The attitude of the British government towards Orangeism today has undergone a dramatic shift. They see it as an obstacle to developing the North as an investment location for the transnational corporations and are not prepared to continue the massive subvention necessary to maintain the existing political set-up. But the reactionary traditions of Orangeism cannot be overcome by the new political arrangements established by the Good Friday Agreement.

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