

Northern Ireland Assembly opens

Acute social contradictions underlie new political set-up

Editorial Board
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The new Northern Ireland Assembly, meeting at Belfast's Stormont Castle on Wednesday July 1, appointed David Trimble of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) as First Minister. Seamus Mallon of the Irish nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) became his deputy. These appointments follow the elections held on June 25.

Provisions for the Assembly were established by the Northern Ireland agreement, which was ratified in referendums held simultaneously in the north and south of Ireland in May. The agreement was drawn up by Britain, the US, the Irish Republic (southern Ireland), the Sinn Fein, the SDLP and the biggest unionist party, and promoted through a massive public relations campaign that portrayed it as the basis for 'peace and coexistence,' as well as jobs and economic prosperity.

In the Northern Ireland Assembly vote, six representatives were elected for each of the province's 18 Westminster parliamentary constituencies, making a total of 108 members. The elections were contested by a record number of parties, with more than ten parties challenging for seats in some constituencies. Voting was by a form of proportional representation, where 'surplus' votes from successful candidates or those with too small a number to be elected were redistributed according to preferences indicated by the voters.

Reflecting the pattern in the May referendums, parties supporting the Agreement received 75 percent of the 822,000 votes cast. The SDLP took the most first preference votes, with just under 23 percent. The UUP gained a 21.16 percent share, but secured the highest number of seats (28 compared with the SDLP's 24) due to second preference voting. Sinn Fein secured 18 seats. The Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), allied to the loyalist paramilitaries, will send two representatives to the Assembly, making a total of 30 pro-agreement unionists.

The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and other anti-agreement unionists like the United Kingdom Unionist Party

won almost half of the unionist vote. This indicates their success in exploiting fears amongst Protestants that the agreement threatens their jobs and security. These parties secured only 28 seats in the new Assembly, but the defection of a handful of UUP representatives would enable them to block the passage of legislation, since all measures require the 'parallel consent' of at least 40 percent of those parties designated as unionist or nationalist.

The large vote for those parties and candidates supporting the agreement is indicative of the alienation among broad sections of workers from sectarian politics and a desire to end three decades of conflict. This was underscored by a growth in support for the main parties claiming a non-sectarian agenda, the liberal Alliance Party and the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition.

However this sentiment remains politically unfocused. The parties that contested the election on a platform of ending sectarian divisions, including those small groups claiming to be socialist, like the Workers Party and the Socialist Party, endorsed the Northern Ireland agreement, claiming it provided a basis for working people to secure their interests.

No party in the election advanced an alternative embodying the independent interests of workers, both Protestant and Catholic. Instead, the mass of voters were told there were only two choices--the new assembly or the status quo. The overwhelming majority of Catholics and more than half of all Protestants expressed a desire to turn a new page in Ireland's troubled history, but did so by backing a new political arrangement that is incapable of realising their aspirations.

Neither the Northern Ireland agreement nor the Assembly is the product of a mass popular, democratic movement. It was drawn up behind closed doors between British and American imperialism and the Irish bourgeoisie and reflects their interests. Its central purpose is to eliminate all barriers to the exploitation of the whole of Ireland by international capital.

The Irish Republic has become a prime investment location for transnational corporations seeking access to the European market. It has done so by offering tax breaks to business and striking wage-restraint deals with the unions at the expense of Irish workers. This is the record the Northern Ireland agreement was designed to emulate. Up to now the British province has been hindered in its attempts to do so by the huge cost of policing 30 years of conflict and maintaining the extensive public sector necessary to compensate for the decline of traditional manufacturing industry.

In recent years the north has achieved some success in securing investment by holding out the promise of peace and greater cross-border collaboration with the Irish Republic in the south. Since the IRA cease-fire in 1994, overseas investment has grown by 50 percent and exports by 18 percent. By 1996, some 195 companies in the north were foreign-owned. Manufacturing output has increased at double the UK rate, while the incidence of strikes is only one-half to two-thirds of the already low UK figure. To further expand the profit-making potential of the north means to ensure that wages are kept down, social costs are slashed and tax revenues are used to benefit industry.

This strategy entails a sharp assault on the social position of the working class. That is a major reason why the British government retains absolute control of security arrangements in Northern Ireland. In anticipation of violent conflicts as the loyalist marching season gets underway, over 1,000 troops have been shipped to the province in the last few days. Should the need arise, these troops could just as easily be mobilised against workers fighting in defence of their livelihoods.

An essential consideration shaping the new Assembly is to prevent the development of a new political movement that articulates the common interests of all workers, Catholic and Protestant. To this end, the agreement reinforces a sectarian framework on the political process in the north. Parties that refuse to be designated as either unionist or nationalist are categorised as 'other,' and their vote does not carry equal weight. This enables the rival cliques of nationalist and unionist politicians to continue manipulating sectarian divisions for their own advantage and that of the more privileged upper-middle-class social layers they really speak for. In so far as the main parties claim to be defenders of distinct and rival 'communities' within the new Assembly, they maintain a political framework that pits workers against one another, to the benefit of big business.

Sinn Fein's participation in the Assembly is the most significant feature distinguishing this from earlier attempts to establish a more stable form of rule in Northern Ireland, such as the 1974 Sunningdale Agreement. Sinn Fein

President Gerry Adams intends to establish positions for his party not only as ministers in the new government, but 'at all, including the highest levels' of the judiciary, the civil service and the police. In return for such positions, big business interests will demand Sinn Fein act as a mechanism of social and political control.

Such an agreement, cobbled together by the imperialist powers and Irish bourgeois interests, cannot bring stability to Northern Ireland. The Assembly is based on the fiction that workers share a common interest with big business. Objective developments will serve to expose this fallacy.

None of the fundamental social and political problems facing workers have been resolved. Their basic need for decent jobs, housing and health care is incompatible with the overriding profit interests of the major corporations. All over the world the ferocious competition between rival corporations for control of markets and raw materials is plunging working people into poverty and unemployment. Ireland will be no exception. Whatever initial benefits may accrue from expanded corporate investment, most will go into the pockets of the rich and a thin layer of the upper-middle-class.

The next period will see a sharp escalation in the class struggle in Ireland. As the Assembly pushes through attacks on social spending, it will be forced to crack down on the opposition this will engender among workers across the religious divide. This will serve to discredit all those parties that have backed the agreement, and could potentially benefit its extreme right-wing opponents.

For the crisis to find a progressive resolution, the working class must break with nationalist and communalist conceptions and establish its unity and political independence. This means the building of a mass socialist party that unites all workers -- Protestant and Catholic, Irish and British.

See Also:

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[25 April 1998]



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