

The Omagh bombing and the dead-end of nationalism

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Saturday's car bombing of Omagh is the worst terrorist atrocity in 28 years of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The explosion that led to the loss of 28 lives has shocked the entire world. The 500-pound bomb ripped through the town centre at 3.10pm, when it was packed with shoppers. An advance warning was unclear as to the bomb's precise location. Police moved people down to an area where the explosion then occurred. Among the dead were nine children, 13 women (one of whom was pregnant) and six men. Some 220 people were injured, many severely. Both Catholics and Protestants were amongst the dead and maimed.

In the immediate aftermath of the bombing, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Irish premier Bertie Ahern and US President Bill Clinton, all called for severe action against the killers and pledged a united security operation on both sides of the border. Blair said they would be 'hunted down', whilst Ahern promised his government would 'ruthlessly suppress' those responsible. The reintroduction of internment without trial was mooted as a possibility.

Blame was immediately placed at the door of the Real IRA (RIRA), a small breakaway republican group opposed to Sinn Fein's acceptance of the Northern Ireland Agreement drawn up by the British, Irish and American governments. The 32 Counties Sovereignty Movement headed by Michael McKeivitt and his wife Bernadette, the sister of IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands, has been linked to the RIRA but deny this. No one has so far admitted responsibility, but the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) said the code-word warning was used in an earlier bombing by the RIRA in Banbridge, County Down. Five men have been detained by the RUC after dawn arrests on Monday, including a relative of a leading member of the 32 Counties movement.

Amidst the widespread grief and legitimate outrage, it is necessary for workers to draw their own independent conclusions from this tragedy. The Omagh bombing is a criminal and reprehensible act that does not advance the interests of Irish workers or the struggle against imperialism. The opposite is the case.

The aim of the bombing was to re-ignite sectarian hostilities between Catholic and Protestant in the face of the widespread desire for an end to this fruitless conflict. The dissident republican groups blamed for the action broke with Sinn Fein for endorsing the Northern Ireland Agreement. They claim that continuing a bombing campaign will undermine British imperialism, forcing a resumption of hostilities and in so doing galvanise the masses into a struggle for Irish independence.

Omagh has enabled the imperialist powers to present themselves as guardians of peace and to legitimise security operations that would have been impossible to conduct in an earlier period. Cross-border security sweeps are now being directed at the arrest of political figures linked to the RIRA, but such repressive powers ceded to the British and Irish states today will inevitably be used against the entire working class tomorrow.

More fundamentally, the bombing of Omagh has been used to reinforce the assertion that the only alternative to the Northern Ireland Agreement is a resumption of sectarian violence. As *The Sun* stated in its usual arrogant style, 'you are either for peace or for murder. There is no middle road'.

After 30 years, Sinn Fein and the IRA have proved incapable of securing the basic social interests of working class Catholics and were no nearer to achieving their stated goal of a united Ireland. This was recognised by the party's leadership when the IRA

called a cease-fire two years ago. The massive endorsement of the Northern Ireland Agreement in the referendums on May 22 amongst Catholics expressed this widespread disillusionment with the traditional politics of nationalism.

But in the absence of a genuine socialist alternative capable of unifying the working class in defence of their independent social and political interests, it has been possible for the ruling class and its political representatives to utilise this sentiment in order to create illusions in the so-called 'peace process'.

Sinn Fein's endorsement of the Northern Ireland Agreement has been vital for the imperialist powers to present it as a means of securing peace and prosperity and as an expression of the democratic aspirations of all Irish people. The reality is very different.

The considerations shaping the Agreement were exclusively those of the ruling class. In order to develop Ireland as an investment location for the global corporations seeking access to Europe, it was necessary to bring military conflict to an end and to develop cross-border trade and investment with the South. All of this was stated openly. What remained unsaid by any of the participants in the peace talks is that attracting international capital requires the destruction of the extensive social welfare provisions and the systematic lowering of wages and conditions.

To this end the unionist and republican parties have been given a joint veto over all policy-making in the new Northern Ireland Assembly. This provides them with a virtual state-enforced monopoly on political life, designed to counteract any movement of workers against big business that cuts across the sectarian divide.

It is in light of these political changes that the demands now being made on Sinn Fein to deal with republican dissidents must be assessed. The British press is full of articles and editorials calling on Sinn Fein to take the lead in neutralising the anti-Agreement groups. Typical is that by Kevin Toolis in the *Guardian*, in which he calls for the perpetrators to receive, 'a good political kicking in front of the nationalist community of Ireland by their fellow Irishmen.'

Though never officially stated, policing their respective 'communities' was one of the key demands placed on both the republican and unionist

paramilitaries in the all-party talks. Sinn Fein has made clear its willingness to accept such a role. In the immediate aftermath of the bombing, Gerry Adams took the unprecedented step of unequivocally condemning the military activities of a republican group. His deputy, Martin McGuinness went further, stating that the RIRA was probably responsible for the bombing and predicting a 'massive backlash within the republican and nationalist community'.

The Omagh bombing and its aftermath underscores the utter bankruptcy of all the bourgeois nationalist groups, whether those advocating the continuation of the armed struggle, or Sinn Fein itself. In the first instance, the murderous actions of a handful of nationalist extremists are being utilised to advocate the systematic abrogation of democratic rights, all in the name of 'preserving democracy'. In the second, the nationalists themselves are being refashioned as political defenders of the status quo and future instruments of state repression.

See Also:

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