

Ratification of Northern Ireland Agreement delayed once again

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Thursday's failure to reach a deal on the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons has forced a further delay in ratifying the British-Irish Agreement. British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern announced a 10-day adjournment in negotiations, after three days of intensive efforts were unable to bring the Unionists and Republicans together.

The deadlock resulted from the refusal of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) to allow Sinn Fein to take up its ministerial seats in the Northern Ireland Assembly Executive without a start to IRA disarmament. Sinn Fein insisted that decommissioning was not a precondition laid down in the Agreement. An earlier target date of March 10 also passed by due to the stalemate. Northern Ireland Secretary Mo Mowlam had threatened to enact the "d'Hondt" system of proportional representation so as to bypass the disputing parties and set up the assembly. But she retreated in the face of Unionist intransigence.

That this failure takes place on the eve of the first anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement is symbolic. The past year has been characterised by constant manoeuvres between the various signatories to the Agreement, in which decommissioning was used as a vehicle for the British and Irish governments to ensure the compliance of Sinn Fein with their policy objectives. Throughout, the Blair government has maintained Britain's traditional alliance with the Unionist parties and insisted that any new arrangement involving the Republicans be on its terms. For their part, Sinn Fein have complied with every demand placed upon them, other than insisting that they could not simply instruct the IRA to disarm in advance of taking up seats in the Executive.

Even if a compromise resolution is reached when negotiations resume, it will not bring an end to these manoeuvres because the Agreement resolves none of the fundamental problems facing Ireland.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement was drawn up and imposed over the heads of the Irish people. It is dictated solely by the needs of the British, Irish and American governments and the big business concerns they represent. The division of Ireland between North and South had become an insupportable obstacle to the economic exploitation of the island. In the last two decades the southern Irish economy became transformed into a cheap labour platform for transnational corporations seeking to penetrate the European market. The US controls fully three-quarters of foreign investment in the South and is seeking to clear a path to extend its influence in the North as well.

Without bringing an end to civil conflict and developing a working agreement with the South, a similar strategy in the North was impossible. British imperialism was no longer able, nor willing, to

sustain the high costs incurred by its security operations in the North, nor to go on funding the state subsidies to industry and a massive public sector spending.

The major factor in convincing the Loyalists and Republican parties to accept the need for change was the erosion of their influence within their traditional constituencies. Political support for the Unionists amongst Protestant workers had been undermined by the decline of traditional industries such as shipbuilding. As poverty and unemployment grew, the Unionist parties' defence of business interests brought them into conflict with substantial sections of workers, Protestant as well as Catholic.

This made it possible to persuade the majority of Loyalist politicians under the leadership of David Trimble that accepting cross-border economic collaboration and a working relationship with Sinn Fein was the only way to maintain their political domination over the North.

The more significant achievement of the three governments involved was to incorporate Sinn Fein and the IRA into the new political arrangements, in return for their acceptance of continued British sovereignty over the North. These organisations do not represent the interests of the working class, but a layer of the Catholic middle class denied social advancement by the old unionist set-up. After 30 years of armed struggle, they had proven incapable of securing the basic social interests of working class Catholics, and were no closer to their goal of a united Ireland. Assured that they would finally be given a position of influence within the state structures, Sinn Fein/IRA formally conceded a Unionist veto over the fate of the North, and declared that the war with Britain was "now a thing of the past, over, done with and gone".

It was the broad-based alienation of working people from their old parties and programmes that produced overwhelming support for the Agreement in the referenda held both sides of the border last year. Many ordinary people saw the Agreement as a means of overcoming sectarian politics, which would enable their more pressing social concerns to be addressed--such as jobs, education and housing. But the Agreement can not satisfy any of these aspirations.

The political arrangements it establishes are designed to perpetuate sectarian divisions in order to prevent the development of a unified movement of the working class. Voting procedures within the Assembly and all aspects of social policy are based on the contention that Northern Ireland is made up of two essentially opposed religious "communities". Assembly members must even register their "designation of identity" as "nationalist, unionist or other", and legislation can only be passed with majority support from nationalist and unionist parties. This gives the sectarian politicians a virtual political monopoly, while marginalising any organisation which seeks

to challenge this divisive framework.

No truly democratic process can be built on such a basis. From the time the Agreement was signed, there has been a bitter struggle for dominance within the new Assembly along communalist lines. Far from establishing "peace", the past 12 months have seen the continuation of terrorist violence and the erosion of fundamental democratic rights.

The Agreement was meant to lay the basis for a "normalisation" of security arrangements. Instead, it is repressive legislation that has been normalised. The Omagh bombing was carried out by a tiny group of Republican dissidents who subsequently declared their own ceasefire. Yet it became a pretext for legislation, rushed through both the Irish and British parliaments, overturning basic judicial norms and civil liberties. The Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Act in Britain allows a person to be convicted for belonging to a proscribed organisation on the evidence of a senior police officer; severely curtails the right to silence and enables the assets and property of those convicted to be seized.

This month, the British Parliament voted to renew the Prevention of Terrorism Act, originally enacted in the early 1970s as a supposedly "temporary measure" dictated by the IRA bombing campaign. Blair has announced that the Labour government will make the legislation permanent.

Despite promises that reform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary would be considered, due to its Unionist bias, the last month was dominated by accusations of its involvement in the murder of civil rights lawyer Rosemary Nelson. The Blair government rejected demands for an independent investigation into her killing, incorporating the RUC into the official inquiry.

The principal targets of paramilitary violence have been workers and youth in the most deprived areas. Hundreds of people have been beaten, shot or mutilated—including a 13-year-old boy, the youngest ever victim of a so-called "punishment beating". Such beatings, regularly meted out by both Unionist and Republican thugs, are one of the means through which their political masters seek to preserve control within their respective areas.

Should the paramilitaries be brought under stricter control and a reform of the RUC take place, Irish workers will continue to face violence and intimidation in a new form.

At no stage in the past 12 months have the interests of working people been allowed to interfere with this framework. The Agreement remains a political project dominated by governments determined to preserve the interests of the major corporations.

The universal prosperity promised under the Agreement is illusory. The basic impetus for the reform of Ireland's economy and political structures is the need to attract international investment and ensure its ability to compete globally. For this, social spending must be slashed to the bone and the wages and conditions of the working class driven down. Northern Ireland's public sector accounts for 55 percent of the GDP, compared to 40 percent in the UK. The proportion of the population at work in that sector is over 50 percent greater than in the UK. Its degree of dependence on subsidies approaches that of the former East Germany.

A recent report on the northern Ireland economy states that it is heading fast towards recession, with output falling and redundancies rising. It warns that the economy is on a "knife edge", with a large part likely to be in recession before the end of the year. Redundancies during 1998 rose by 31 percent, after a 38 percent fall in 1997. And economic output per head of the population was lower last year, as a

percentage of the UK average, than it had been since 1991. Over a quarter of firms with less than 50 employees were concerned solely with survival, with a fifth of all companies describing survival as their number one objective for this year. Almost half of all the firms surveyed said that government should increase grant assistance to business as its greatest priority. But this has been ruled out by both the British and American governments. During a recent visit to Ireland, Clinton's special adviser for economic initiatives emphasised that business could not rely on "handouts" and stressed the need for them to prove their competitiveness.

The model cited as the antidote to the North's difficulties is the so-called "Celtic Tiger" in the South. However, its success has been built on the impoverishment of the working class. A third of the population in the Republic of Ireland is officially recorded as poor, with more than one in ten unemployed. The total share of wages in the southern economy has fallen by a quarter in the last 20 years. The trade unions have worked closely with the government and employers to prevent strikes and hold down wages.

Whilst this has enabled the South's Gross National Product to increase by an average of 7.5 percent annually, these achievements are ephemeral. The global crisis, which has had such a devastating impact on the North, will hit the South hard because it is so dependent on international markets. What is more, the European Union has made clear that it will not continue to pay out billions of pounds in structural funds to Dublin. The pending reform of the Common Agricultural Policy will also mean huge cuts in the subsidies paid to the Republic. Neither is the process of economic restructuring confined to Ireland; throughout Europe similar efforts are under way. Ireland will be placed at a severe disadvantage as this process escalates, due to its geographical location and lack of a sufficiently developed infrastructure.

The basic fault line underlying the Good Friday Agreement is not between the differing demands of the Loyalist and Nationalist parties. It is the impossibility of reconciling the social and democratic concerns of working people with the imperatives of big business.

Inevitably, the constant downsizing of jobs, wage cuts and elimination of basic services will provoke major struggles throughout Ireland. The central lesson of the past year is that peace and prosperity cannot be won by tinkering with the political framework of bourgeois rule, whilst preserving the economic and social oppression of working people. Only a genuine mass popular and democratic movement, uniting Catholic and Protestant workers on a socialist programme, can overcome the bitter legacy of Ireland's past.



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