

# Northern Ireland Agreement--What explains the continued deadlock?

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The implementation of the Northern Ireland Agreement continues to face deadlock. The most recent discussions involving the British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, the leaders of Sinn Féin, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Social and Democratic Labour Party have produced no settlement to the outstanding disagreements between the parties.

These follow a series of failed meetings that have so far delayed the formation of the Northern Ireland Assembly Executive by six months.

The immediate source of disagreement has revolved around the issue of weapons decommissioning. The UUP have refused to allow Sinn Féin to take up its ministerial seats without a start to IRA disarmament. For their part, Sinn Féin insist that immediate decommissioning was not a precondition of the Agreement signed last year.

On April 1, Blair and Ahern announced a 10-day adjournment in negotiations and issued a "declaration" claiming that whilst decommissioning was not a "precondition" for entry into the Assembly Executive, it was "obligatory". Once all parties accepted this, the declaration continued, each party would be able to nominate its ministers--but they would not be able to take the pledge of office until after a "collective action of reconciliation" one month later.

This attempt to impose a new framework on the contending factions has failed. Sinn Féin dismissed it as a repudiation of the original Agreement and, despite UUP leader David Trimble's plea to Unionist paramilitaries to begin decommissioning, the Ulster Volunteer Force and Red Hand Commandos refused to comply.

It is true that decommissioning was not a formal precondition of the Agreement signed by Sinn Féin, but behind the scenes Blair promised this to the Unionists. But more is at stake here than weapons. Though Blair and Ahern have railed against "intransigence", they offer no explanation as to why, after more than a year, a process that won widespread support continues to flounder. This is because the Agreement does not provide a genuine basis for resolving the divisions that have plagued Ireland. Rather, it is an attempt by Britain, Ireland and the US governments to incorporate the sectarian parties and politicians into new mechanisms of rule to safeguard the interests of big business.

One of the most striking features of the "peace process" has been the refusal by those concerned to so much as discuss the historical basis of the problems the Northern Ireland Agreement claims to address.

Sectarian conflicts between Catholics and Protestants were encouraged by British imperialism throughout its rule of Ireland. They also underpinned the partition of Ireland into North and South in 1922. By granting a measure of political independence to the South, the British ruling class sought to preserve its economic domination over

Ireland as a whole, and its direct control over the more prosperous North. This has conditioned all subsequent economic and social development.

British rule in the North was based on securing a Protestant ascendancy over the province. In turn, Unionism's domination was built on the denial of civil liberties to the Catholic minority and was reinforced by patronage, militarisation, internment, systematic intimidation and murder, with the involvement of British Intelligence. This was accompanied by a semi-official policy of ensuring Protestants received the plum jobs in the major engineering and shipbuilding industries as well as a privileged status in housing and education.

Acceptance of partition by the southern Irish bourgeoisie could not lead to the creation of a free and democratic republic because it did not challenge the economic basis of the island's subordination to imperialism. Eire's economic development was stunted and its democratic pretensions compromised--first by the need to ruthlessly suppress social antagonisms between the native ruling class and the working class, and second by the catholic basis of its state apparatus.

The creation of the Unionist state in turn extracted a heavy price from British imperialism. The North operated for much of this century as an industrial platform for Britain, but by the 1960s its economic importance had declined significantly. To attract international investment successive governments were forced to offer financial inducements, whilst simultaneously paying out huge subsidies to preserve traditional industries like shipbuilding and engineering from overseas competition. This perpetuated levels of economic backwardness and inefficiency that were unsustainable in the long term. In addition a public sector was developed which outstripped that of the rest of the UK.

The social tensions generated by Unionism's denial of equal rights to the expanding Catholic work force provoked the civil rights movement of the late 1960s. Its brutal repression by the Royal Ulster Constabulary and unionist thugs was to spark the beginning of "The Troubles". Over the next three decades, the North was to become an economic and political nightmare for the British bourgeoisie. By the time that the present Agreement was signed, Britain was subsidising the province by £3.2 billion per year to maintain the status quo--more than £2,000 per person--while GDP per head was 21 percent below European Union benchmark levels.

The economic and social development of the South was no less tortuous. The nationalist attempt at economic self-sufficiency in the pre-war years had left a weak industrial base and an economy dominated by a backward agricultural sector. In 1958, the Irish bourgeoisie abandoned this perspective and launched an "economic

development programme" based on attracting international investment. By the end of the 1960s this had produced a collapse of small-scale Irish industry at a cost of thousands of jobs.

Ireland's importance as an investment location only grew with the consolidation of the European Economic Community in 1973 and, later, the European Union (EU). Despite its much smaller size, Ireland attracts a quarter of all US investment in the EU today, just behind the UK.

The need to overcome the structural limits to further integrating the whole of Ireland into the global economy brought the British and Irish governments together in discussions from the mid-1980s. The impetus for reaching a settlement was the need to end all restrictions on the mobility of capital. Cross-border trade and access to Europe were now universally recognised as the key to the island's economic future. International finance capital now insisted that Britain and Ireland establish more stable political arrangements. This process, largely under the tutelage of the United States, ended with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in April last year.

For Britain, the new arrangements offered the possibility of increased investment and the slashing of public spending in the North. The Irish bourgeoisie saw the Agreement as an opportunity to overcome major infrastructure problems, such as inadequate road, rail and air access to Europe. For its part, the American ruling class--which already controls a full three-quarters of foreign investment in the South--regarded the new framework as the basis for extending its influence even further.

The major success of the Agreement, compared with previous attempts at reaching a political settlement in the 1970s, was in securing the backing of both the Unionist and Republican parties.

With Britain no longer prepared to countenance subsidising the North, the Unionist parties could no longer promise the jobs and social benefits through which their hegemony over the Protestant work force had been sustained. This severe undermining of their position persuaded most of the Unionist parties to sign up to the Agreement.

Of greater significance was Sinn Fein's willingness to accept British rule in the North. The abject failure of the strategy of "armed struggle" over three and a half decades had led to widespread disenchantment with the nationalists. The Adams leadership, recognising its self-created impasse, took the decision to follow other nationalist movements like the PLO and ANC and seek a place within a new constitutional set-up. Abandoning the armed struggle and agreeing to a unionist veto on Irish unity was the price demanded for their chance to share in the exploitation of Irish workers by the global corporations.

Despite this, the talks at Hillsborough Castle on the Agreement have been dominated by growing tensions. The basis for this was present within the very foundations of the proposed changes. Even before its creation, the new Northern Ireland Assembly has been an arena of struggle over who will dictate economic and social policy. It was always destined to take this direction. The Agreement enshrined the old sectarian divisions as the continued basis for political life in the North. The voting procedure in the Assembly means that all policy decisions are subject to a veto by the unionist and nationalist parties. This effectively sidelines all those who reject the sectarian framework.

These measures were dictated by fundamental considerations on the part of both the British and Irish bourgeoisie. Whereas the division of Ireland has become counterproductive from an economic standpoint, neither London nor Dublin is prepared to contemplate political union. For Britain this would be tantamount to ceding control of the North to its economic rivals. Though the Irish government is happy to exploit

any opportunities opened up by cross-border economic initiatives, its willingness to abandon any constitutional claim over the "six counties" showed that it is not prepared to shoulder the financial problems of the North. Nor is it ready to face the potential social dislocation of absorbing a million Protestants into its state.

More fundamentally, as even a brief examination of Ireland's history shows, the cultivation of sectarianism has been central to the maintenance of capitalist rule. Its function has been to prevent the development of a unified social and political movement of the working class. This is a danger of which the ruling elites are well aware. Britain's imposition of partition in order to preserve its rule over the most vital area of the Irish economy provoked revolutionary opposition. The Irish bourgeoisie in turn could only establish its rule in the South to the extent that the working class was unable to advance its own perspective for social and economic emancipation.

Maintaining divisions in the working class is more important today than ever. The experience of the South shows that international investment can only be attracted by holding down wages, driving up productivity and slashing social spending to fund tax breaks to the major corporations. Cutting state expenditure in the North will mean laying whole areas of industry and public services to waste, and the South must respond in kind. The claim that the Agreement will bring prosperity for all will prove illusory, leading to widespread disaffection. The role of the sectarian politicians will be to channel social discontentment along the lines of fratricidal conflict.

Whether or not Blair and Ahern succeed in imposing a compromise formula on decommissioning agreeable to the Unionists and Republicans, none of the social and democratic issues confronting working people in Ireland will be resolved. For this, everything depends on the construction of a new socialist and internationalist leadership in the working class. The international unity of the working class and the elimination of all national divisions between peoples must be counterposed to both the Unionist's pro-imperialist politics and the failed Republican perspective for the capitalist development of Ireland.

Only a programme that guarantees the democratic rights of all and champions the goal of social equality--one which sets out to meet the universal requirements of working people for decent jobs, housing and healthcare--can overcome the bitter legacy of sectarianism and unite Catholics and Protestants on both sides of the border. This is the basis on which to construct an independent political movement of working people, in opposition to the self-interested manoeuvrings of the pro-business parties.



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