

Ulster Unionists boycott Assembly

Northern Ireland "peace process" in disarray

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Fifteen months after the Good Friday Agreement established the mechanism to devolve certain powers to an elected Northern Ireland Assembly, the "peace process" lies in disarray. On Monday, July 12, Britain's House of Commons began debating the devolution bill proposed by the Labour government. The intention was to rush this through Parliament, to be voted on the next day, and then receive the Royal Assent on Friday, July 16.

A "fail-safe" mechanism had been incorporated, promising the suspension of the Assembly if the IRA failed to decommission its weapons. The haste to get the bill passed was so great that this mechanism was not available for scrutiny by MPs.

These plans came to nothing when the six Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) MPs voted against the bill. The UUP worked directly with the Conservative opposition to call for an end to the prisoner release programme unless there was immediate decommissioning. Tuesday evening saw intense discussions between the Blair government and UUP leader David Trimble that resulted in an even more substantial unilateral rewriting of the Good Friday Agreement.

After the bill had been passed by the Commons, and prior to its passage through the House of Lords, the government proposed three amendments designed to enforce the disarming of the IRA on the basis of a timetable to be set by the De Chastelain Commission. If this was not adhered to, then the Executive would be suspended and the defaulting party named.

The UUP Executive rejected these proposals that same evening, after a meeting lasting just 15 minutes. Speaking afterwards Trimble said, "The executive's view remains unchanged. I have not sought nor will I seek a change in the party policy." Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams accused the government of making "a sop to Unionism". Irish Premier Bertie Ahern also expressed his disagreement with the new measures.

Thus the stage was set for the meeting of the Northern Ireland Assembly on Thursday, July 15, convened ostensibly to appoint the first power-sharing Executive since 1974. The event turned into a debacle and had to be called off when the UUP boycotted proceedings.

Had the UUP been present, the first item on the agenda would have been to debate a motion from the anti-Agreement Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Ian Paisley calling for Sinn Fein to be excluded from the Assembly for a year. Even without the UUP present, Paisley came within one vote of the motion being placed on the agenda for debate. As there were at least nine UUP Assembly Members who had pledged to vote against Trimble if he agreed to sit down with Sinn Fein prior to decommissioning, it was highly likely that one or more of them would have supported the DUP motion. This would itself have threatened the collapse of the Assembly.

In the absence of the UUP, the Presiding Officer said protocol still called for the parties present to make their nominations for Ministers to serve on the Executive. When it came to the DUP, Paisley refused, effectively bringing the meeting to a close. Under the terms of the Agreement, without the two main Unionist parties, the nominations for Ministers to the Executive did not meet the requirement for "cross-community" representation, so the Assembly meeting was declared null and void. Speaking afterwards, Paisley described events as "a good day" for Northern Ireland.

The Assembly's Deputy First Minister, Seamus Mallon of the nationalist Social and Democratic Labour Party (SDLP), resigned, accusing the UUP of using the crisis "to bleed more concessions out of the governments. To bleed this very process dry." Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams accused the Unionists of not being prepared to "share power with Catholics".

In the face of this crisis, British Prime Minister Tony Blair's only response was to declare that the Agreement was now "parked" until September, and to issue reassurances that the peace process goes on. A further round of talks are to be held with all parties concerned, in the hope that by the end of summer tempers will have cooled enough to get some form of agreement in place.

Last week's events provoked widespread disappointment on both sides of the Irish border amongst the vast majority of people who in the two referendums held last year had demonstrated overwhelming opposition to continued sectarian warfare. Such sentiments are understandable. But a viable way forward out of the quagmire of sectarian conflict is only possible when the real character of the Good Friday Agreement is understood.

The frantic round of behind-the-scenes manoeuvres last week demonstrated contempt for the democratic and social aspirations of the Irish people on the part of the Blair government. But this is nothing new. Since its inception, the peace process has consisted of many such secret discussions between the governments of Britain and the Irish Republic with the Unionist and Republican parties, under the stewardship of the Clinton administration. Their aim was to end armed conflict in the North in order to secure more favourable conditions for investment by the major international corporations that dominate the Irish economy.

To this end, the Unionist bourgeoisie in the North had to be persuaded to accept some form of power-sharing with Sinn Fein, and at least a nominal reform of the state machinery there, including the Royal Ulster Constabulary. In return, Sinn Fein and the IRA had to be persuaded to end their armed campaign and accept the Unionist veto over Irish unification.

Initially this seemed successful. The main unionist party, the UUP, endorsed the Agreement, along with the smaller parties based on the

loyalist paramilitary groups. The DUP was the largest unionist party opposing the Agreement, but just failed to win majority support amongst Protestant voters. Sinn Fein declared it would accept British rule until it was able to win a majority vote in the North for unification and promised to work for IRA decommissioning.

Aside from nebulous promises of peace and prosperity, however, the Agreement did nothing to address the social and democratic concerns of the Irish people, nor any of the issues that have given rise to decades of conflict. More than this; through the mechanism of a joint veto, the self-designated loyalist and nationalist parties would be able to determine all major issues that fell under the jurisdiction of the new Assembly. This constitutional framework served to enshrine the division of the Irish working class along religious lines inside the new mechanisms of the Northern state.

Far from allowing a progressive resolution of hostilities between loyalists and Republicans, the stage was set for internecine warfare over who would command the lion's share of political and economic influence within the new arrangements. The UUP knew that the British ruling class still relied on them to safeguard its interests in the North. They set out to secure either the complete disarming of the IRA, or to exclude Sinn Fein from the Assembly, giving them a form of limited home rule alongside the constitutional nationalists of the SDLP. The Sinn Fein leadership could not countenance a surrender of weapons by the IRA without ensuring that they would become part of the ruling elite, and insisted that decommissioning could only take place after the Assembly was established.

The situation was made worse by the Agreement's failure to end the constant threat of violence facing working people and its promotion of conflict between the officially designated "communities" over the allocation of resources. Trimble's UUP fared badly in the European elections in comparison with the DUP—securing only 119,000 first preference votes against the DUP's 192,000—a reversal of the balance of forces at the time of the Agreement. The struggle for influence in the Assembly has been accompanied by an intensification of the brutal turf war for command of the streets. On the segregated housing estates, the loyalists' terror organisations and the IRA have exerted an ever more oppressive control over their respective communities. Even within the loyalist areas, there is a bloody conflict between the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Red Hand Commandos on the one hand, and the Ulster Defence Association and Ulster Freedom Fighters.

Last week's collapse of the Assembly has served to highlight the fundamental weakness of the Labour government and its lack of perspective. Peace in Ireland was meant to be Blair's crowning glory. It has turned out to be his nightmare. Press commentary, even from sources supportive of both the peace process and the Blair government, has been sharply critical.

The Economist magazine, a leading business journal, concluded: "A few more months' reflection is unlikely to make a solution easier to find. The concern now is that Mr Blair's standing as the man who might push through a settlement has been seriously undermined. He has set and missed too many deadlines for any new ones—of his devising, at any rate—to command credibility. The idea that the Ulster Unionists would ultimately find it impossible to stand up to a charismatic prime minister has also been disproved."

The magazine went on to note that President Clinton also "no longer seems a plausible champion capable of dramatic intervention to save the deal."

To speak of Blair—a small man with a large ego—as "charismatic" indicates the extent to which he and his government have relied on the

media to create an aura of semi-infallibility around them. Even more dangerously, Blair himself gives every indication of believing his own PR. He went into Northern Ireland with the weight of the Clinton administration behind him to "sort things out". To this end, he gathered together the contending parties and told them they should now work by the new rules set down by the substantial business interests that dictate his own political agenda.

For months, he schmoozed and courted, cajoled and bullied, first the UUP, then Sinn Fein. He persuaded the Republicans to sign up to decommissioning by May 2000, only to privately assure the UUP that it would take place prior to that date. Once the referendums had sanctioned the Agreement, he was convinced that the contending parties would prove as compliant as his own Labour Party has been to his demands. He seemed sublimely ignorant of the character of the political forces he was dealing with, as he set four separate deadlines only to be rebuffed by parties who have a real constituency -- outside the press -- to which they are answerable. In neither case is this the mass of working people who voted for peace. For the Unionists it is the Protestant bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie—who are extremely unwilling to see their historic privileges infringed upon by the aspiring Catholic petty-bourgeois layers represented by Sinn Fein.

Blair's failure points to a fundamental political fact. There is no basis for overcoming sectarian divisions, let alone addressing the social and democratic problems facing Northern Ireland's people, without the active political intervention of the broad mass of working people.

The Good Friday agreement is, in essence, an attempt to economically refashion Ireland in the interests of big business. The British, Irish and American governments are all agreed that armed conflict and the highly militarised border between North and South are a major obstacle to taking advantage of Ireland's cheap and well-educated labour, and its potential as a platform for exporting goods into the European market. But they also know that a precondition for success is the ability to secure the most brutal levels of exploitation of Ireland's workers and to eliminate the extensive social provisions that still exist. Hence they have sought to constitutionally regulate the old political divisions between Catholics and Protestants, rather than eliminate them by reinforcing the stranglehold of the Unionist and Republican parties. The desired result has been to exclude the working class from any real say in the changes now taking place. Otherwise the danger would arise of the development of a unified social and political movement of Ireland's workers in defence of their common class interests—the need for decent jobs, healthcare, housing and democratic rights.

It is on these basic issues that workers, young people and critically-minded intellectuals must pronounce their own verdict on Blair's fraudulent peace process and all the parties engaged in it. They should then draw the appropriate conclusions—the need to construct a new internationalist and socialist party to represent the independent interests of the entire Irish working class, irrespective of religious differences.



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