

Blair fails to gain Unionists' backing

Talks confirm undemocratic character of Northern Ireland Agreement

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Five days of talks were held last week in an attempt to break the 14-month deadlock in the implementation of the Northern Ireland Agreement. British Prime Minister Tony Blair declared a "final deadline" of June 30 for the setting up of the Northern Ireland Assembly. He had hoped that this would coincide with the opening of the newly created Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, and crown the triumph of the Labour government's constitutional reforms.

However, no agreement could be reached because of the continued insistence by David Trimble's Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) that the IRA begin a hand-over of their weapons. The deadline came and went and the talks continued into this week.

Instead, a joint declaration by the British and Irish governments was presented, that was signed by no one. This reaffirmed that the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons would take place by May 2000, in accordance with the recommendations of the International Commission on Decommissioning. Ministers in the new Assembly (including Sinn Fein) would, in the meantime, be appointed by July 15, and power would be devolved to Northern Ireland. The announced Assembly will not meet, however, because it is on its summer recess.

The new elements introduced in the declaration have the character of an ultimatum. The decommissioning of weapons would actually begin "within a specified time" set by the International Commission. A "failsafe" clause then asserts that "if commitments under the Agreement are not met, either in relation to decommissioning or to devolution, they will automatically, and with immediate effect, suspend the operation of the institutions set up by the Agreement... The British Government will legislate to this effect."

The British and Irish governments had declared that the Agreement would set Northern Ireland on the path towards democracy and peace. They secured large majorities for it in the north and south and boasted that the "people have spoken". Then they held elections to the new Assembly. Now they baldly declare that they will scrap it if they do not get what they want.

In part, the deadlock reached last week is due to Blair's opportunist manoeuvres with the UUP over decommissioning. More broadly, however, it is a product of the web of deceit and evasions through which the British, Irish and American governments have sought to smooth the passage of the Northern Ireland Agreement.

In fact, there is no specific timetable for the decommissioning of weapons laid down in the Agreement that all parties signed up to. It states only that those within the Assembly "reaffirm their commitment to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations... within two years... of the agreement." But in order to secure the backing of the

Unionists, Blair sent a private letter to Trimble during the initial talks last year. This indicated that decommissioning should start after the Assembly elections last June, and that the procedures could be reviewed if they proved unsatisfactory. Trimble seized on the letter as a *de facto* amendment to the Agreement and demanded IRA decommissioning begin before Sinn Fein's Ministers were allowed into the new Executive.

Blair hopes that Trimble will be able to sell his new proposals to his party, but the UUP has so far rejected them. Trimble says that last Thursday the Prime Minister promised the Unionists that if the IRA failed to decommission Sinn Fein would be kicked out of the Assembly and the Executive and other devolved institutions would continue. Trimble would have had no problem with recommending this, as it would represent self-rule without power sharing. In contrast, the proposals Blair announced publicly speak of the "automatic suspension" of the Assembly as a whole.

That the Unionists have been able to dictate events and focus discussion almost exclusively on decommissioning is indicative of the Agreement's failure to substantially challenge the status quo. The British ruling class still relies on the Unionist bourgeoisie to secure its interests in the north and will not countenance any threat to this. At the end of the talks last week, Blair called his proposals a "challenge" for everyone: "For Republicans, it is to embrace exclusively the path of democracy and non violence. For Unionists it is to share power." At no stage in the peace process has Blair acknowledged that the roots of the violence in Ireland lay in the systematic denial of democratic rights to Catholics and violence against them by the Orange State and its sponsor, British imperialism. The rule of Unionism was maintained through the discriminatory provision of jobs, housing and social benefits to Protestants, based on subsidies from Britain. The almost exclusively Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the British Army oversaw all of this.

The forms of "self-rule" envisaged in the Agreement seek to preserve British hegemony over the north and ensure a continuing "Unionist veto" over any moves towards a united Ireland. In many respects it is identical to the proposals that created the abortive Stormont Assembly in 1972. The most significant shift is that Sinn Fein has now been persuaded to sign up to arrangements recognising the division of Ireland and to abandon its support for the 30-year armed campaign against British rule. For its part, the Southern Irish bourgeoisie gave up its constitutional claim to the six counties in return for the opportunity to operate cross border investments bodies.

During the latest round of talks, Gerry Adams issued a statement for

Sinn Fein declaring that, "We believe that all of us, as participants acting in good faith, could succeed in persuading those with arms to decommission them in accordance with the agreement. We agree that this should be in the manner set down by the Independent Commission on Decommissioning within the terms of the Good Friday agreement... conflict must be finished forever; it must be for all of us a thing of the past". Sinn Fein accepted that decommissioning should begin this autumn, with progress reports to the British and Irish governments.

Though this statement was not accepted by the UUP—because it did not come in the name of the IRA—Blair welcomed it as an "historic seismic shift in the landscape of Northern Ireland".

Following in the footsteps of other nationalist movements, like the African National Congress and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, the Sinn Fein leadership (and effectively the IRA) have declared their readiness to directly serve the interests of the major imperialist powers, in return for a seat in government. The key role in pushing Sinn Fein to accept the new arrangements was played by the Clinton administration, with the US being both the major investor in the Irish Republic and the main source of finance for the IRA.

Despite the widespread desire for peace, neither the Agreement, nor any of the parties that signed up to it, represent the interests of the broad mass of working people. It was motivated solely by the most pressing needs of big business. The development of globalised production and the rise of internationally mobile transnational corporations have exposed the inherent weaknesses of the northern Irish economy.

Whereas the Irish Republic has transformed itself into a cheap labour investment location for global companies seeking access to the European market, the north has been unable to do so. Its economy is still dominated by trade with Britain (50.1 percent), while the rest of the European Union makes up only 20.3 percent and the rest of the world only 17.7 percent. The remaining 11.9 percent consists of trade with the Republic. Northern Ireland's per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is significantly below that of all the other UK regions, at 80.4 percent of the UK average. The service sector makes up a massive 74 percent of all employment, a quarter of which is government services. This is paid for through subsidies from Britain on top of the massive costs of policing the militarised Province. Northern Ireland has the highest rate of long-term unemployment in the UK, at 47.6 percent of the total unemployed compared with 28.8 percent for Britain as a whole. Almost 52 percent of the long-term unemployed have been out of work for more than three years. An end to armed conflict is a prerequisite for overcoming this situation, along with the opening up of various cross-border economic initiatives with the South as set down in the Agreement.

Though it was necessary to end armed conflict on the streets in the interests of securing greater investment and trade, it was just as essential for the bourgeoisie that the sectarian divisions within the working class be maintained. The substantial vote in favour of the Agreement expressed a widespread desire to end 30 years of violent conflict and a growing disillusionment with sectarian politics among both Catholics and Protestants. This was used by the ruling powers to secure support for their proposals, but they are also acutely aware of the dangers posed by the undermining of the old parties and programs in the eyes of working people.

Divisions within the working class have historically played a vital role in securing imperialism's domination of Ireland and preventing a unified struggle by workers against the employers. Therefore every

aspect of the "peace process" is framed in terms claiming that the fundamental division in Ireland is one based on religion—a position constantly reinforced by the media. In order to prevent any possibility of a break from sectarian politics, the Northern Ireland Agreement stipulates that the new constitutional procedures rest upon a so-called "designation of identity", in which all members within the Assembly are registered as "Unionist", "Nationalist" or "Other". A majority is needed amongst both unionist and republican/nationalist parties before legislation can be enacted, thus giving them an effective veto and militating against the development of non-sectarian politics.

This has helped consolidate the grip of the sectarian parties. Sinn Fein's vote has increased fairly consistently since the "peace process" began, partly because of Adams' call for peace, but also because it portrays itself as the best defender of the interests of Catholics within the new arrangements. In the recent European elections in May, its vote increased from 9 percent (in 1994) to 17 percent. The unionist vote is more complex due to the creation of new parties like the United Kingdom Unionist Party and the Progressive Unionist Party. But the vast majority voted for either Unionist or nationalist parties (including the Social Democratic Labour Party) at the expense of the non-aligned parties.

There has been no end to sectarian violence. Killings and punishment beatings are a regular occurrence—although loyalist violence is given far less attention than that of the republicans. A significant shift is the extent to which terror is increasingly employed by the paramilitaries within their own respective communities—both to police rising social discontent and, when necessary, to deal with any expressions of political dissent.

Events of the past year have confirmed that the workers of Ireland, Catholic and Protestant, north and south, have been led down a blind alley. Almost three decades of conflict have ended in the strivings of a clique of self-serving politicians to take their place in an Executive that will enforce the dictates of the transnational corporations over the heads of working people.

The growth of both Sinn Fein, and the constitutional nationalists of the SDLP, was bound up with the abortion of the mass civil rights movement of the late 1960s. The official labour movement in both Britain and Ireland was incapable of challenging the systematic discrimination against Catholics and of advancing a socialist perspective capable of uniting the entire working class in defence of their common social and democratic rights. The struggle against the oppression of the minority Catholic population and imperialist domination in the north was thus diverted along the path of nationalist and petty bourgeois protest politics. Meanwhile, through a system of patronage, the Unionist bourgeoisie was able to maintain its hold on Protestant workers.

The working class of Ireland is still excluded from all genuine participation in the political process and is without any means to defend its independent interests. The progressive strivings towards peace and the desire to overcome the terrible social problems faced by all working people throughout Ireland requires the formation of a new political party, founded on the principles of socialist internationalism.



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