

Punishment beatings and forced exile thrive in Ireland's "imperfect peace"

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Some 16 months ago in referendums held north and south, the people of Ireland voted to support the Good Friday Agreement. Their overriding concern was to end the daily killing and maiming on the streets of Northern Ireland.

A week of political turmoil and ongoing violence in working class communities in the North of Ireland has revealed the illusory character of such hopes. What has been termed an “imperfect peace” in fact provides little peace for ordinary working people.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair is faced with growing demands, particularly from the Unionist camp, for the removal of Mo Mowlam as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) deputy leader John Taylor threatened to boycott ex-US Senator George Mitchell's review of the Good Friday Agreement scheduled to begin Monday. UUP leader David Trimble said he may refuse to engage in bilateral meetings with Sinn Fein, and called for a postponement of the review.

The UUP's hardened stance comes after last week's ruling by Mowlam that the Irish Republican Army (IRA) cease-fire was still intact, despite reports of widespread punishment beatings and the murder of Charles Bennett. Unionists condemned Mowlam's decision to continue the early release of IRA prisoners under the Sentences Act. While stopping short of demanding Sinn Fein's expulsion from the Northern Ireland Assembly, they demanded some form of sanctions against the IRA.

Mowlam's decision reflects the letter of the Good Friday Agreement, which provides for Sinn Fein involvement in the Assembly if there is a cessation of IRA military activity against the armed forces, the Royal Ulster Constabulary and on the British mainland. She has, in effect, concluded that the recent actions carried out by the IRA were against civilian not military targets and can be classified as “internal housekeeping”.

Sections of the British ruling class and the

Unionists—led by the pro-Conservative *Daily Telegraph* in Britain and the unionist *Belfast Telegraph*—have used this decision to mount a campaign designed to destabilise the Agreement and marginalise Sinn Fein.

This began with the leaking by the *Belfast Telegraph*, on the day of Mowlam's announcement, of proposals from the Blair government for the reform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). The crocodile tears now being shed by the Unionists and sections of the Conservative Party in Britain over expulsions and punishment beatings of Catholic workers have the same political end. The media reports drawing attention to the IRA's ordering of seven youth to leave Northern Ireland under threat of death have been used as a stick with which to beat the Blair government.

The pro-Agreement press initially took Mowlam's side, but quickly fell in behind the Unionists' demands. The pro-Labour *Independent* ran an editorial headlined: “If Mo Mowlam has lost the trust of the Unionists, she has to go”. It concluded, “Mowlam is a spent force who has shown an increasingly open sympathy for the Republican side”.

Mowlam's position is not dictated by sympathy for Republicanism, but recognition that without keeping both the Unionists and Sinn Fein on board, then there is no Good Friday Agreement. The problem now faced by the Blair government is that the attempt to incorporate Sinn Fein into new mechanisms of rule in Northern Ireland may yet be rejected by the Unionist bourgeoisie and its long-time allies.

The Good Friday Agreement never made an issue of ending the practice of punishment beatings, expulsions and murders. Instead, it sought to incorporate the paramilitaries not only into the political establishment, but also into the policing of Northern Ireland. The leaked documents on RUC reform included proposals to recruit more Catholics into the RUC and sanction the use of private security firms in policing local areas. Such firms

would undoubtedly employ former paramilitaries.

Punishment beatings and expulsions have continued unabated since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, without provoking undue concern on the part of the political establishment. Some 385 people have been forcibly exiled by the IRA and 372 by loyalist paramilitary groups.

Between 1994 and 1995, the first full year after the cease-fire, the number of punishment attacks by the IRA increased fourfold, from 32 to 141. Moreover, while the Conservative Party has condemned Mowlam for not taking sanctions against the IRA/Sinn Fein, they choose to ignore the ongoing violence from the loyalist camp. Last weekend alone, three men were severely injured in loyalist punishment attacks. The Ulster Defence Association has also been blamed for two separate pipe-bomb attacks in Larne, Co. Antrim, in which the brother of Social Democratic Labour Party Assembly member Danny O'Connor was targeted.

The regular practice of targeting petty criminals by both Republican and loyalist paramilitaries continues, but increasingly punishment beatings and exile are the favoured methods of asserting political control over the local population.

Amongst those subjected to attack and exile in the past month are a South Armagh couple and their two children, told to leave by Republicans because they were in a mixed marriage; a Catholic couple from Larne ordered out by a loyalist gang; a Protestant family petrol bombed by loyalists for refusing to pay protection money; several men and women exiled for owing loyalists drug money; a 15-year-old boy ordered out for getting into a playground fight with the son of a Republican; a woman ordered out for ending a relationship with a Republican; a family of seven exiled by Republicans after the father fought in a pub; a family of four exiled after a fight with a Republican. Loyalists cut the throat of a boy aged 17 because his father had fought one of their members.

Even at this most basic level, the promise that the Agreement would bring peace has been refuted. For those in the working class neighbourhoods of Northern Ireland, Catholic and Protestant, the danger remains of being beaten up, exiled or even killed, and may have actually increased. This points to the more fundamental question: whose interests are represented in the so-called "peace process"?

Though no one wishes to see a return to the situation that preceded it, the Agreement can offer nothing progressive for ordinary working people. It is an attempt

to defend the basic strategic concerns of big business in Ireland.

The political leaders of Britain, Ireland and the United States were anxious to bring an end to military hostilities, in order to facilitate greater investment by the transnational corporations and end the high cost of Britain's military/police commitment. But every other aspect of the Agreement seeks to perpetuate the traditional sectarian divisions between Catholics and Protestants that have been so vital throughout history in preventing the emergence of a political challenge to the interests of capitalist rule in Ireland.

To this end, the fiction has been created that by incorporating both Sinn Fein and the Unionists into a devolved Assembly the interests of the Catholic and Protestant "communities" are represented. Political life in Ireland is defined in terms of cultural or religious divisions, rather than the opposing interests of the bourgeoisie and the working class.

Neither Sinn Fein nor the Unionist parties represents the social and democratic interests of Ireland's working people. Unionism, in all its various forms, is a pro-capitalist current whose attachment to the United Kingdom is a specific manifestation of its defence of the profit system and the continued exploitation of the working class.

For its part, the IRA/Sinn Fein emerged as a movement of the excluded Catholic petty bourgeoisie. Its anti-imperialism, though shrouded in vaguely socialist phraseology, never extended beyond the call for the creation of an independent capitalist Ireland. Today, even this has been abandoned. Sinn Fein's one aim is to seek entry into a governmental set-up that accepts Irish partition, in return for a share in the spoils of power.

The Agreement was supposed to give the people of the North of Ireland at least partial control over their own destiny, yet politics is still largely determined by the machinations of various factions within the British bourgeoisie. The only change from the past, when Unionism held undisputed sway over the North, is that Sinn Fein is now offering itself up to corporate concerns in Britain, the US and Europe as an alternative vehicle through which to advance their interests.



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