

Widespread disturbances in Northern Ireland sparked by hardline Unionists

Julie Hyland
13 July 2000

Violent disturbances in Northern Ireland continued yesterday for the eleventh consecutive day as the Protestant Orange Order held July 12 celebrations marking the victory of King William of Orange over the Catholic James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690.

Shops and businesses were forced to close early for the second day running by Protestant extremists protesting the ban on contentious Orange Order parades through Catholic areas. The Orange Order is a 75,000-strong body named after King William. On Monday Loyalist extremists had blockaded 125 main roads, closing down entire cities and towns. As bonfires were lit for traditional eleventh-night celebrations on Tuesday, disturbances in predominantly Protestant neighbourhoods continued, including confrontations between youth and security forces, carjackings and petrol bomb explosions.

The British army, back on street patrol in Northern Ireland for the first time since 1998, and the largely Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) fired plastic bullets and used water cannon and armoured vehicles to break up some of the protests. Trouble broke out in other towns, including Carrickfergus, Lurgan and Ballynahinch.

The RUC said that 57 members of the security forces have been injured over the last week and 146 arrests made. There had been 288 petrol bombings, in which 77 homes and 55 businesses were damaged. So far, the only death to result from the disturbances has been that of a Protestant man, said to be the result of a dispute between rival loyalist terror groups.

The protests have focussed on the ban on the Drumcree Orange Order parade in Portadown, County Armagh. The Orangemen claim that it is their “civil and religious right” to conduct their parade celebrating Protestant ascendancy along the Garvaghy Road, a largely Catholic neighbourhood. The Drumcree march has been a flashpoint for confrontations since 1997 when the Parades Commission—a body set up to regulate disputes between Protestants and Catholics over the yearly marches—banned the Orangemen from marching this route. Portadown is considered the centre of hardline Unionism and since 1972, 10 Catholics have been killed on the 200-yard stretch of road that forms the town centre.

The 1997 parade was eventually allowed through after days of Loyalist violence, but it was blocked again in 1998 and

dispersed last year as the British and Irish governments sought to push through the Good Friday Agreement establishing power-sharing institutions in the North.

Orange hardliners have been holding a sit-in on Drumcree Hill since 1998, and attempt to undertake their march each July 9. This year, security forces erected a 20-foot high steel and concrete barrier across the Garvaghy Road to prevent the march and mounted a major show of strength. Some 2,000 extra British troops have been drafted into the North specifically for the annual parades.

Orange hardliners had called for protests throughout Northern Ireland in response. At a 1,500-strong Orange rally held at Drumcree on July 2, one speaker proclaimed, “The war starts today.” In addition to disturbances that evening in Drumcree, street riots also broke out in several predominantly poor Protestant neighbourhoods around Belfast. Loyalist extremists have been able to establish a presence in such areas by manipulating sectarian and social tensions, running drug supplies and carrying out brutal reprisals against anyone who gets in their way.

The scale of unrest, which saw running battles between Protestant youth and the RUC, drew an alarmed reaction from many representatives of the clergy, mainstream Unionists and business leaders. Presbyterian Moderator Dr. Trevor Morrow warned that the protests were not under the control of those that had called them and demanded the Orange Order call off the action. The Grand Orange Lodge issued a statement condemning the violence and Archbishop Dr. Robin Eames said that nothing could justify assaults on the RUC, especially when Unionists were seeking to protect the force from review under the Good Friday Agreement.

The main pro-British Protestant Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the smaller Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), which sit in the Northern Ireland Assembly, condemned the violence. The power-sharing arrangements established by the Agreement, and those Unionists who have supported them, are the main target of the protests.

This was underlined by the joint appearance at Drumcree of paramilitary gunmen from the anti-Agreement Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF) and former Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) leader Johnny “Mad Dog” Adair. Jailed for directing

terrorism in 1995, but paroled under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, Adair has boasted that he killed at least 20 Catholics.

The anti-Agreement Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), led by Ian Paisley, has also been prominent in the Drumcree protests. Its two ministers in the Assembly have sought to introduce a series of wrecking motions aimed at undermining the position of David Trimble, UUP leader and the Assembly's First Minister.

A longstanding, former hardline Orangeman, Trimble came to prominence for leading previous stand-offs between Unionists and the Parades Commission at Drumcree. He has subsequently played a key role in bringing the UUP into the Agreement and facilitating the establishment of the power-sharing structures. Hardline Unionists see this as a betrayal. The UUP itself is deeply divided over the Agreement, and Trimble only just survived a leadership challenge by anti-power-sharing Unionists within his own party in May.

The fragility of Trimble's leadership is a serious threat to the new arrangements. It was only his narrow victory in the leadership challenge that enabled Britain to restore limited devolved authority to the Assembly.

On July 4, the DUP presented a motion to the Assembly for the removal of Sinn Fein's two ministers from the body's ruling executive. The motion had no chance of success, since under the "cross community" provisions of the Assembly it would also have required the support of a majority within the Irish nationalist parties, Sinn Fein and the Social Democratic Labour Party. However, it did win the backing of a majority of Unionist Assembly delegates—32 out of a possible 58—when two members of the UUP, Derek Hussey and Roy Beggs Jr., voted in support.

These divisions reflect the competing interests of the various Unionist factions. Trimble's stance is that of the majority of the Protestant bourgeoisie, who support the Agreement. Faced with increased competition from the South and declining subsidies from Britain, they regard the new arrangements as the only means of maintaining their privileged position and political influence in the North.

In conjunction with the British, Irish and US governments, they are anxious to end the sectarian conflict so as to make Northern Ireland an attractive location for corporate investors. Significant concessions by Sinn Fein, including its recent display of decommissioned weapons, had convinced the pro-Agreement forces that this was a real possibility. The threat to this agenda now appears to come from within the Unionist camp.

Business leaders rounded on the Protestant extremists. Roy Baillie, chairman of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, said the Drumcree events had "effectively wrecked" their plans for the next two years. Deputy director of the Confederation of British Industry in Northern Ireland, Deirdre Stewart, complained that it would be much more difficult to "get

companies to even consider Northern Ireland as a possible investment site." Northern Ireland's Trade Minister Sir Reg Empey has said a visit by leading US executives to discuss investment in the North had been called off due to the disturbances.

RUC Chief Constable Sir Ronnie Flanagan also condemned the "very evil people" on the extreme fringes of Loyalism that had attacked his officers. Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams took a similar approach, appealing to "civic Unionism" and the business community to "stand up" against the extremists. For the British government, Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Mandelson stated that, faced with any threats, "the security forces will respond accordingly. They have the resources and they have my full support."

Unionist opponents of the Agreement are led by forces drawn from religious fundamentalists and represent those layers whose privileges depend on their role either in the state forces and local government—now facing review and cut backs—in the agricultural sector or who are directly involved in the terror groups that control entire neighbourhoods.

Divisions are not confined to the Unionists. A car bomb explosion 15 miles from Drumcree, which damaged an RUC station and a number of buildings, was attributed to the anti-Agreement splinter group, the Real IRA.

The hardline loyalists do not enjoy popular support. There is widespread hostility and resentment amongst both Protestant and Catholic workers to their activities, and many opt to leave Northern Ireland during the marching season. Attendance at this year's Drumcree protest was significantly down—from 10,000 in the mid-1990s to less than 2,000.

Despite their isolation, the sectarianism is still able to exert significant pressure because the Good Friday Agreement has neither addressed the historic roots of Northern Ireland's "troubles" nor provided any means of resolving longstanding issues of democratic rights and social inequality. In place of the genuine, mass participation of working people, both Catholic and Protestant, in jointly shaping their own futures, the Assembly is a vehicle for rival loyalist and nationalist parties to compete for the backing of big business interests in Britain, Ireland and the US. The current deployment of the British Army and RUC may be directed against Unionist "wreckers", but the target in future will more than likely be workers seeking to oppose this essentially undemocratic set-up.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact