

Sectarian riots in Northern Ireland

Chris Talbot
26 June 2001

A Protestant loyalist gang attacked Catholic homes in Belfast, Northern Ireland with paint bombs and stones on Sunday night. Elsewhere in the city, fireworks were thrown at a house and a petrol bomb was thrown at police, who also reported sporadic stone throwing throughout the Ardoyne area. The latest incidents follow three nights of rioting last week in north Belfast.

Said to be the worse disturbances in the city since 1998, the riots appear to have begun when loyalist youths (who support the continued union of Northern Ireland with Britain) hurled abuse and threw stones at children and their parents on the way to a Catholic school. Holy Cross Girls' Primary School is just inside a loyalist area that borders on the mainly Catholic and pro-Irish nationalist Ardoyne district. Mrs. Anne Tanney, headmistress at the school, said, "We've had incidents in the area over the last 30 years, but never during the day when the children are here."

Fighting then erupted between rival loyalist and nationalist gangs of stone-throwing youths. Later, hundreds of youths from both sides turned against the police, throwing heavy missiles as well as over a hundred petrol bombs and paint bombs. There has been a build-up to the conflict for some time in this part of the city, which contains 13 of Belfast's 17 "peace lines" dividing Protestant and Catholic areas. More than 600 people have been killed in this small area in the course of several decades of sectarian conflict.

Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) chief Sir Ronnie Flanagan blamed loyalist paramilitaries for orchestrating the violence, calling the rioters "murderous scum". Over 60 police officers were injured in the clashes in the Ardoyne area. Soldiers were also deployed on the streets to support the RUC operation.

Known paramilitaries were present in the crowds on both sides. But according to the *Irish Times*, leading IRA men were seen restraining the youths on the nationalist side.

Local police superintendent Roger Maxwell said, "There is some indication that there is a degree of

orchestration by loyalist paramilitaries. The majority of the missiles came from the Protestant community last night, although there were some attacks on police from members of the nationalist community." A report in the nationalist *Irish News* claimed that five cars filled with members of the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF), a loyalist paramilitary group, went into the area and were later seen amongst the loyalist crowds.

A number of shots were fired at the police, who retaliated by firing rounds of a new type of plastic bullets, L21 A1, said to be potentially lethal. Security forces are now gearing up in preparation for July's marching season, an occasion to flaunt Protestant supremacy when loyalists march to celebrate the victory of William of Orange in 1690. Fighting is particularly likely at the notorious trouble spot of Drumcree, scene of bitter conflicts in recent years when police have stopped loyalists marching down the predominantly Catholic Garvaghy Road. There are reports of secret contacts between the Orange Order organisers of the marches and loyalist paramilitary groups.

The RUC has shipped in two Belgian water cannon and the British army is sending an additional 2,000 soldiers, bringing its troop level to 15,200.

Further intervention by loyalist paramilitaries seeking to whip up sectarian conflict is increasingly likely in an attempt to undermine the institutions set up by the Good Friday Agreement of 1997. The larger vote received by the anti-Agreement Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in the British general election has given a boost to those sections of the unionist hierarchy who regard acceptance of limited power sharing with the nationalists/republicans under devolved rule as a betrayal of the union with Britain. In the election in North Belfast, Nigel Dodds, a well-known leader of the Democratic Unionists, defeated the previous Ulster Unionist MP.

Suspension of the institutions set up under the Good Friday Agreement—the Northern Ireland Assembly and power-sharing Executive—is possible if First Minister David Trimble, leader of the pro-Agreement Ulster

Unionists, carries out his threat to resign on July 1. Trimble has said he would resign if the IRA refused to decommission its weapons by the end of June.

In May last year, the IRA agreed to put its weaponry “beyond use” and allow international inspectors to examine a number of its arms bunkers, but this has not satisfied the Ulster Unionists. Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, which has two cabinet ministers in the Executive, has been placed under pressure to decommission, not only from the Unionists and the British government, but also from the Irish government and the moderate nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP).

Having lost five of his party’s nine seats in the general election—three to the DUP and two to Sinn Fein—Trimble is threatened not only by Ian Paisley’s Democratic Unionists, but also by anti-Agreement hardliners in his own ranks. He kept his leadership of the Ulster Unionist Party at the annual general meeting last weekend. However, he was forced to bring his main anti-Agreement opponent, Jeffrey Donaldson, into the negotiating team taking part in talks with the British and Irish governments, which will make any compromise unlikely.

So far there has been no movement in talks on any of the contentious issues affecting devolved government in Northern Ireland. As well as IRA decommissioning, these were supposed to include reform of the RUC to increase the representation of Catholics in the overwhelmingly Protestant police force. In fact, the proposed Police Service of Northern Ireland will be so little changed that even the SDLP are opposed to it.

It was also agreed that “demilitarisation”—a reduction of the British army presence and its replacement by the police—would take place. Yet the minimal changes to the RUC have resulted in demoralisation and hundreds of resignations, giving rise to an increase in British troop numbers.

Meanwhile, First Minister Trimble has banned Sinn Fein ministers from taking part in meetings with the Dublin government.

Sinn Fein are strongly in favour of continuing the Good Friday Agreement. Not only has it brought them political office and financial rewards, but they also accept the rationale behind the accord—that the development of the North depends on attracting investment and utilising Northern Ireland’s pool of cheap labour, following the pattern of the Irish Republic.

Largely because of demographic changes—a higher nationalist youth vote—Sinn Fein for the first time

received more votes than the SDLP in the British general election held earlier this month. Sinn Fein has refused to move further on decommissioning, fearing loss of face among its supporters.

Fears over the collapse of the Northern Ireland Assembly have been strongly voiced by the business community. “The companies that have invested here have done very well and continue to reinvest... our real issue is an image problem”, said Nigel Smyth of the Northern Ireland branch of the Confederation of British Industry, pointing to “uncertainty in the political situation” as the biggest problem faced by big business.

Smyth said thousands of new jobs had been created over the last period, mainly in the software and telecom area. The investment has resulted from the low wages paid as well as tax breaks from the British government. But there has been a simultaneous decline in jobs in areas such as textiles and shipbuilding, where traditionally many Protestant workers found employment.

Anxious to maintain the Good Friday institutions, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his Irish counterpart, Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, will be holding crisis talks this week with the leaders of the unionist and nationalist/republican parties. US involvement will be much lower key than under the Clinton administration, with State Department Director of Policy Planning Richard Haass visiting Belfast to hold discussions with the various parties. President Bush has banned paramilitary groups from raising funds in the US, a move that was favourably received by the unionists.

Even if a last minute deal is negotiated, it can hardly bring stability to a political set-up that has enshrined sectarian divisions within its institutions. With the support of the governments in London, Dublin and Washington, the political concerns of ordinary working people in Northern Ireland are constantly channelled through the nationalist and unionist parties, preserving religious divisions and, above all, impeding the growth of a united movement of Catholic and Protestant workers pursuing their common social interests.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact