

Northern Ireland: IRA decommissions arms

Mike Ingram
25 October 2001

On the eve of today's deadline for the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the possible collapse of the Good Friday Agreement, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) finally began decommissioning its weapons.

A statement issued by the IRA on Tuesday October 23 said, "In order to save the peace process we have implemented the scheme agreed with the IICD [International Independent Commission on Decommissioning] in August."

Within three hours of the IRA statement, the IICD said: "We have now witnessed an event which we regard as significant, in which the IRA has put a quantity of arms completely beyond use. The material in question includes arms, ammunition and explosives." The IICD statement gave no further details, saying that to do so "would not further the process of putting all arms beyond use."

This came after simultaneous statements in Belfast and New York by Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, the two main leaders of the IRA's political wing, Sinn Fein.

Speaking in Belfast, Adams said: "Martin McGuinness and I have also held discussions with the IRA and we have put to the IRA the view that if it could make a groundbreaking move on the arms issue that this could save the peace process from collapse and transform the situation."

In his remarks, Adams said, "Genuine Republicans will have concerns about such a move," but rubbished "The nay-sayers, the armchair generals and the begrudgers, and the enemies of Irish republicanism and of the peace process, [who] will present a positive IRA move in disparaging terms."

Addressing Republican critics of disarmament, he added, "Others will say that the IRA has acted under pressure. But everyone else knows that the IRA is not an organisation that bows to pressure or which moves on British or unionist terms."

Adams' rhetoric notwithstanding, the statement issued Tuesday was a direct result of the systematic pressure placed upon the Republicans by the Unionists and the British and Irish governments to end the impasse over arms' decommissioning. Adams chose to maintain a diplomatic silence about the one pressure group, which, above all, had precipitated the move—the Bush administration in the United States—in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington.

The new political structures set-up by the Good Friday Agreement had seemed closer to collapse than at any time since it was signed in April 1998. Assembly First Minister David Trimble and five other Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) members of the Executive had resigned last Thursday, citing the failure of the IRA to decommission its weapons. The resignations were post-dated until the end of this week, however, giving Trimble time to reconsider his position in the event of a move on the part of the IRA.

Trimble's brinkmanship was aimed at placing maximum pressure

upon Sinn Fein/IRA to come up with the goods on decommissioning; the implicit threat being that if the Assembly collapses then hard line anti-Agreement Unionists would gain the upper hand. Sinn Fein had to comply with the Ulster Unionist Party's demands, or the Assembly would collapse and it would instead be dealing with Ian Paisley's hardline Democratic Unionist Party.

It has never been principally a question of if the IRA would decommission, but when. Among Irish nationalists there were serious reservations about disarming, particularly given the pro-Protestant nature of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the continuing threat from Loyalist paramilitaries. Moreover, the IRA arms caches were considered to be an invaluable bargaining chip in Sinn Fein's negotiations with the British government on issues such as policing and the participation of Sinn Fein in cross-border political bodies. But having explicitly accepted the Assembly as the legitimate government in the North, the IRA could not indefinitely maintain their own military capacity.

The statements by the Sinn Fein leadership are interesting for a number of reasons.

Firstly, they seek to present decommissioning as an initiative by the Republicans, which shows the IRA to be "an example of a people's army, in touch with the people, responsive to their needs" and themselves as earnestly seeking "to replace conflict and strife with genuine partnership and equality."

Secondly, Adams speaks of his desire to turn what has been a "crisis-driven process" into a "people-centred movement towards a democratic peace settlement."

And finally, he baldly asserts, "Irish Republicans hold that the British connection is the source of all our political ills."

These propositions should be considered carefully.

Any informed follower of Irish political affairs knows full well that the major impetus for IRA decommissioning came from the US. Indeed, the past few years have stripped Sinn Fein of any pretence of being an independent political force. Ever since efforts to arrive at a new political settlement in Northern Ireland began, Sinn Fein has sought to recast itself in the role of a favoured political representative of American imperialism.

Washington's political interests in Northern Ireland have grown as it has superseded Britain as the dominant economic power throughout the entire island. In addition to the dominance of North American companies in the Irish Republic, they also made up 52 of the 152 overseas companies operating in Northern Ireland in 1997. This compares with 47 from the United Kingdom, 14 from the rest of Europe, 13 from the Irish Republic and 10 each from Asia/Pacific and Germany. It is in order to safeguard these interests and establish new ones that the Clinton administration became intimately involved in the setting up of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Throughout the whole "peace process", the American ruling class has sought to bolster Sinn

Fein as its own counterweight to Britain's proxy, the Unionists.

In recent weeks, however, relations between Sinn Fein and Washington became strained, especially following the arrest of three alleged IRA men in Colombia on charges of providing military training to the Farc guerrilla movement, which opposes the US client regime in Bogota. One of those arrested was Sinn Fein's representative in Cuba, Niall Connolly. Adams made the ridiculous claim that Connolly's appointment had been made without his knowledge or the authorisation of the international department of Sinn Fein.

Most significantly, the September 11 bombings of the World Trade Center in New York, and the subsequent war against Afghanistan unleashed by the US has changed the whole context of Northern Irish politics. From that point, the Bush administration made clear that they would no longer sanction Sinn Fein/IRA's radical nationalist posturing, which had become an embarrassment at a time when an "international war against terrorism" had been proclaimed. Washington will have told the IRA in no uncertain terms to carry out decommissioning as anticipated in the Good Friday Agreement, and that Sinn Fein should start behaving like the grown-up bourgeois party it purports to be.

As Adams admits, the so-called "peace process" has never assumed the character of a "people-centred movement towards a democratic peace settlement", and nor could it. Its entire purpose was to develop the new political structures necessary to ensure a stable environment in what has become a potentially lucrative investment platform for those seeking access to the European market. From the start, the working class has been excluded from the political process. Instead the imperialist powers and the Irish bourgeoisie have sought to bring the Nationalist and Unionist parties into government, to control the working class, while maintaining the old sectarian divisions that have prevented any effective social and political opposition to the profit system from emerging.

Sinn Fein frequently advances itself as a socialist party, but this is belied by its strenuous efforts to rescue the Good Friday Agreement at all costs. Adam's claim that the "British connection" is the root of all evil is a flimsy cover for Sinn Fein's pro-capitalist politics. While maintaining the pretence that the peace process is simply a means to an end, or a stage in the struggle for a united Ireland, the Republicans have accepted a settlement that was drawn up to maintain the strategic interests of big business. Behind their opposition to the "British connection", the Republicans say nothing about the role of the Irish bourgeoisie and of US imperialism in perpetuating the brutal exploitation of the working class, Catholic and Protestant alike.

Wherever nationalist movements have emerged from disaffected layers of the radical petty bourgeoisie—whether in the Middle East, Africa or Ireland, and even when they have won power—have proved themselves incapable of establishing any genuine independence from imperialism. Instead such nationalist forces invariably align themselves with one or other imperialist power, as the local overseers of the exploitation of their country's resources and the labour of the working class.

Sinn Fein says the conditions are being created for the transition to a new society. In reality, what London refers to as the "normalisation" of the situation in Northern Ireland means the creation of a capitalist government, steeped in sectarianism and presiding over a conflict-ridden society in which the working class are offered up as cheap labour to international capital.

The signing of the Good Friday Agreement has produced no let up

in sectarian violence. It reinforces the idea that it is not fundamental class divisions which mark Irish society north and south—with working people sharing a common class interest—but mutually hostile religious communities, which must compete for scarce resources by championing the sectarian parties.

IRA decommissioning will not satisfy the more extreme forces within Unionism. Paisley claimed that a "dirty deal" had been struck between Sinn Fein and the government. "There is no talk about the end of the battle, the war being over, no talk of the war being over," he blustered. Paisley insists he will not be satisfied, even if General de Chastelain—head of the decommissioning body—has said that decommissioning has started.

While the IRA's move was welcomed by Trimble, who said he would seek the backing of his party over the weekend to resume its place in the Assembly, Jeffrey Donaldson, a leading UUP figure opposed to power-sharing said, "We will need urgent answers from General de Chastelain about key questions. If it's a one-off gesture then that presents problems for Unionism."

Loyalist paramilitaries, meanwhile, have given no indication that they will follow the IRA in destroying their weapons. As the events of this week were unfolding, two Catholic schoolgirls aged eight and 11 were taken to hospital following a Loyalist attack. The 11-year-old suffered shrapnel wounds and the other extensive shock, after a pipe bomb thrown by Loyalist thugs exploded in front of them. Just hours before, a 24-year-old Protestant man was shot in the chest as he walked home. These are only the latest in a series of sectarian attacks, throughout Belfast.

For the past three-and-a-half years, the working class has been presented with a false choice of either the power-sharing Assembly or a return to "The Troubles". To avoid a return to violence, working people are supposed to accept the unchallenged domination of the Unionists and Republicans over their respective populations.

The prerequisite for a progressive resolution to the problems of Northern Ireland is the active involvement of the mass of ordinary working people in the political process. Decisions concerning the political and constitutional framework of the North cannot be left to the representatives of British, Irish and US imperialism. The establishment of a truly democratic form of government throughout Ireland requires a new party of the Irish working class. This new party must take as its standpoint the perspective of socialist internationalism, seeking to unite working people throughout Ireland with their class brothers and sisters internationally.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact