Sectarian divisions widen in Northern Ireland

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7 January 2002

A report issued by the Royal Geographical Society finds that sectarian divisions have worsened since the so-called "peace process" began in Northern Ireland.

In the first analysis of the 2001 census, the Society notes that the segregation of Catholics and Protestants in Belfast has grown significantly since the IRA ceasefire of 1994. According to figures compiled by Dr Peter Shirlow of the University of Ulster, Coleraine, an estimated two-thirds of the population in Northern Ireland now live in areas where residents are either 90 percent Protestant or 90 percent Roman Catholic.

Some 62 percent of residents in areas that are seperated by so-called "peace walls", usually consisting of brick or barbed-wire, consider relations to have deteriorated. 68 percent of people aged 18 to 25 have never had a meaningful conversation with anyone of the other religious denomination, and 62 percent have been victims of physical or verbal sectarian abuse since the IRA ceasefire, according to Shirlow.

Despite widespread support for the ceasefire, only one in five people would take a job on the other side of a peace wall, and just five percent of Catholics and eight percent of Protestants work in an area dominated by the other denomination. In both groups, a majority refuses to use shops, doctors' surgeries, leisure centres and job centres in what they perceive to be the "wrong" area, even when those facilities would be more convenient.

The survey found a marked difference between age groups, with pensioners far more likely to have relations with those from the other denomination, or to cross a peace line to use facilities. This is attributed in part to the fact they feel themselves less likely to be targeted, but also due to relations built up prior to 1968 when the "Troubles" began.

Shirlow told reporters, "The whole peace process is basically a folly for these people. There have been benefits in the suburbs and rural areas—better jobs, the possibility of higher incomes, greater stability—but in other areas conflict is still being reproduced in the same way as for the last 30 years. If people can't even move within the city and accept work where they wish, where is the peace dividend? If you take away the political deaths, the level of violence has actually increased."

Sectarian tensions, he said, were worsening, because both Catholics and Protestants perceived themselves as victims, while refusing to acknowledge that the other had also suffered.

The picture painted by Shirlow is supported by figures from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive: These show that while 3,000 people, mainly Catholics, moved into areas dominated by the other denomination between 1994 to 1996, when optimism about an end to the violence was high, in the five years since 1996 some 6,000 families have moved back to their own communities because of intimidation.

"When 1994 came, people said they were so glad it was over and many then tried to go to places they hadn't been for 20 or 30 years—pubs, parks and shops on the other side of the divide," a Belfast Protestant married to a Roman Catholic told the *Times*. "But they were spat at, sworn at, and a new narrative emerged on both sides. It was, 'They don't want us, they don't treat us fairly, they won't let us be part of their community'."

Shirlow began his study after the Northern Ireland Office denied that there was increasing sectarianism. His team interviewed 4,800 people from 12 Belfast estates, six Protestant and six Catholic.

Shirwood calls for the setting up of some kind of "experience commission", where people with similar experience from both sides of the religious divide could share their knowledge. "Currently Catholics see themselves as victims of loyalists and the British state, loyalists see themselves as victims of republicans and now the British state. We have to show they are both

victims and perpetrators," he said.

Though probably well-meaning, this type of psychological approach does not explain why sectarian tensions have increased since the start of the so-called "peace-process".

The results of the survey confirm the inherent failure of the April 1998 Good Friday Agreement to resolve the sectarian conflict in the North. Far from providing a basis for ending sectarianism, the Agreement has enshrined sectarian divisions in the new political structures it introduced. Parties in the "power-sharing" Northern Ireland Assembly are defined as either Unionist/loyalist, Nationalist/republican, or "other". Those refusing to define themselves in sectarian terms are effectively sidelined, since all key decisions require a majority within both camps.

Sectarianism has become the semi-official mechanism through which the different communities are forced to compete for ever-dwindling resources.

The British, Irish and American bourgeoisies framed the Agreement in order to meet the demands of global finance capital. The primary aim was to create more favourable conditions for investment in the North, as well as the South, by bringing an end to the "Troubles," which had deterred potential investors for decades, with working people on both sides of the present border being offered up to the transnational corporations as cheap labour.

However, a particularly divisive role is being played by those parties and groups opposed to the Agreement, who are determined to whip up sectarian hostilities in order to put an end to "power sharing". Interestingly, the two single factors highlighted in the report concerning the reluctance of families to move into areas dominated by the other religion both involve hardline loyalist attacks upon Catholics.

Since 1996, the battle at Drumcree church has been the result of provocative demands from the loyalist Orange Order to be allowed to march through what has become an increasingly Catholic area. Orange protests were frequently accompanied by attacks on Catholic homes in the area mounted by the Ulster Defence Association.

Similarly, the other incident cited as being most significant in reversing population shifts is the conflict between the Catholic Ardoyne and Protestant Upper Ardoyne areas of Belfast last autumn. Unionist/loyalist forces opposed to the Agreement targeted Holy Cross primary school in an attempt to embarrass Sinn Fein leader Martin McGuinness, who holds the post of education minister in the new Assembly.

This witnessed the grotesque spectacle of loyalist thugs lining up to hurl abuse at Catholic children, as their parents tried to walk them to school through the Protestant Upper Ardoyne enclave, and culminated in a pipe-bomb being hurled at the children one morning.

Moreover, the Good Friday Agreement has done nothing to alleviate the terrible social conditions in Belfast and throughout Northern Ireland, which provide the main fuel for tensions between Catholic and Protestant workers. With no regard to the social problems facing all working people—both Catholic and Protestant—opposing political tendencies use sectarianism to their own end.