

Deepening poverty and inequality in Northern Ireland

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The 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which incorporated republican Sinn Fein and the IRA into the structure of British rule in Northern Ireland, was supposed to create a framework within which an era of “peace and prosperity” for all would dawn. Instead, five years later, a new report has been compiled revealing that poverty is more prevalent than either in the UK or in the Republic of Ireland, and both Catholics and Protestants are deeply affected.

In the introduction to *Bare Necessities, Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland*, the report’s five academic authors, who work for the think tank Democratic Dialogue, note that Northern Ireland has long been recognised as one of the poorest areas in the British Isles. However, there is no tradition of publishing information that would allow a direct comparison with other regions or countries. The authors set out to remedy this by comparing information collected from thousands of interviews with surveys in Britain and the Irish Republic.

Democratic Dialogue was set up after the 1995 IRA ceasefire. It supports the devolution policy of the British Labour Party and the southern Irish government, and presents itself as a key player in policy-making for the Northern Ireland Assembly. Nevertheless, it has published a devastating report.

After discussing various methods of calculating poverty, the authors agree on a consensual method comparable to techniques used in Britain and Ireland: a representative sample of thousands of people is questioned on various aspects of their lives in order to arrive at an agreed definition of what constitutes poverty in any given society. Interviewees were asked whether they possessed 90 items—such as a warm waterproof coat, good clothes for job interviews, access to a decent pension, or a motor car—and whether they considered these a necessity, the lack of which would contribute to poverty or exclusion. Results were collected from two surveys in which interviewers spoke with people for about an hour. Interviewees were also queried about a series of social, political and religious issues, and were offered the opportunity to reply to sensitive questions

in secrecy.

After considering the number of households lacking items deemed necessities and relating these to absolute income levels, a picture was built up of the extent and depth of poverty. A poverty line was set at £156 a week, in a household lacking at least three items. The authors found a level of agreement between Catholics, Protestants and households that did not define themselves in religious terms, about what constituted a necessity.

Some stark facts emerged. For example, 28 percent of the respondents have no personal savings and 24 percent lack access to a pension. While almost all households had a TV and a fridge, 23 percent could not afford to replace or repair them. Five percent could not afford fresh fruit and vegetables; 6 percent did not have two decent pairs of shoes; 8 percent were not able to pay their utility bills on time; 7 percent could not afford family days out; and 5 percent had no money for hobbies or recreational activities.

Of children’s necessities, 8 percent of parents could not afford new clothes, and 21 percent could not afford a computer for their children’s schoolwork. Twenty-one percent of children missed out on a comic or magazine once a week, while 28 percent could not have a week’s holiday away from home at least once a year.

Taking lack of individual necessities together, the report concluded that 29.6 percent of households were poor in 2002/2003. A further 2.1 percent had very recently left poverty in terms of income, but still lacked necessities. Another 12.1 percent, although they did not lack necessities, had such a low income that they were considered “vulnerable” to poverty. In all, 502,000 people were living in poverty of a total population of only 1,690,000. Of these, 148,900 were children, 37.4 percent of whom are growing up in poverty.

In comparison with both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland came off worst on a series of calculations. The average weekly income in the UK is £384, compared to £337 in Northern Ireland. The median income, with as many households above as below the figure,

is £311 in the UK, £269 in Northern Ireland. Just over 24 percent of households have incomes of less than 60 percent of this figure. Compared with the Republic of Ireland, the authors provided a series of graphs showing much smaller differences between Northern Ireland and the rest of the island, but with mean and median incomes and poverty levels consistently marginally worse in the North.

Income inequality was also marginally worse than in the rest of the UK. A striking graph in the report shows the vast bulk of the population earning between less than £100 and £400 a week, while a smaller but significant number earn up to £800 a week. A tiny number earn above this, as the graph trails off towards infinity at the top end of earnings. According to the authors, the richest 40 percent of the population earn 67 percent of the total household income, while the poorest 40 percent earn only 17 percent of the total. The richest 10 percent have more than 5.21 times the household income of the poorest 10 percent. Inequality is growing rapidly. In 1988, the ratio between the richest and poorest 10 percent was only 3.63. The report comments that, “based on the 2002/2003 figure, Northern Ireland is one of the most unequal societies in the developed world.”

The report does not comment on the relationship between the growth of social inequality and the so-called “peace process.” But its own figures show that the main beneficiaries of Sinn Fein’s support for the Stormont Assembly have been Northern Ireland’s rich and super-rich, who have increased their personal wealth from investment drawn into the six counties on the basis of low wages and the absence of open street warfare.

Thirty-six percent of respondents who described themselves as Catholics live in poverty, compared to 25 percent of Protestants. But given that approximately 44 percent of the population is Catholic, the absolute numbers of Protestant poor are significantly closer to the figure for Catholics. Traditionally, the basis of support for Ulster Unionism amongst Protestant workers has historically lain in the capacity of the Protestant bourgeoisie to offer significantly better wages and conditions to Protestant workers, while Catholics were excluded from numerous occupations. This has been undermined by the collapse of industries such as shipbuilding and engineering that were dominated by Protestants and by limited political efforts to redress employment discrimination. There has been, therefore, a certain levelling out of conditions for workers—but in a generally downward direction as opposed to a prevailing advancement of Catholics.

The undermining of the economic basis for the Protestant ascendancy on which Unionism was based makes the role played by the sectarian parties in continuing to foster communal antagonisms—in albeit less explosive forms than

armed conflict—decisive for big business in implementing its policy of divide and rule.

Sinn Fein draws its constituency largely from the more disadvantaged Catholics, with 43 percent of its supporting households describing themselves as poor. It does so by promising to fight aggressively for their rights in employment, housing, and so on. At the other end of the spectrum, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Ian Paisley secures a base amongst Protestant workers partly by railing against “positive discrimination” and the threat posed by an expanding Catholic population to jobs, housing, and so on.

The report also revealed the direct legacy of British military occupation and civil war. Fifty percent of respondents knew someone who had been killed during the conflict; 30 percent had lost close friends or relatives; 8 percent had personally been injured, and half of those had been injured on two or more occasions; almost 9 percent had had to move elsewhere because of intimidation and harassment; and 4.4 percent had been forced to leave a job.

Other striking figures show that 67 percent of single parents and 56 percent of households with one or more disabled member are in poverty.

The report concludes lamely by calling for Stormont to be handed more power to tackle inequality. But no solution can be sought in such a discredited sectarian arena. Rather, the huge class divisions exposed in the North of Ireland, mirrored in the Southern Republic, demand the political unification of the working class in the North and South of Ireland with those in Britain on a socialist programme for the wholesale redistribution of private and corporate wealth.



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