

Northern Ireland: Adams offers to disband IRA as new elections are called

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More than a year after the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly and six months after scheduled elections were cancelled, new elections have finally been called by the British government for November 26, 2003. It is highly unlikely that those elected will immediately take up their seats, as no clear Agreement has been reached between the various contending parties and governments to allow the assembly to be revived. Rather, the vote will be a trial of strength before the planned review of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement due to begin in December.

The election announcement came immediately after another of the opaque and choreographed developments that have come to be the hallmark of the Northern Ireland “peace process.” This very impenetrability highlights the gulf that separates its participants, both republican and unionist, from the concerns of working people.

Following months of arm-twisting and bartering by the British and US governments, on October 21 the head of the arms decommissioning body set up by the Good Friday Agreement, General John de Chastelain, announced that he had witnessed the destruction of “automatic weapons, heavy ordnance and associated munitions” by the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which was “considerably larger” than anything he had witnessed before. In its 10 years of cease-fire, the IRA has twice before destroyed weapons caches during barter sessions with the British government.

By prior agreement between Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams, Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader David Trimble, British prime minister Tony Blair, and his Irish counterpart, Bertie Ahern, this new act of IRA disarmament was intended to accompany the election announcement and news of a further agreement reached between Sinn Fein and the UUP.

Later reports suggested that the IRA had indeed destroyed quantities of Semtex explosive along with some of its caches of heavy weaponry, stored in underground bunkers in rural areas in the Irish Republic. The destruction was authenticated both by de Chastelain, who had spent 48 hours being driven blindfolded to secret locations, and the IRA’s spokesperson on such occasions, “P O’Neill.” No comparable action or statement was demanded from the loyalist paramilitary groups, and none was forthcoming.

Just as significantly, the physical destruction of weapons was accompanied by one of the most explicit statements yet from the Sinn Fein leadership. Speaking to a televised Sinn Fein meeting, Adams insisted that he had a “total commitment to playing a leadership role to bring an end to conflict on our island, including physical force republicanism.” He told of his hopes that the Good Friday Agreement provides “the context in which Irish republicans and unionists will as equals pursue their objectives peacefully, thus providing full and final

closure of the conflict.”

Adams was even clearer some days later as to his intention to end any form of armed republican opposition to British rule. In response to the question of when the IRA would go away, in an interview with the *Sunday Business Post*, Adams pledged “to bring an end to physical force republicanism, that clearly means bringing an end to the organisation or the vehicle of physical force republicanism.”

In addition to signalling the aim of finally winding up the IRA, Adams’s statements are an offer of support to the British and Irish governments in the suppression of dissident republican groups such as the Real IRA and the Continuity IRA. Real IRA leader Micky McEvitt was recently jailed in Dublin for being the leader of a terrorist organisation, in the first such conviction in southern Ireland. The IRA itself has been involved in threats and attacks against Real and Continuity IRA members. It is suggested that IRA leader Gerry Kelly would be the next Northern Ireland justice minister should the assembly be revived. Former IRA members would therefore be directly responsible for maintaining law and order on behalf of the British government.

Adams’s and de Chastelain’s announcements were to be followed by a statement from Trimble intended to commit the Ulster Unionists to reviving, and participating in, the assembly. But at the last minute, Trimble claimed that de Chastelain’s statements lacked transparency, as a fully itemised list of weaponry destroyed was not made available. Further agreement was therefore “on hold,” pending more information. The IRA striptease has to be full, final and public.

Behind Trimble’s public rejection of an IRA move whose capitulatory character is clear for all to see is his weakening position within the UUP and the electoral threat to the UUP posed by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of the Reverend Ian Paisley. For Trimble, the IRA merely needs to degrade and humiliate itself before its onetime bitter foes. For the DUP, which opposes the Good Friday Agreement and calls for Sinn Fein’s exclusion from a renegotiated version of it, nothing, up to and beyond a complete disappearance of the IRA will suffice.

Every stage in the IRA and Sinn Fein’s integration into the structure of British rule in Northern Ireland has been accompanied by hysterical shrieks from the DUP to the effect that Trimble and the UUP leadership are capitulating to “terrorism” and that a united Ireland is just around the corner. The DUP’s web site carries cartoons equating Gerry Adams with Osama bin Laden. A recent speech by Paisley trumpeted, “Supporting Mr. Trimble is to ride the roller coaster towards complete Dublin control and the reign of the IRA over Northern Ireland.”

Of rising support for the DUP, Paisley went on, “at long last, it is in

the hands of the unionists of Ulster to sweep IRA/Sinn Fein armed terrorists from the government of Northern Ireland, and to keep them out.”

Trimble’s UUP is the traditional party of the Protestant bourgeoisie. Having concluded that an accommodation with Sinn Fein is a necessary evil to sustain profitability and investment in the North, Trimble’s wing of the party is only interested in extracting the best terms from Sinn Fein to ensure its collaboration in policing the working class.

By contrast, both the anti-Trimble wing of the UUP and the DUP, with its close links to loyalist paramilitarism, speak more for those who benefited directly from the anti-Catholic discrimination on which Northern Ireland was founded and whose often marginal privileges are under threat in the new Ireland of Trimble and Adams. These include a broad range of people from small business owners, farmers, civil servants, sections of Protestant workers, to members of the security services, Orange Lodges and lumpen anti-Catholic bigots. Egged on by Paisley’s paranoid evangelism, the DUP seeks to unite all these disparate layers in a crusade to defend the holy union with Britain.

The rise of the DUP is presently the gravest single threat to the Good Friday Agreement, but it can be explained as a political byproduct of the arrangements set in place by it. It is the most developed expression of the Agreement’s efforts to institutionalise sectarian divisions and thereby continue to make them the basis of rule in the North.

The cultivation of sectarian divisions in the working class has been the key mechanism through which the ruling class has prevented the emergence of an effective opposition to big business. In keeping with this, the Agreement defined the North in terms of a cohabitation of essentially opposed religious “communities” and gave the sectarian parties—Protestant/Unionist on one side and Catholic/Irish Republican on the other—a joint veto on all legislation within the Assembly.

This meant that the unionist parties could continue to masquerade as the defenders of the interests of the Protestant “community,” while the nationalist parties—and Sinn Fein in particular—advanced themselves as the advocates of Catholic advancement.

Neither of the sectarian camps set out to challenge the essential aims of the Agreement, which was shaped exclusively by the requirements of big business for a stable security situation in order that the North could attract investment. This was supposed to somehow automatically benefit the working class through the provision of more and better-paid jobs in a so-called “peace dividend,” without any need to articulate an alternative political perspective to that of the British, US and Irish governments that brought the Agreement into being.

Needless to say, the benefits the Agreement was supposed to bring to working people were, to say the least, greatly exaggerated. As in every country throughout the world, economic success for the North is measured by how much the requirements of the major international investors and transnational corporations are met. This translates into the provision of cheap labour and low corporate tax, which in turn demands higher taxes on working people and the gutting of social provisions that are seen as an unacceptable drain on company profits.

The result of this process has been to strengthen the position of those parties that have advanced themselves as the most aggressive and intransigent defenders of their respective “communities”—Sinn Fein on one side and the DUP on the other. Whereas Sinn Fein argues that the advancement of Catholics is bound up with the success of the Agreement, the DUP turns this on its head and argues that for this very reason the Agreement represents a threat to Protestants.

Although a narrow majority of Protestants supported the Agreement in 1998, over the succeeding years that majority has vanished, to be replaced by growing alarm that the “peace and prosperity” promised has not materialised. Rather, farmers and small business remain under pressure, while the traditionally Protestant-dominated heavy industries have been decimated and replaced by low-paying new industries such as electronics assembly and call centres. The DUP plays on the broad social insecurity this engenders to insist that the only beneficiaries of the Agreement have been former “terrorists,” and that Protestants and members of the security services killed during “the Troubles” have been betrayed.

The DUP leadership senses it has an opportunity to eclipse the UUP and to demand that the Good Friday Agreement be renegotiated—to ensure not only the permanent exclusion of Sinn Fein from power, but also the continuation in a slightly modified form of the old structures of the Protestant ascendancy based on domination of the security forces and a privileged position in government.

Catholic workers have suffered years of social disadvantage and discrimination, but this does not lend legitimacy to policies based on the narrow goal of equal representation in jobs, housing, etc., using quotas and other measures. This apparent commitment to “equality of opportunity” in reality only offers equality of exploitation and deprivation, and in practice forces working people to compete against each other based on their religion. As such, it acts as a recruiting platform for the DUP.

Sectarian divisions can only be overcome if all workers, Catholic, Protestant and those of no religious persuasions, are offered the chance to live a decent and secure life with a high standard of living. This is inconceivable without the struggle to unify the working class on a socialist programme to challenge the political monopoly of big business and to implement policies that serve the common needs of the vast majority of the population. By necessity, this would place the working class in opposition to the Agreement and all attempts to preserve the sectarian British state in the North, but would also unite Catholic and Protestant workers against the Southern bourgeoisie and capitalist rule throughout Ireland.



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