

Northern Ireland loyalists turn to race violence

Steve James**6 February 2004**

A series of racial attacks in Northern Ireland point to organised efforts by Ulster loyalist paramilitaries to purge Protestant areas of non-whites.

During three decades of conflict between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the British government, very little was heard about conditions facing the tiny number of people who were members of an ethnic minority group in Northern Ireland. A 1995 report counted the entire minority population of the province at a mere 8,270, consisting mainly of Chinese, Indians, Pakistanis and Irish travellers, out of a total population of 1.697 million people.

Most of these groups have lived in Northern Ireland for decades. The Chinese population, for example, mostly arrived in the early 1960s in search of work. Some Vietnamese "boat people" arrived in the 1970s. Many Indian families moved to Belfast in the 1920s and 1930s, hoping to flee communal violence generated by British rule in India. More arrived immediately following India's partition in 1947. A small Jewish community has existed for decades, although its numbers declined during "the Troubles."

Since the IRA ceasefire and the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, small numbers of asylum seekers, overseas students, tourists and foreign workers have visited and attempted to settle in the province. A 2002 report, prepared for the Northern Ireland Executive, estimated that around 2,000 asylum seekers were temporarily resident. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of the population—99 percent—remains white.

Presented as opening a new era of peaceful development, the agreement, based on incorporating Sinn Fein into the structure of British rule in Northern Ireland, has deepened the sectarian domination of all areas of political and social life and strengthened the grip of the paramilitary groups over working class Protestant and Catholic areas.

The tactics of forced evictions, intimidation and violence have been utilised for many years by paramilitaries on both sides to ensure their control of Protestant and Catholic areas. Sectarian division and violence remains endemic.

July 2003 alone saw the following: a Catholic man stabbed by a loyalist gang; 40 petrol bombs thrown at Protestant homes by Catholic mobs; several Protestant and Catholic churches burnt; a playground used by Catholic children burnt; Ulster Defence Association attacks on traffic in and out of a Catholic enclave in north Belfast; ball bearings, screws, bolts, bricks and rocks thrown at houses and cars in the Catholic Short Strand area of Belfast; two Catholic postal workers in Derry received death threats to their home addresses; 20 loyalists attacked a Catholic man playing golf because he was wearing a Glasgow Celtic football strip; bomb hoaxes directed at Catholic families in Derry; a Protestant woman attacked by a gang of UDA thugs because she had Catholic friends.

Since the agreement, however, the paramilitary and gang violence directed against Catholic and Protestant working people has also plagued Chinese, African and Asian people visiting or resident in Northern Ireland. In total, 226 racial incidents were reported in 2003, compared to 185 in 2002. While in part this increase is thought to be due to a greater willingness to report racial incidents, it is also clear that minority populations are being systematically targeted by paramilitary loyalist and fascistic groups and their lumpen hangers-on.

Last July, the chair of the Northern Ireland African Cultural Centre reported that an African man had found two live bullets on his doorstep, and pipe bombs had been thrown at two African family homes, including one with eight-week old twins. A group of tourists, including some black people, were attacking by a stone-throwing mob, while a travel firm ceased sightseeing bus tours following

a series of attacks.

Also in July, in the town of Craigavon, near Portadown, a baseball bat-wielding gang attack the home of a Muslim imam. Six children were in the house at the time. The attack forced the family to leave Ireland. The imam's wife also claimed that their car had been sabotaged, causing a wheel to fall off while they were on a motorway. In August, another Muslim family in Craigavon was forced to leave their home of five years following an attack by a gang throwing stones. In total, nine families have left Craigavon, and the construction of a mosque has been delayed.

The Craigavon attacks followed a campaign by a group calling itself the White Nationalist Party (WNP), which leafleted the area warning that "This is Ulster, not Islamabad."

The fascist group, which advocates "racial purity," was reported as working alongside elements of longstanding loyalist groups such as the UDA and the Loyalist Volunteer Force. UDA youth wing members have distributed racist WNP material outside social security offices in Ballymena. Opposition to the mosque was also supported by members of the Ulster Unionist Party. Former Craigavon mayor, Fred Crowe, told the BBC that Muslims were "out to wipe out Christianity."

In December 2003, two Chinese families and a Ugandan couple were forced to leave their homes in the Village area of south Belfast following a spate of pipe bombings and assaults. Police connected the attacks to efforts by the British National Party (BNP), of which the WNP is an offshoot, to stoke racial tensions in the area. The BNP intend to stand candidates in forthcoming local elections. Duncan Morrow, of the Community Relations Council, warned the *Guardian*, that under the current circumstances "it is dangerous for people who are from ethnic minorities to be living in some Protestant areas."

The pressure on Chinese people in south Belfast occurs primarily in streets run by loyalist paramilitaries. In addition to the Chinese and Ugandan families forced to leave, five student houses were recently forced to break up because both Catholic and Protestant students lived in them. A local estate agent told the *Guardian* that he had been visited by a group he assumed were paramilitaries telling him not to rent property to non-whites. He said, "If a black or a Chinese person tries to rent a property from me I would have to tell them it is not safe. If this goes on someone is going to be burnt alive or murdered."

On the other side of Belfast, a Zimbabwean businesswoman complained of routine abuse and Ku Klux

Klan slogans being painted on her door. She said, "Initially we wanted to move. We called the police. Then we realised that it's happening everywhere in Belfast. There is nowhere to run to."

A student from Soweto in South Africa was threatened by a group of men who appeared at her front door. Her two children kept silent upstairs while the family's TV, kitchen, fireplace and games console were destroyed.

In early January, again in the south Belfast Village area, a six-foot wooden plank was thrown through the window of a Pakistani family, showering the house's dining area with glass. Two houses occupied by Romanian and Pakistani families, who were away on holiday, were also set alight.

The developing pogromist atmosphere has generated considerable anger and opposition. Last week, hundreds of people demonstrated outside Belfast City Hall to protest the attacks. At the demonstration speakers from Belfast's Anti-Racist Network condemned the attacks as being orchestrated by loyalist paramilitaries and fascists, called on loyalist leaders to prevent them, and for all sections of the community to extend their protests.

For Northern Ireland's political elite, the race attacks threaten the worldwide image of the new Ulster as a peaceful and attractive investment and tourist location. The rally was attended by many of Northern Ireland's political leaders, including Sinn Fein's Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, trade union officials, along with leading figures in the Social Democratic and Labour Party, the Ulster Unionist Party and the loyalist Progressive Unionist Party.

No connection was drawn between the Good Friday Agreement and the upsurge of racist violence. But the agreement, which establishes religious differences as the basis of government legislation while social services are run down, guarantees a continual stoking of social tensions and grievances which the racists and fascists will exploit.



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