New push by Britain and Ireland for IRA disbandment

Chris Marsden, Julie Hyland
7 March 2005

Recent weeks have seen intense pressure placed on Sinn Fein by London and Dublin, backed by Washington, to accept not only the disarming of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) but its disbandment.

The pretext for this has been the December 20 raid on the Northern Bank in Belfast, which netted £26.5 million, making it Ireland's largest-ever bank robbery. The governments of Britain and the Irish Republic insist that the IRA carried out the heist—although they have presented no evidence substantiating the charge—and maintain that some within Sinn Fein's leadership must have known it was to take place.

Sinn Fein, which is considered the political arm of the IRA, officially denies any link to the proscribed organisation. It has denied any role in the bank raid, as has the IRA.

Nevertheless, Britain and the Irish Republic have used the robbery to ratchet up the pressure on Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams and his deputy Martin McGuinness to fall into line behind their latest demands.

Sinn Fein has argued that the assault on them is the work of hostile anti-republican forces within the north's pro-unionist police and security apparatus. But it is the government of the Irish Republic in the south that has been most vociferous in its denunciations and, unlike Britain, has openly named Adams and McGuinness as being members of the ruling IRA Army Council.

The IRA remains a proscribed organisation on both sides of the border, and the naming of Sinn Fein's leaders implies a threat of criminal prosecution that goes beyond the financial sanctions so far imposed by Britain. It is inconceivable that Dublin would act in this way without the say-so of Washington, given the extent of US control of the Southern Irish economy.

The demand for IRA disbandment was not included in the Good Friday Agreement, signed by Sinn Fein in 1998, which laid the basis for a devolved power-sharing government in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, this demand flows from the character of the constitutional arrangements for which the Agreement called.

The Agreement was drawn up to meet the political and economic requirements of the two major imperialist powers with strategic interests in Ireland, Britain and the United States. Its essential aim was to bring to an end the armed conflict that had been taking place in the north for more than three decades, resulting from sectarian tensions between the dominant pro-British unionist Protestants and the Catholics, who suffered systematic discrimination and who largely supported unification with Southern Ireland. The major powers hoped that a power-sharing deal between the unionist establishment and Sinn Fein would reduce the massive financial costs of Britain's military occupation and provide a more stable environment for attracting international investment, as had been successfully achieved in the Republic to the south.

The Agreement provided no basis for a genuine resolution of sectarian tensions within the north. It was cast as an agreement between antagonistic communities that were to be represented by contending republican and unionist parties. Moreover, it preserved British rule of the six northern counties and the veto enjoyed by the unionists over any move towards unification, while Dublin renounced its historic claim to the north.

Sinn Fein accepted these provisions and was accepted into the Assembly established at Stormont, alongside the Unionist parties, after the IRA had ceased military operations against Britain. All parties pledged "total and absolute commitment to exclusively democratic and peaceful means" and "opposition to any use or threat of force by others for any political purpose." This was taken to mean that the IRA and pro-British loyalist paramilitaries would follow their ceasefire with disarmament.

As a reward, Sinn Fein was promised reform of the almost exclusively Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary, a substantial reduction in the British armed presence in the North, and the creation of various cross-border economic and political institutions.

Power sharing thus translated into an agreement on the part of Sinn Fein to police the Catholic population alongside the unionist parties' role in policing Protestant areas.

The support of Sinn Fein and the IRA for the Agreement expressed the failure of the nationalist perspective and the tactics of terrorism associated with it. Rejecting any possibility of a unified struggle of the working class against both British occupation and the domination of big business on both sides of the border, the republican organisations, both political and military, sought to pressure the British state into withdrawing its troops and giving up its claims on the north. However, the IRA's isolated terrorist campaign never seriously threatened British imperialism and played the reactionary role of deepening divisions between Catholics and Protestants in the north, and between the Irish and British working class.

The Agreement offered the dominant petty-bourgeois elements within the republican movement the possibility of ending their exclusion from positions of power and privilege under Protestant ascendancy within the north. It won wider support amongst Catholic workers because they were justifiably tired of the bankrupt strategy of terror, which had failed to provide any alleviation of the social hardship and suppression of democratic rights they faced.

The unionist parties were promised that accepting power sharing with Sinn Fein and a role for Dublin in the north's political affairs would bring substantial economic benefits. A majority of Protestant

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voters initially backed the Agreement, but the unionist camp has remained divided between the pro-Agreement Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) of David Trimble and the anti-Agreement Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) led by Ian Paisley.

The British Labour government of Tony Blair did everything it could to placate Britain's traditional unionist allies, and the main emphasis was always on the need for the republicans to accept IRA disarmament, which was portrayed as the main or even sole obstacle to a permanent peace.

Initially, London and Washington were reluctant to place undue pressure on Adams and McGuinness, who were seen as committed to bringing the more reluctant forces within the IRA into line. It was accepted that the decommissioning of arms by the IRA would take years.

All this changed following the destruction of the Twin Towers and the attack on the Pentagon on September 11, 2001—an event that was used to launch the Bush administration's "war on terror" as the cover for its plans to seize control of the oil reserves of the Middle East and Caspian Basin.

Faced with the need to appear intransigent towards all forms of terrorist activity, it became increasingly difficult for Washington and London to treat Sinn Fein and, by implication, the IRA as legitimate negotiating and even power-sharing parties. This was especially the case under conditions in which the anti-Agreement unionists cited Bush and Blair's insistence that there could be no negotiations with terrorists to justify their own refusal to participate in the power-sharing arrangements.

With Stormont in a state of permanent crisis and suspension, Adams and McGuinness were instructed to demonstrate publicly that the IRA was in the process of disarming. But every initiative failed to satisfy the unionists. In October 2002, Blair issued a public statement demanding that the IRA be disbanded.

At that time, Sinn Fein refused to accede to Blair's injunctions, which were described as a unionist ultimatum. As a result, the Northern Ireland executive has remained stalled until today.

This has had a deleterious impact on the plans to develop the north as an investment platform. A 2004 report from Northern Ireland's Economic Development Forum identified key weaknesses faced by the region's companies, attaching primary importance to the threat posed by political instability. It stated, "Northern Ireland's political representatives...ignore the importance of political stability at the economy's peril. Every effort must be made to resolve the current difficulties in the peace process and mitigate against the direct negative impact political instability has on economic growth and tourism in particular."

Last summer, the pressure placed on Sinn Fein to accede to the demand for IRA disbandment appeared to have succeeded. On May 20, the party's national chairman, Mitchel McLaughlin, told the *Guardian,* "We are saying it is possible to get rid of the IRA."

This was followed by a speech by Adams himself to a party gathering in August in which he stated, "I personally feel that while there are justifiable fears within unionism about the IRA and while people have concerns about the IRA, I think political unionism uses the IRA and the issue of IRA arms as an excuse. I think republicans need to be prepared to remove that as an excuse."

According to the security forces, the ensuing months were taken up with a political campaign by the Adams leadership to secure the agreement of the IRA that it must disarm and even disband. As far as London and Washington were concerned, however, the Northern Bank raid provided an opportunity to intensify the pressure on the Sinn Fein leadership.

The opposition faced by Adams from within the IRA does not imply a significant constituency within that organisation wishing to resume military hostilities against Britain, especially given its traditional reliance on funding and political support from within America's political establishment.

But there are those who argue that disarmament is being called for in isolation from any significant change in the threat posed by the police, the British army and the loyalist gangs. Moreover, there are numerous allegations that elements within the IRA, like their counterparts amongst the loyalists, are involved in criminal activity such as smuggling cigarettes and fuel, for which arms are necessary.

Like every other aspect of the Agreement the latest moves against Sinn Fein are characterised by unprincipled manoeuvring, hypocrisy and lies designed to conceal the real issues being fought out. Behind the mask of outrage over Sinn Fein's alleged collusion with IRA criminality is a final push to ensure that the plans of the major imperialist powers for Ireland are fully implemented.

No one should assume that Sinn Fein will not be prepared to go along with what is now being demanded of it. Adams and McGuinness have spent more than a decade seeking to transform Sinn Fein into precisely the type of respectable bourgeois party with which US and British imperialism can do business.

Even while rejecting the accusations being levelled against them, their statements leave open the option of turning on any elements within Sinn Fein who might prove to have been involved in the bank raid or other criminal activities. Adams told an IRA memorial unveiling last week that "No republican worthy of the name can be involved in criminality of any kind" and those that were would be expelled.

More than a century of bitter experience in Ireland has demonstrated that a nationalist perspective, whether accompanied by a military campaign or not, cannot overcome the bitter legacy of imperialist domination. Nor can a perspective that does not challenge capitalist property relations provide the basis for addressing the essential social and democratic interests of the working class.

The only way forward is to adopt a socialist programme based upon a unified struggle of the Catholic and Protestant working class on both sides of the border against the imperialist powers and the Irish and unionist bourgeoisie. Such a struggle would find powerful support within Britain and throughout Europe.

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