

Northern Ireland: McCartney murder used to increase pressure on IRA to disband

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The feting of the family of murdered Belfast man Robert McCartney by the Bush administration is a cynical exercise in political manipulation. McCartney's murder has been seized upon by the US, British and Irish governments to step up pressure on Sinn Fein to back the demand for the Irish Republican Army to disband. Sinn Fein, which officially denies any ties to the proscribed IRA, has long been considered the political wing of the republican paramilitary organisation.

McCartney, a 33-year-old father of two, was stabbed to death outside a Belfast bar on January 30. His friend Brendan Devine was also seriously injured in what was reportedly a non-political argument with alleged IRA members. Both men were stabbed repeatedly, jumped on, battered with sewer rods, and left for dead.

It is further alleged that one IRA member returned to the bar to collect potentially incriminating closed circuit television tape and that other IRA members have intimidated witnesses to the killing.

The murder generated a wave of revulsion in the Catholic Short Strand area of Belfast. It received unprecedented attention in the media and within political circles internationally, culminating in the March 17 St. Patrick's Day invitation for a personal audience with President George W. Bush extended to McCartney's five sisters and his female partner.

The intervention of the Bush administration has nothing to do with genuine concern at the personal tragedy suffered by the McCartney family and everything to do with winding up the IRA. Bush made this demand central to his St. Patrick's Day speech, and leading Democrats, including Senator Hillary Clinton, as well as former Republican presidential contender Senator John McCain were on hand to endorse his stand.

Commenting on the event, Britain's Northern Ireland secretary, Paul Murphy, expressed satisfaction over how the McCartneys had been used to change the "political

landscape," particularly with regard to Irish-Americans, by having "personalised the issue of criminal activity."

Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern added that inclusive government in Northern Ireland was possible only when there was "definitive closure to paramilitary capability and activity, including all forms of criminality."

For their part, the McCartneys said they believed that Bush "had a very good understanding of what our campaign is about" and was fully behind them.

Pressure has been exerted on Sinn Fein to wind up the IRA ever since last November's collapse of negotiations to restore the devolved government established by the 1998 Northern Ireland Agreement. Without the disbanding of the IRA and Sinn Fein's endorsement of the reformed Royal Ulster Constabulary, now called the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), resumption of the power sharing executive is excluded because of opposition from the Protestant Democratic Unionist Party.

All of the parties and governments that signed onto the 1998 "Good Friday Agreement," with the exception of Sinn Fein, seized on accusations of IRA involvement in the December 2004 robbery of Belfast's Northern Bank to intensify pressure on Sinn Fein to agree that the IRA must cease to exist. McCartney's murder the following month was likewise seized upon by London, Washington, Dublin and the unionist parties in Northern Ireland, which calculated that allegations the IRA had turned on its own to further a criminal agenda would ensure the organisation's demise.

Sinn Fein has attempted to placate these governments with promises to end the activities of the IRA, hoping thereby to establish its credentials as a full partner within the power-sharing structures established by the Good Friday Agreement. Sinn Fein insists that the names of those thought to be involved in the killing were handed over the PSNI ombudsman, reversing the party's previous policy of non-collaboration with the RUC, and it has

suspended several of its members.

The McCartneys were invited to Sinn Fein's 100th anniversary conference, where they were given a standing ovation. Sinn Fein leader Jerry Adams sat beside them, and the entire event was broadcast on TV.

Adams responded to the McCartneys' presidential invite to the White House with a warning that the issue was being utilised for political ends and a reaffirmation that Sinn Fein was making every effort "to create the conditions in which the IRA ceases to be." Adams added, "It is my conviction that we will be successful." His deputy, Martin McGuinness, accused the police of "unprecedented and incredible delays" in questioning key suspects and witnesses in order to damage Sinn Fein.

The IRA has been thrown further into crisis by reaction to the McCartney killing. It was forced to reverse its initial policy of protecting its members, and suspended from membership three people said to be involved in the killing. It then published an offer it had made to the McCartney family to shoot the individuals whom they held responsible for the killing.

This attempt to appease popular anger badly misfired. Spokesmen for the British, Irish and US governments lined up to insist that such summary justice only confirmed the IRA's criminality and to demand that it now accept "the rule of law."

By far the greatest damage facing Sinn Fein and the IRA comes from the hostile stance taken by Washington. Nothing exposed Sinn Fein's fraudulent utilisation of certain socialist phrases more fully than its long-standing reliance on influential sections of the US ruling elite to provide it both with funding and political leverage against Britain.

During the 1990s, Sinn Fein made clear that it was ready to abandon its terrorist campaign against Britain and take its place in the Northern Ireland state apparatus, where it would help create the political stability necessary to attract global investment. In return, the Clinton administration cultivated Sinn Fein as an instrument through which US imperialism could exert its political influence within Northern Ireland.

Sinn Fein is now being threatened with permanent withdrawal of its proffered status of legitimacy if it does not toe the line. Mitchell Reiss, the US special envoy to Northern Ireland, made the administration's position clear to the BBC. "It's time for the IRA to go out of business. And it's time for Sinn Fein to be able to say that explicitly, without ambiguity, without ambivalence, that criminality will not be tolerated."

Sinn Fein's own record makes nonsense of Adam's warning that the McCartneys must not allow themselves to be politically manipulated. The family's embrace of Bush as an ally in its campaign for justice is a politically misguided and deplorable spectacle, given the criminal and bloodstained character of his administration as evidenced in its ongoing brutalisation of the Iraqi people. But in the final analysis, it is further evidence of the political miseducation resulting from the domination of bourgeois nationalism over the Catholic working class in the north of Ireland.

Through its hostility to a socialist program based on the international unity and political independence of the working class, and its historic reliance on the support of sections of the American and Irish bourgeoisie, Sinn Fein bears major responsibility for the disoriented response of the McCartneys. In turning to Washington, the family are only echoing Sinn Fein in its embrace of US imperialism's role as the guarantor of the constitutional arrangements established under the Good Friday Agreement.

The events surrounding the murder of Robert McCartney prove that it is not enough to oppose the worst excesses of the IRA, whilst accepting the bourgeois nationalist political framework of republicanism—including the illusion that the Northern Ireland agreement provides the basis for meeting the elementary democratic and social aspirations of working people, whether Catholic or Protestant.

Outrage over the brutal slaying of Robert McCartney and sympathy with his family's plight should in no way prevent working people from opposing the course on which they have embarked. But equally, it in no way implies that support be extended to Sinn Fein, which is only anxious to renew its friendly relations with Washington, London and Dublin; or to the IRA, in the mistaken belief that it constitutes an anti-imperialist force. Everything depends on working people—Catholic and Protestant—adopting a socialist and internationalist perspective in opposition to all of the political defenders of British and American imperialism and capitalist rule.



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