Northern Ireland: loyalist riots point to unresolved social and political tensions

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19 September 2005

The eruption of orchestrated rioting in some predominantly working class Protestant areas of Belfast is a sharp indicator of the social and political tensions being generated within the "new" Northern Ireland.

For three successive nights, some hundreds of largely young rioters lobbed petrol bombs, stones, fireworks and blast bombs at the police and the British Army. Protestant paramilitary groups were actively involved, with gunfire exchanged between the security forces and loyalist activists. Some 2,000 police and army officers in armoured cars were deployed and over 30 police were injured by missiles. Reports suggest that at least one loyalist was shot and police fired 430 plastic bullets.

Conflict first emerged around the Whiterock march by the Protestant Orange Order. Long one of the more confrontational Orange parades, the Whiterock march was banned from its traditional route past a Catholic area by the Parades Commission. Instead, the few hundred marchers of the Shankill Protestant Boys and the Sons of Ulster were instructed to march through an abandoned industrial estate, while a set of Belfast's huge steel "peace" gates, which separate the march route from the neighbouring Catholic and republican nationalist area, were locked.

Marchers tried to break open the gates. The Royal Irish Rangers were ordered to strengthen the barricade with armoured vehicles. Marchers used stones and bottles to attack the police, who replied with water cannon.

Similar exchanges occurred simultaneously in a number of areas in Belfast and in South Antrim. Shortly after the Whiterock confrontation blast bombs and gunfire were used against the police. Two Landrovers and a Saxon armoured personnel carrier were burnt out.

In Belfast city centre pro-British unionist protestors blocked three lanes of traffic. Elsewhere a bank was set on fire, a cash machine was attacked by someone driving a mechanical digger and petrol bombs were thrown at police in East Belfast, while 100 or so masked men attacked police in the Ardoyne Rd. Trouble continued for the next two evenings, with a bus set on fire and numerous cars hijacked, burnt out and used as barricades.

Britain's Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Hain described the riots as a "throwback to a dark and hideous age." He announced that, so far as the British government was concerned, the loyalist paramilitary group, the Ulster Volunteer Force, was no longer on a ceasefire.

The head of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, Hugh Orde, attacked the Orange Order in unprecedented terms: "I have seen the Orange Order in their sashes attacking my officers.... No police service in the UK or Europe has to face this organised disorder across such a wide area."

The United States special envoy to Northern Ireland, Mitchell Reiss, accused the Ulster unionist parties of an "abdication of responsibility."

Over the last months Hain has repeatedly suggested that sectarian tensions and growing loyalist violence were completely at odds with the supposedly wealthy and modern Belfast of the twenty-first century. But the rioting is not an historical apparition making a belated visitation to perplex British and US politicians. Rather it is the product of contemporary Northern Ireland, where sectarian division remains the basis of political life, and for allocating vital social needs such as jobs, housing and education.

The rioting was by no means spontaneous and was clearly organized—at least in part—in response to the July 28 statement from the Irish Republican Army. The statement announced that the IRA would finally cease all activity, dump its arms in sight of representatives from the Catholic and Protestant churches, and instruct its members to pursue their aim of a united Ireland through exclusively political means.

In the aftermath of the collapse of negotiations to revive devolved government in the North's power-sharing executive in 2004, Sinn Fein and the IRA were subject to immense pressure to finally disarm. This was particularly the case following alleged IRA involvement in the Northern Bank raid and the murder of Belfast Catholic Robert McCartney.

The IRA has long since abandoned its military campaignagainst Britain in return for the promise of a seat in government for Sinn Fein and other privileges for the leadership of both organisations. But the statement was still a formal admittance that the IRA was no longer in business and that it would cease any criminal activity in favour of exclusively constitutional and legal practices.

IRA disarmament was the central issue raised by Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party as the reason for its opposing power-sharing with Sinn Fein. It has successfully exploited the issue as a rallying point for Protestant disenchantment to eclipse the Ulster Unionist party of David Trimble, which negotiated the 1998 Good Friday Agreement with Sinn Fein and the British, Irish and US governments. But for both the DUP and UUP the issue was a bargaining counter in seeking concessions from the British

government and excluding Sinn Fein from positions of power and influence that the Unionist parties had once monopolised.

For this reason, the IRA declaration was not seen as a victory by the DUP and other Protestant loyalist formations such as the Orange Order, but as a setback. Anything that results in Sinn Fein's political advancement only further encroaches on the political and social privileges once enjoyed by the Protestant bourgeoisie and the more privileged layers of the petty bourgeoisie.

One example of this is the threat to the once exclusive Protestant control of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, which was a symbol of loyalist ascendancy. The RUC has now been renamed as the Police Service of Northern Ireland and Sinn Fein has been charged with rehabilitating the force and encouraging recruitment amongst Catholics.

Unionists' fears were confirmed by the British government's decision following the IRA statement to set about removing some of the remaining watchtowers from South Armagh, on the border with the Irish Republic, and the announcement of a "normalisation" of troop levels.

The Blair government also announced that the Home Service of the Royal Irish Regiment—successor of the Ulster Defence Regiment and another loyalist stronghold—would be disbanded.

The Orange Order and the loyalist paramilitary groups have taken matters onto the streets in order to make clear to the British government that they are still a force to be reckoned with.

Both the DUP and the UUP leadership have made formal criticism of the rioting, while taking pains to blame it on British concessions to the IRA. However, all the Unionist parties have played their part in encouraging the sectarianism that produced the rioting, and have deep connections with the Orange Order.

Underlying the ability of the DUP and the Orange Order to muster support amongst ordinary Protestants is the fact that the maintenance and exploitation of sectarian divisions is embodied in the very concept of "power-sharing" between parties that are designated representatives of either a Loyalist-Protestant or a rival Catholic-Irish republican community. This then becomes the basis for determining the allocation of every item of social spending. In turn every political decision is measured against the yardstick of which "community" benefits most in terms of jobs, houses or investment projects.

Under these conditions, the stirring up of fratricidal conflict between sections of workers with different religious and cultural affiliations becomes the basis for the Unionists and Sinn Fein to secure their political domination of "their" community. The DUP portrays every advance by Catholics as a threat to Protestants, whilst Sinn Fein conceals its essentially pro-big business orientation and policies behind claims that it is the most steadfast advocate of the advancement of all Catholics in the face of the efforts of Protestants to retain their privileges. In this way workers are diverted into a struggle over who gets what that enables all sections of the bourgeoisie to play off each against all in a classic example of divide and rule.

In reality, in the years since the Good Friday Agreement the main beneficiaries have been the large number of corporations that have opened or expanded their operations in Northern Ireland to take advantage of a skilled and relatively low-paid workforce.

This may have brought with it some jobs, but much of the new investment is unlikely to remain long, since, as in the Irish Republic, the impact of the accession of much of Eastern Europe to the European Union and the prodigious industrial expansion in China will draw this away. And inevitably the demand will be for all workers to accept ever-lower wage rates and cuts in social programmes.

An alternative to continuing and even worsening sectarian conflict and declining living standards for all requires the adoption of an entirely new political orientation for Catholic and Protestant workers alike—socialist internationalism.

Republicanism offers no means of meeting the social and democratic aspirations of workers in the North or of ending the reactionary grip of unionism. Formal independence from Britain would not change the fact that all workers, irrespective of their national or religious affiliations, are exploited by huge transnational corporations whose sole concern is to impose the lowest wages and the longest hours of work, and to pay the least taxes.

Moreover, more than eight decades of "independence" have proven that the southern bourgeoisie, no less than its unionist counterparts, is only an alternative local representative of global capital and US, British and European imperialism. Its own history of trampling on democratic rights, the linking of Irish nationalism with Catholicism and the discrimination against Protestants is the most powerful recruiting sergeant for the Unionist bigots. There cannot be a successful argument for unity that is predicated on a demand that Protestants become a discriminated minority in a unified capitalist Ireland.

The task facing the working class is not the building of new nations and the reinforcing of national divisions, but a unified struggle by Catholic and Protestant, north and south of the border, Irish and British, in the struggle to establish a socialist Ireland as part of a United Socialist States of Europe. This demands the building of an Irish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.