Northern Ireland: Racist attacks force 100 Roma out of Belfast

Jordan Shilton
4 July 2009

Over the course of several days in June, violent attacks on the Roma community in Belfast forced at least 20 families to flee their homes and eventually to leave the UK. Evidence points to the involvement of extreme right-wing, fascistic groups in the ethnic cleansing. Those attempting to assist the fleeing families were also targeted.

The first reports of violence came on June 11 in the Lisburn road in south Belfast. Over the following weekend attacks against the Roma intensified, with the police receiving several emergency calls. On June 15 a mob threw bricks and other objects through the windows of homes, forcing over 100 Roma to seek refuge in a local church. The next day they were moved to a leisure centre under heavy police escort.

Those affected were mainly families, with nearly 50 of the total of 114 being children. Speaking to the *Belfast Telegraph* Couaccu Silius explained, “We are not going back to our house. It is not safe.

“They made signs like they wanted to cut my brother’s baby’s throat. They said they wanted to kill us. We are very scared. We have young children. We cannot go back. Possibly we could go back to Romania but we have no money.”

As it became clear that it would not be possible for the families to return to their homes, temporary accommodation was arranged with Queens University. In talks with the Romanian ambassador it was agreed that the Northern Irish government would pay for flights back home for those who wanted to leave. By June 26, at least 100 had returned to Romania, with only two people saying they were planning to remain in Belfast.

Reports claimed that graffiti had appeared in the area bearing the slogans of the neo-Nazi Combat 18 group and that attackers had posted extracts from *Mein Kampf* through the letterboxes of targeted homes.

Combat 18 was formed in the early 1990s and has been implicated in numerous vicious attacks on immigrants in Britain. Taking its name from Adolf Hitler’s initials, it split from the British National Party in protest at the BNP’s increasing focus on electoral politics. Several of its leading members have been imprisoned for assaults and murders of immigrants since the 1990s.

Similar groups were implicated in the discovery of pipe bombs in the south of the city and which were intended for further violence against foreign nationals. The *Observer* cited an anonymous source who stated that a shot gun had been smuggled into the area with the help of Combat 18 members in England. According to the source, “They sent a text message this week saying: ‘English C18 thanks all true loyalists for forcing Romanian Muslims out of Belfast and also Polish in mid Ulster out of their homes! These foreign nationals are a threat to Britain’s Britishness.’”

Attacks continued throughout the following week. Rallies in support of the displaced Romanians were attacked by youths wielding bottles. In another area of the city a Hindu priest and his family were forced from their home by threats of violence.

Attacks have also been directed against those seeking to help the displaced. On June 23, the church where the Roma families had sheltered a week earlier came under attack, with windows smashed and doors broken down. Paddy Meahan, who was involved in organising rallies against the racist attacks, was notified by police that his home was a potential target for a firebombing. Most recently, a member of Northern Ireland’s Local Assembly (MLA) has received threatening emails and warnings from police that her life is in danger. Anna Lo, of Chinese origin, has been outspoken in her support for the displaced Roma.

In spite of this intimidation, many ordinary people came to the aid of the Roma community, providing food, clothing and other essentials. Some of those living in the neighbourhood organised a group to guard the homes from further violence.

Protests have also continued. On June 20, anti-racism groups held a rally attended by several hundred and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions called a demonstration on July 2. Protesters have condemned the role of the police, with many criticising their inactivity. It was claimed that responses to emergency telephone calls from the Roma families were not acted upon by officers and that not enough was done to protect the families in their homes.

© World Socialist Web Site

The main concern of the police has been to downplay the involvement of loyalist groups, to which many officers are affiliated, in the attacks. Spokesmen declared that they did not believe loyalists had played a role. Such denials are not credible. Loyalism shares many ideological positions with the far right, including pro-British, racist and anti-immigrant attitudes. Moreover, the methods employed against the Roma community—pipe bombs, throwing bricks through windows—bear the hallmarks of loyalist and sectarian violence.

Politicians also claimed that the attacks were carried out by a disorganised minority. First Minister Peter Robinson, no doubt fearful of the effect the violence would have on foreign investment, complained that "Recent events here have damaged the image and reputation of Northern Ireland throughout the world."

Belfast Lord Mayor Naomi Long, of the Alliance party claimed that Northern Ireland was making "great strides towards a bright and shared future. We cannot let a small minority of people detract from that, or allow them to drive people from their homes."

Notwithstanding Long's comments, these attacks take place in the context of a society still deeply divided along sectarian lines. So-called "peace walls" can be found across Belfast, splitting working class communities on the basis of religion. The political system, based on the Good Friday agreement, entrenches sectarian division, with parties affiliated to either "nationalist" or "unionist" groups. This both ensures the continuation of sectarian divisions and provides a fertile base for the racist and xenophobic sentiments seen in the latest attacks.

Tensions are exacerbated by the worsening social crisis in Northern Ireland. Over the past twelve months, the unemployment rate has nearly doubled, rising by over 90 percent. Predictions point to the jobless rate rising to 9 percent next year, as the local economy is hit hard by public spending cutbacks.

The Village area of Belfast, where the initial attacks broke out, has had a reputation for some time for violence. As Tom McGurk noted in the *Sunday Business Post*, "The racist attacks on the Roma community in the Village area of Belfast will come as no surprise to those who know the place. "For years, it has been synonymous with the most extreme loyalist elements and, throughout the Troubles, was dominated by loyalist paramilitarism. During the worst days of the sectarian killings in Belfast, the Village was the headquarters for some of loyalism's bloodiest gangs."

He continued, "Increasingly decrepit and rundown, the Village is nowadays symbolic of what has happened to large sections of the North's unionist working-class communities, with huge levels of unemployment, poor levels of educational achievement and serious levels of alcohol and drug abuse."

The recent attacks are only the latest in a long line of racist incidents in Belfast. Though numbers are very small, since the Good Friday agreement in 1998 Northern Ireland has seen an increase in immigration with Chinese and Indian communities growing in size. The Chinese community in south Belfast has come in for persistent attacks, while Poles and Portuguese immigrants have also been targeted. Earlier this year in March, clashes broke out after a football match between Northern Ireland and Poland.

Throughout Europe, the Roma community faces xenophobia and discrimination, particularly in the former Stalinist states in Eastern Europe. A report detailing the conditions facing the Roma when they returned home to Romania was published by the *Times*. Describing the village of Batar it noted, "Twenty hours of journey time separate Belfast, via Dublin and Budapest, from Batar but, surveying the medieval conditions in which the Roma live here, one might do better to take as a measure of distance not years, nor even decades, but centuries.

"On the farthermost margins of the European Union a man's legs and arms were smeared with dirt as he toiled to make bricks from straw and mud to build another room on his home. It was, he said, to provide somewhere to sleep for the dozens of naked children—some of them malnourished, all of them filthy—who were running and swooping gleefully through the scattered rubbish."

Referring to the footage of Roma families forced from their homes, a Romanian journalist told the *Times*, "It's not so important. People here don't have a lot of sympathy for the Roma."

In neighbouring Hungary, xenophobic attacks on Roma are on the increase. In the past year, seven murders of Roma people have taken place, with the right-wing Hungarian Guard being implicated. The group has close ties to the Jobbik party, which saw its vote rise sharply in the European elections earlier in June. Jobbik ran an avowedly anti-Roma campaign, stating that it would clear the Roma out of Hungary in order to rid society of "gypsy crime."

In both Slovakia and the Czech Republic, unemployment in the Roma community runs as high as 70 percent. In Italy, where there is a large Roma community, xenophobic attacks were encouraged by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's proposal last May to fingerprint anyone identified as a "gypsy". The subsequent violence saw Roma camps destroyed, particularly near Naples.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site