

Northern Ireland: Policing and justice agreement heralds assault on living standards

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Threats and bribes from London, encouraged by Washington and Dublin, eventually convinced the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to agree to the transferring of policing and justice powers to the Northern Ireland Executive. Months of bitter negotiations at Hillsborough Castle culminated in a five-point agreement in a text that ran to a mere 3,000 words.

The agreement between Sinn Féin and the DUP was hailed as laying the basis for the stabilisation of Northern Ireland's political system. It was, according to the British prime minister, Gordon Brown, the "final piece in the jigsaw" of the protracted Northern Ireland peace process.

News of the February 5 deal was greeted by Irish *Taoiseach*, Brian Cowen, who was present at the announcement, and US President Barack Obama. Irish Congress of Trades Unions' General Secretary Peter Bunting welcomed "the promise of a new US-backed investment conference."

In fact, the provisions of the agreement will be directed against the working class. Responsibility for policing, the legal system and prisons is being transferred to a devolved state apparatus run jointly by Irish nationalists and pro-British unionists. This will retain all the sectarian features built into the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which brought the decades-long conflict between British imperialism and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) to an end. The deal is a precursor to intense attacks on living standards and social spending in Northern Ireland and the large-scale privatisation of services.

The agreement has a tight timetable, which, if sustained, will see policing and justice powers transferred to Stormont before the expected date of the British General Election on May 6. Policing transfer has for many years proved to be a particularly problematic component of the incorporation of Sinn Féin into the apparatus of Northern Ireland state.

Following the Patten report in 1998, simultaneous with the Good Friday Agreement, the then Protestant-dominated Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) was substantially reformed and some of its more hard-line unionist elements cleared out or forced into early retirement. The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) was formed on the basis of seeking to recruit as many Catholics as Protestants, and presented as a "normal" police force.

Nevertheless, deeply entrenched opposition within the state

and security services remained to handing over partial control of policing to Sinn Féin, even after the disbanding of the Provisional IRA. Neither have unionists been assuaged by the fact that following the St. Andrews Agreement of 2006, Sinn Féin and the DUP have worked fairly closely together in Stormont, despite its repeated suspensions since it was first revived in 1998.

Sinn Féin only voted to fully endorse the PSNI in 2007. This opened the door to preparations for the transfer, final details for which have now been accepted. It has campaigned long and hard to convince Catholics that the PSNI should be more trusted than its hated predecessor. The focus of recent bombings by republican dissidents has been to force Catholics to refrain from joining the PSNI.

Under the Hillsborough Agreement, Policing and Justice will be transferred to the Northern Ireland Assembly on April 12, following a "cross community" vote. A Department of Justice will be established, with a justice minister appointed jointly by the first and deputy first minister (Peter Robinson of the DUP and Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness). The most likely candidate is David Ford, leader of the Alliance Party, which began life as a moderate unionist party, but is not formally designated as representing a particular "community" under the sectarian provisions of the Good Friday Agreement. It is affiliated to the Liberal Democrats in the UK. An attorney general will also be appointed.

The Justice Minister will head a department whose annual cost will be some £800 million. While this sum was identified in a finance document released from London in October, the Hillsborough draft includes additional amounts specifically designed to buy off unionist opposition, particularly amongst former members of the RUC. £101 million is set aside for police pensions. A further £60 million is to be made available for hearing loss claims submitted by former members of the police.

Secondly, the Parades Commission is to be abolished, replaced by local arrangements supervised by a working group chaired by the first and deputy first minister. These local arrangements will involve those seeking to parade, local resident representatives and "other stakeholders." Abolition of the Parades Commission was a key demand from the Orange

Order, and the basis on which it was willing to support the transfer of policing. The Order clearly believes that more Orange marches will take place, particularly a small number of highly contested ones, under the new arrangements. A schedule for the abolition of the Parades Commission by the end of 2010 is set out in the Hillsborough text.

Three other issues are considered in the published agreement, but these only run to a few short paragraphs intended to ensure Stormont and the Executive function more efficiently, and that outstanding business delayed because of the policing dispute is hurried through.

Despite the concessions to the unionists, agreement was only achieved at the last minute. Aspects of the transfer were opposed by elements within the DUP concerned at losing support to the hard-line Traditional Unionist Voice group of former DUP member Jim Allister. DUP fears were intensified by the crisis surrounding First Minister Peter Robinson, when, shortly before the final phase of talks, his wife was exposed as having solicited money from leading DUP supporting property developers for her lover and herself.

Faced with this procrastination, the British government warned the DUP that if a deal were not agreed Sinn Fein would pull out from the assembly, triggering new elections in Northern Ireland that the DUP would lose. Brown warned the DUP that these elections would be held as soon as possible and definitely before May. Faced with this, the DUP fell into line.

The haste to finish the transfer of policing is part of a general preparation for an assault on living standards across Britain and Northern Ireland. The British financial aristocracy intend to claw back the vast sums squandered over the last year on bailing out all its major banks from the working class.

Public spending in Northern Ireland amounts to £16 billion, half of which is allocated to Stormont. This translates to £9,385 per head, compared with £7,121 per head in England. Over 30 percent of workers are employed in the public sector, compared to 20 percent in England. From the standpoint of the British government, these expenditures must be slashed. It hopes that transferring policing and justice powers will allow the social tensions arising out of spending and wage cuts to be safely managed by the devolved Sinn Fein/DUP Executive, armed as it is with immense experience of sectarian manipulation to set working people against each other.

Northern Ireland's finance minister, the DUP's Sammy Wilson, has already announced agreed budget cuts of £370 million for 2010. Sinn Fein and the DUP are already committed to introducing the privatisation of bus services. Much more is to come.

Wilson has warned of an "extremely challenging time" in the immediate future. He pledged to divert spending from "less important areas" to "invest in a manner that generates enduring and tangible economic returns." For "less important areas," read social spending, health, art and culture.

Press commentary has also echoed repeated complaints that

wage levels in the public sector are 40 percent higher than in private companies. Bro McFerran, head of the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and technology company Allstate NI complained to the *Belfast Telegraph*, "We cannot afford to have this public sector dependent culture anymore because it is stifling any entrepreneurship that is out there." McFerran called for public services to be given "electric shock treatment."

The Northern Ireland economy is in poor shape. A handful of new companies attracted by the DUP and Sinn Fein's investment policy will not offset the ongoing collapse of what remains of Northern Ireland's once powerful manufacturing industry and the onset of recession.

Last year alone 8,400 manufacturing jobs, 10 percent of the total, were lost. Over the period of the last round of negotiations two US companies pulled out, at the cost of 350 jobs. Some 54,500 workers are officially unemployed, around 6.8 percent of the total and a 50 percent increase in one year. Real unemployment is much higher, with 27.8 percent of working age adults described as "economically inactive." Pay freezes and reduced hours have been utilised to pass on the costs of recession to the working class.

A building boom in Belfast has come to a grinding halt. A flagship investment project, the aptly-named Titanic Quarter on the site of the Harland & Wolff dock from which the ill-fated ocean liner was launched, has hit its own iceberg in the form of the collapse of property prices. Land values have fallen by as much as 60 percent. The huge riverside project, presented as Northern Ireland's solution to recession, is half empty in a property market saturated with recently built office blocks and luxury flats.



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