The royal visit to Ireland

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A huge security operation is being rolled out to protect Queen Elizabeth and her husband Philip during their four day visit to Ireland beginning today. The measures will be extended for the visit of US President Barack Obama just three days later.

The royal tour is the first visit by a British monarch to the Republic of Ireland since the creation of the Irish Free State and independence from Britain. It has been described as an historic moment, with Taoiseach Enda Kenny hailing it as “symbolically a healing of the past” and President Mary McAleese as a “signal of the success of the peace process” and a sign that Ireland and Britain were forging a “new future, a future very, very different from the past, on very different terms from the past”.

The queen will be taken around a number of locations with historical associations with the struggle for Irish independence. There, much in the manner of then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s 1997 apology for the 19th century potato famine which killed 1.5 million people, some carefully crafted expressions of “official remorse” will be made. Prime Minister David Cameron has already paved the way by personally apologising for the British army’s murder of 13 people on Bloody Sunday, January 30, 1972.

The visit has long been desired, as proof of the successful outcome of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which was endorsed by referendums in the north and south. The Agreement put an end to armed conflict in the North by establishing power-sharing between the Unionists and Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland, with the backing of Britain, Ireland and the United States. The broader aim was to secure bilateral relations with the republic, to further investment and trade.

Since then relations between London, Washington and Dublin have become ever more closely intertwined.

The back-to-back visits of the queen and Obama are a reward for Ireland’s role as a trusted ally of two of the most predatory imperialist powers on the planet. As well as serving as a major base for financial parasitism and a cheap production location for transnationals seeking entry to the European Union, Ireland has despatched troops to Afghanistan. Shannon airport is a mid-Atlantic staging post for the US military and CIA extraordinary rendition flights.

In addition, after the 2008 financial collapse, Ireland has spearheaded the drive by European governments, the European Union and the International Monetary Fund to dump the huge losses run up by the financial speculators onto the backs of working people. Some €70 billion in tax-payers’ funds has been transferred to Ireland’s banks, around 45 per cent of the country’s annual gross domestic product. Much of this is to be taken from the government pension fund.

This has been accompanied by the most stringent austerity measures—that have seen unemployment shoot over 13 percent and still rising—policed by the Irish trade unions.

The aim of this massive subvention of public monies is to protect the wealth of the super-rich and Europe’s major banks and financial institutions. Of these vast sums, around £140 billion of Irish debts are held by leading British banks. Lloyds Banking Group recently announced that of its £27 billion worth of loans to Ireland, some 60 per cent was impaired. RBS loans of £52 billion in Ireland were by March this year producing some £7.3 billion worth of losses.

Defending these massive loans was the primary consideration behind the British government’s offer of over £7 billion in line with the EU/IMF “bailout” offered to Ireland to prevent a debt default last November.

The royal visit, the proof desired by Ireland’s wealthiest layers that all differences with the former colonial power were ancient history, was finalised the same month.

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The visit also reflects the broader mutual interests between the capitalists in both countries. Agricultural and manufacturing imports, exports and inter-company trade flow between Britain and Ireland, worth some £43 billion in 2008. Sixteen per cent of all Irish exports are destined for Britain, while 7 per cent of British exports stop in Ireland. British direct investment in Ireland the same year was worth £23.4 billion, while Irish investment in the UK amount to £10.1 billion. British-based companies export more to Ireland that to China, Russia, Brazil and India combined.

Numerous leading British companies have a high profile in Ireland and vice versa, while 60 Irish companies are listed on the London Stock Exchange—more than anywhere else. Over 40,000 directors of British companies are listed as having been born in Ireland. A British and Irish Chamber of Commerce is set to open this month. The exploitation of the working class on both sides of the Irish Sea is a joint project by an increasingly integrated capitalist class in Britain, the Irish Republic and the British controlled North.

These fundamental considerations account for the unanimous support for the visit from the Irish political and trade union establishment. The tour was agreed by the Fianna Fail/Green coalition, implemented by its Labour/Fine Gael successor and endorsed by the leadership of Sinn Fein. Martin McGuinness, now sitting in Stormont alongside the Democratic Unionist Party, advised that any protests would be “a mistake”.

On Friday, Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams issued a statement. Adams, who for years refused to swear an oath of allegiance to the British monarch and was barred from taking his elected seat in Westminster, expressed his hope that the royal visit would improve relations between the two countries. He said the visit would “be a matter of considerable pleasure, not just for her Majesty, but for the rest of us as well”.

In a country where the constant invoking of nationalism and Ireland’s colonial past is the screen by which political and social realities are concealed from the masses, the visit offers a moment of clarity. All the major parties claiming adherence to one or another form of Irish republicanism have united in order in the interests of the ruling elites.

Some 6,000 *garda* (police), special-forces and intelligence operatives from Britain, Ireland and the US will be deployed in Dublin and Cork. Hundreds of houses, shops and offices are being inspected for concealed weapons and secured by bomb disposal teams. Surface to air missile defences are being set up at Casement Aerodrome, while armed officers will patrol the Liffey river and Dublin’s canals in inflatable dinghies. Snipers are to be deployed as well “saturation” policing using massive numbers of plain clothes and uniformed police, soldiers and US-trained rangers.

An Irish army riot control platoon will be on standby in Dublin. Riot control vehicles armed with water cannons are being borrowed from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Domestic surveillance both by Garda Special Branch and the G2 Covert Intelligence Unit is being massively intensified.

The ostensible targets for such “security” arrangements are republicans opposed to the power-sharing agreement. But this is out of all proportion to the tiny numbers of such “dissident” forces. As workers face the most savage attacks on wages, welfare and social provisions in the history of the Irish state, there is a clear element of political intimidation involved in such a naked display of state power. More than anything else, the extraordinary level of security testifies to a shared commitment of the British and Irish financial elite to enforce unpopular austerity measures demanded by the financial oligarchy against any and all opposition.

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