

Northern Ireland: Ulster Volunteer Force instigates sectarian riots

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On June 21, Belfast witnessed the return of intercommunal street battles of a ferocity not seen for years. The violence, instigated by the loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force, was directed at the Short Strand area of the city, a Catholic enclave long a target for loyalist violence.

Around 100 masked men wearing camouflage gear and surgical gloves attacked Catholic homes and the local St. Matthews Church with bricks and paint bombs. Short Strand residents responded in kind. Gunshots were exchanged from both sides. The following evening, hundreds of young people fought each other and the police.

In the end, three people, including a 16-year-old youth and a press photographer, were shot. Another ended up in hospital with a fractured skull, while there were numerous minor injuries. Gunshots, blast bombs, petrol bombs, fireworks and rocks were exchanged between the rioters and directed at armoured police Land Rovers.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland replied with water cannon and plastic bullets. TV pictures showed police vehicles on Newtonards Road driven at speed towards rioters to force them off the streets. Youth lobbed petrol bombs at the vans, before attacking them with sledgehammers and their bare hands.

Fighting followed weeks of escalating intercommunal tension as the Protestant “marching season” builds towards the annual July 12 celebration of Protestant William of Orange’s victory over the Catholic James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. A number of the most controversial marches, in which Protestant Orangemen march past or through nationalist areas, generate tensions every year. Last year, for example, three days of rioting instigated by dissident republican groups followed a march past the nationalist Ardoyne area.

Responsible for 358 civilian killings, including many of

the most sadistic, the UVF is an extreme right group. Most of its victims were innocent Catholics. Although the organisation supports the Good Friday Agreement, has been on a cease-fire and has decommissioned some of its weaponry, it has by no means wound itself up and is involved in drugs and extortion.

The UVF reportedly triggered riots to flag its alarm over activities of the PSNI’s Historical Enquiries Team (HET), which is investigating thousands of unsolved murders from the 30-year “Troubles” beginning in the late 1960s. A number of UVF members have recently been arrested and more are expected based on evidence from a number of police agents within the organisation. “HET Go Home” graffiti have recently appeared on East Belfast gable ends.

But the UVF’s ability to mobilise support from an impoverished working class Protestant area rests primarily on current conditions.

The state apparatus in Northern Ireland continues to rest on the maintenance and manipulation of communal divisions. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 was aimed at bringing the armed conflict to an end in order to reduce military involvement, slash public spending and create the necessary stability to secure global investment. To do so meant not only incorporating Sinn Fein into a Northern Ireland executive, but, more generally, recognising the demographic shifts in the six counties by creating opportunities for advancement for a layer of the Catholic petty bourgeoisie.

The main loyalist parties, first the Ulster Unionists and then later the Democratic Unionist Party, accommodated themselves to this arrangement. It meant they would retain top seats in the political and economic set-up in Northern Ireland, even if these were shared with their Catholic/Nationalist counterparts—Sinn Fein and the Social Democratic Labour Party.

Under the Agreement's terms, the entire structure of political life, from the sectarian designation of members of the Northern Ireland Assembly in Stormont to the structure of local government and the allocation of public funds was, and remains, based on the lie of there being two religious "communities". As a consequence, Belfast is now a more divided city than ever, with both sectarian political parties and former paramilitary members arguing for more for "their" people. There are now at least 48 "peace walls", dividing Protestant and Catholic working class areas, up from 37 in 2006, while numerous community, education and sports facilities are duplicated. One barrier even runs through a public park.

In the immediate aftermath of the Agreement, public spending actually increased and, along with a property boom, somewhat masked the wholly divisive character of the new arrangements. Now, however, an intense social crisis is being created. As part of the British Conservative-Liberal Democrat government's unprecedented cuts programme, the DUP/Sinn Fein administration in Stormont has agreed to 8 percent spending cuts, and a 40 percent reduction in capital spending, out of a public sector budget that accounts for more than 60 percent of the local economy.

In addition, the British government and the Northern Ireland executive are both seeking to lower the rate of corporation tax, which will further constrict public spending.

The recession has driven up unemployment. As of April 2011, some 59,500 people, 7.2 percent of the economically active population, were unemployed. Although this compares favourably with the rest of the UK (7.7 percent) and the Irish Republic (14.7 percent), it also represents a sharp intensification. Some 3,900 jobs were lost since last April, a much sharper increase than across the UK.

Some 27.8 percent of the population is economically inactive—the highest for any UK region. The situation appears likely to deteriorate rapidly. A March 2011 report from PWC accountants estimated that unemployment would reach between 9 and 10 percent by the end of 2011.

This economic decline affects both Catholic and Protestant workers, but the sectarian partition of social life facilitates the manipulation of class tensions into an intercommunal struggle over schools, parks, community centres, hospitals—everything that is under threat.

In the most impoverished Protestant areas in East Belfast,

where the once huge engineering industries used to recruit most of their labour, several generations of workers have seen secure employment destroyed. According to sectarian propaganda, all the benefits of the "new" Northern Ireland are going to "the other lot" rather than where it is really directed—into the major corporations, financial institutions and their representatives in Stormont.

While manipulating sectarian divisions, the political apparatus, with longstanding connections to the paramilitary groups on both sides, is acutely aware of the need to prevent such tensions from undermining Northern Ireland's pitch for international investment. The Northern Ireland First Minister, the DUP's Peter Robinson, and Sinn Fein Deputy Martin McGuinness both expressed alarm at the impact of the riots on efforts to draw in tourists and business.

According to the *Belfast Telegraph*, last week Robinson, along with leading DUP members, held a private meeting with the UVF, including its local East Belfast leadership. No doubt concessions were offered with regard to the HET inquiries.

No way out of this exists outside of the construction of a political movement in the working class seeking to unify Catholic, Protestant and all other workers against attacks on living standards. This is inseparable from a struggle to unite workers in Northern Ireland with workers in Britain, Ireland and Europe for the overthrow of capitalism. It is only on this basis that social wealth can be directed towards social need and the entire sectarian apparatus of class rule in Northern Ireland be dismantled once and for all.



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