

Sinn Fein's Martin McGuinness greets British monarch

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The brief meeting of Britain's Queen Elizabeth II and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland Martin McGuinness has been widely hailed as an "historic" event. The pair publicly shook hands last week during the queen's visit to Belfast to mark her diamond jubilee.

Yet for most people, the handshake was a non-event. It aroused no significant outrage, either in republican circles or among pro-British unionists in the north. Generally, it was viewed as of a piece with Sinn Fein's integration into the structures of official politics, rather than any departure from the organisation's former position not to recognise the authority of the British monarch.

McGuinness had in fact made clear his willingness to meet the queen during his bid for the Irish presidency. Last year, when the queen toured sites in Dublin and Cork, McGuinness declared that any protests opposing her presence would be "a mistake", while his co-leader Gerry Adams welcomed the visit as "a matter of considerable pleasure".

Having signed up to the Good Friday Agreement 14 years ago and taken a position in coalition governments with both the main unionist parties, McGuinness was hardly going to strain over a handshake with Elizabeth Windsor. Neither was the queen going to allow any personal animosity to prevent her from acknowledging services rendered by her former political enemy.

In a keynote speech delivered to a Sinn Fein reception at Portcullis House, House of Commons, on June 28, McGuinness described his meeting as "highly political", "highly significant" and "highly symbolic" in defining a new "relationship between Britain and Ireland and between the Irish people themselves".

McGuinness never once sought to distinguish the queen as a representative of imperialism from the

British working class, speaking always of her as the representative of the "British people" or of "Britain"—a homogenous mass universally guilty of crimes against Ireland. In contrast he praised everyone involved in the Irish Peace Process—"from Presidents to Taoisaigh to Prime Ministers, from politicians to church and community leaders ... who placed building a new future ahead of fighting old battles".

Britain's history of "colonialism, plantation, division and partition" had "fostered inequality, division and conflict", but things were changing for the better. To complete the process of national reconciliation required only further "mutual respect and decisive actions", as well as admissions of guilt on the part of Britain for its various crimes.

If a more receptive and positive stance were adopted by Prime Minister David Cameron, McGuinness told his audience, then all parties would prosper and Ireland would eventually be unified through Britain's agreement to honour a 50 percent plus one result in a border poll.

"[W]e now operate in a new context of compromise, agreement and peace. Dialogue has replaced conflict. Respect has replaced mistrust", he concluded.

For Sinn Fein leaders, this might well be the case. But for millions of Irish working people, on both sides of the border, it will seem far removed from their daily reality.

Partition is a historic crime perpetrated by British imperialism against the Irish people; one that left a bitter legacy of oppression and sectarian divisions. McGuinness speaks, however, as though independence for the southern 26 counties brought a land of milk and honey into being, which the six counties in the north need only join to resolve all the problems of the Irish people.

In reality, the Republic of Ireland is presently witnessing a massive political and social offensive by the Irish bourgeoisie on workers to impose the savage austerity measures being demanded by the “Troika”—the European Union, European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Political independence could not bring genuine independence from imperialist oppression, because the Irish bourgeoisie act as exploiters of the working class and as local representatives of the global financiers and the major powers to which they are subordinate.

Sinn Fein wants to end partition, but on the basis of securing for itself the role now occupied by its southern political rivals, Fine Gael, Fianna Fail, et al, in a united state as a trusted representative of imperialist interests and a defender of Irish capitalism.

Sinn Fein trades on an anti-imperialist reputation in its pose of providing an alternative to the Fine Gael/Labour coalition’s austerity drive. But in line with the programme of the Conservative-Liberal government in London, the Sinn Fein-DUP coalition in the Assembly at Stormont have laid out cuts to Northern Ireland’s budget totalling £4 billion from 2011 to 2015. This includes a 40 percent cut in capital spending on projects such as new hospitals, schools and infrastructure.

Northern Ireland relies more than any other area of the UK on public spending, with over a third of all jobs found in the public sector. The impact of the cuts has thus been especially severe, with more than 11,000 public sector jobs eliminated in recent years. There have been an additional 37,000 private sector job losses since the onset of the economic crisis. Employment figures have fallen in every quarter except one in the past fifteen. While the official unemployment rate is close to 7 percent, the reality is much worse, with over 120,000 economically inactive.

The Sinn Fein-DUP administration is also preparing an attack on social welfare payments, pushing through their own version of the Welfare Reform Bill. This will result in welfare payments being capped, as well as the slashing of individual payments to those out of work and with long-term disabilities.

While cutting services, Sinn Fein is campaigning for the devolution of powers so as to control corporation tax. They want it slashed to attract investment, possibly from the current rate of 24 percent to the 12.5 percent

rate charged in the Republic. DUP leader Peter Robinson has called for the tax rate to be reduced even further to 10 percent.

This is accompanied by plans to slash wages to levels comparable with Asia and Eastern Europe. A report from Oxford Economics based its support for a corporation tax cut in Northern Ireland on a comparison of so-called “best practice” across such locations as Singapore, South Korea, Estonia, Poland and the Czech Republic.

McGuinness’s aim, with his public reconciliation with the monarchy, was to send a message to international big business that Northern Ireland offers a stable environment in which to invest, governed by a political elite who have laid aside previous sectarian differences to carry through the necessary attacks on the working class.

It must also be stressed that contrary to the hype about past differences having been overcome, Sinn Fein and its unionist counterparts work deliberately to encourage and maintain communal divisions in the working class in a strategy of divide-and-rule. They agreed to the provision that all parties in the Assembly must identify themselves as either unionist or republican, and this framework is applied to public services, including housing and education. To this day, at least 80 barriers or “peace walls” divide Catholic and Protestant communities across the province, a figure which has risen sharply since the Good Friday Agreement came into force.

Genuine freedom from imperialist oppression is bound up inexorably with the fight to end class oppression, to replace capitalism with a socialist system based on production for need, not profit on a global scale. Only on this perspective is it possible to forge a party that can unite all Irish workers in its ranks against the various parties of big business in the struggle for a united Socialist Ireland as part of a United Socialist States of Europe.



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