

# Orange march triggers riot in Belfast

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Backed by large numbers of riot police, and authorised by Northern Ireland's Parades Commission, a small group of Orangemen marched 300 metres past shops adjoining the nationalist working-class Ardoyne area on Belfast's Crumlin Road July 12.

The annual sectarian provocation was opposed by Ardoyne residents and greeted at the end of its five-minute journey by hundreds of loyalist supporters. Two hours later, rioting erupted when a counterdemonstration by 700 dissident republican nationalists supporting the Greater Ardoyne Residents Coalition encountered loyalist protesters and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).

Over the next few hours, up to 10 gunshots were exchanged and petrol bombs and bricks thrown. Cars were set alight. Police used water cannon and plastic bullets against republican protesters. A number of police were injured, and four men were arrested. Police have promised more arrests.

Smaller confrontations between youth and the PSNI were also reported in other corners of the Ardoyne and in the Bogside area of Derry.

The trouble followed weeks of escalating tensions over the timing and number of participants in the Crumlin Road march, which has over recent years replaced Portadown's Garvaghy Road as the focus of sectarian conflict. This year, the Parades Commission authorised the march, but insisted that it should be concluded by 4 p.m. to avoid a nationalist counterdemonstration.

The 4 p.m. deadline meant that those seeking to participate would be unable to wait until the end of the mass Orange rally being held some miles away at Belfast's Barnett's Demesne. The rally, attended by thousands of loyalists, is the focal point of the July 12 celebrations of the 1690 victory of William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne. The ruling saw both unionist and republican politicians attack the Parades

Commission, playing to their respective audiences.

The Parades Commission was set up in 1996 as part of the process that ultimately integrated Sinn Fein into the structures of British rule in the North of Ireland. Its purpose has been to politically oversee all religious and political marches following the huge standoffs between Ulster loyalists and the British Army around Drumcree Church in Portadown in the 1990s. It has powers to reroute marches or restrict the numbers and behaviour of participants. It has become an essential instrument of sectarian manipulation.

Nigel Dodds, deputy leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), ranted that the Parades Commission decision was "appalling because it actually presents a reward for the same outfit that last year, and the year before, created the violence at Ardoyne."

Sinn Fein's Policing and Criminal Justice spokesman Gerry Kelly also complained, "The Parades Commission couldn't really have made a worse decision. Instead of dealing with a decreasing number of parades, they're now spiralling upwards."

Sinn Fein shares political responsibility with the Orange order for the continuation of sectarian tensions. The party's agreement to share power with the unionist parties was based on an explicit recognition and perpetuation of politics in Ireland being based upon existing sectarian divisions. This would always have resulted in a competition for scarce resources between Protestants and Catholics, unionist and nationalists. But in recent years, this has been made worse still by the Sinn Fein/Democratic Unionist Party coalition imposing sweeping spending cuts on behalf of the Conservative/LibDem government in Westminster. Both parties aim to develop investment in Northern Ireland by cutting corporation taxes and cutting public spending.

Sinn Fein's aim for a united capitalist Ireland

ultimately relies on waiting for changing demographics to favour the nationalist “community” and therefore to increase the Sinn Fein vote. Wedded to the bourgeoisie and seeking relations with the major global corporations, it makes no effort to counter sectarianism with even the most minimal social and economic measures benefitting the working class, Catholic and Protestant.

The corollary to its agenda is that the unionist “community” will decline and lose influence—something the Protestant bourgeoisie is equally determined to oppose and to which end it cultivates a sectarian backlash.

In conditions of deepening austerity, competition for declining resources, many of which are duplicated for both supposed “communities”, necessarily deepens sectarian tensions.

Thirteen years after the Good Friday Agreement, unionists have repackaged Orangeism as a celebration of “community” culture. Belfast now hosts an annual “Oranifest”, described by the city’s lord mayor, Gavin Robinson, as “recognised for its potential to bring tourists and visitors into our city...a celebration of our heritage and culture.” But Orangeism remains the embodiment of sectarian anti-Catholic, pro-Union bigotry. It upholds right-wing, anti-democratic positions profoundly hostile to the interests of all working people on every major social and political issue.

The period culminating in the Crumlin Road march sees Orange marches take place all across Northern Ireland, including 18 large parades on July 12, along with hundreds of minor ones, involving tens of thousands of people. Five thousand marched in the village of Keady, watched by 20,000 spectators. The village of Crumlin anticipated 1,000 marchers in 50 flute bands, in a mainly nationalist town.

In addition, in central Scotland, 46 parades took place in Glasgow in July 12 alone, involving up to 8,000 people, while another 8,000 marched in Stirling the previous Saturday. Most of these do not culminate in riots, but the prevailing atmosphere is one of intimidating alcohol-fuelled sectarian bigotry.

Amongst the numerous public comments by Orange Order leaders in the run-up to this year’s July 12, grandmaster of the Grand Orange Lodge Edward Stevenson accused Irish republicans of waging a

campaign of “genocide” during Britain’s dirty war in Northern Ireland. Stevenson complained that “republicans are trying their best to re-write history...to make it look as their campaign of murder was somehow justified.”

Imperial grand master of the Independent Orange Institution Alan McLean warned a demonstration at Rasharkin that Conservative prime minister David Cameron’s proposal to change the law of succession to allow the British monarch to marry a Catholic meant “It is only a matter of time before our Protestant monarchy is in real danger.”

McLean noted the hundredth anniversary of Ulster’s Solemn League and Covenant and the motto “For God and Ulster”: “The efforts down the years by our enemies to cajole us, to bomb us, to force us into a united Ireland have come to nothing.”

Putting these words into action was a loyalist street band, caught on camera marching in a circle for 20 minutes outside a Catholic Church on Donegall Street, Belfast, on July 12. The band played the “famine song”, a creation of supporters of Scottish football club Glasgow Rangers. The song is a sectarian reference to the Irish famine of 1845-1852, in which 1 million people died and a million more were forced to emigrate from Ireland. It tells Catholic fans of rival Celtic to go back to Ireland.

The persistence of sectarian riots and the excesses and backwardness of the annual marching season testify to enormous underlying class tensions. They point to the basic fact confronting working people in Northern Ireland: Not a single step forward can be made outside of the struggle for an independent political movement in the working class. Its task is to unite Catholic and Protestant workers by sweeping away the structure of sectarian rule in the North, and capitalist rule in the whole of Ireland and Britain.



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