

Sectarian violence erupts in Northern Ireland

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Sectarian violence has again flared up on the streets of Belfast.

Groups of nationalists and unionists battled over three nights with police, causing dozens of injuries, after a parade last Sunday by a Republican group ended in rioting and violent clashes provoked mainly by a unionist counter-demonstration.

The latest unrest comes in the wake of months of violence in the city, which began with Orange Order parades held on July 12. After the official Parades Commission permitted a march to proceed through a Republican-dominated area, violence erupted between dissident Republicans, opposed to Sinn Fein's agreement to power-sharing with the pro-British Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the police at a counter-demonstration later in the day.

Tensions rose further when it was revealed that a small band of loyalists, belonging to the Royal Black Institution, had surrounded a Catholic church during a march and played sectarian songs.

Following this, the Parades Commission ruled that the same unionist group could hold a planned march on August 25 past a Catholic church, but ordered the band of the Royal Black Institution not to play any music while doing so. Unsurprisingly, the loyalist march went ahead and disregarded the ruling, with reports again of sectarian songs being played and sung along the route.

The Republican march that provoked the latest round of violence came just a week later near Carlisle Circus in north Belfast. The subsequent clashes caused more than 60 injuries among police officers, and led to several arrests.

A prominent role in the violence has been played by members of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), a paramilitary organisation that fought the Irish Republican Army (IRA) for decades. According to the *Guardian's* long-time Ireland correspondent Henry McDonald, a former secret envoy who conducted

negotiations between the Irish government in Dublin and the UVF will meet with loyalist leaders later in the week.

Behind the public posturing of leading political figures urging "peace" and mutual respect between both "communities", which has included proposals for a meeting with Northern Ireland's police commissioner, Matt Baggett, sowing sectarian divisions is the bread and butter of both major political parties. Their concern is only that they do not get out of hand.

After the third day of clashes, Sinn Fein leader Martin McGuinness and DUP leader and First Minister Peter Robinson held talks with local politicians and community leaders to seek an agreement over future marches. With a large loyalist march planned for September 29, warnings have been made by police that fatalities are inevitable.

Both leaders utilised the talks to play to their own constituencies, holding separate press conferences afterwards. Robinson, who met privately with an Orange Order delegation, commented that he wanted to see an end to the Parades Commission. At the end of August, he had co-signed a letter with other unionist leaders condemning the commission as "arrogant, incompetent and ignorant", describing some of its rulings as "monstrous." Coming shortly after the ruling against the loyalist flute band, this was widely interpreted as a defence of unionist provocations.

For his part, McGuinness postured as a defender of the "rule of law", urging that Parades Commission decisions be respected. He warned that the peace process as a whole was being undermined. "The Parades Commission is a lawfully instituted organisation that was put there because of the difficulties that existed with contentious parades in different parts of the north," he said. "If people are not prepared to abide by those determinations, then what they're effectively doing is sowing the seeds of further

conflict within our society and I think they're making a big mistake."

The Parades Commission, established in 1996, was a key part of the Good Friday Agreement, which saw Sinn Fein fully integrated into the state structures of Northern Ireland. The Commission's powers, including the ability to reroute marches and place conditions on the behaviour of participants, has become a vital political mechanism for the manipulation of sectarian conflicts.

Notwithstanding McGuinness's claims that the violence had merely been caused by "bigotry", and that the "rule of law" must prevail, the reality is that the legal structures instituted as a result of the Good Friday Agreement have entrenched and perpetuated the sectarian divisions that still dominate Northern Ireland, both politically and in daily life. Each party is meant to represent its designated "community", Catholic or Protestant, Republican/nationalist or Unionist.

The population lives and to some extent works in largely segregated areas. Indeed, the years since the signing of the Agreement have seen this develop more perfectly. Every social problem besetting working people is cast through the prism of an intercommunity contest for ever-dwindling resources.

This social tinderbox is being stoked further as the Sinn Fein-DUP regional administration at Stormont imposes the austerity measures of the Conservative-Liberal government in London. A package of £4 billion in spending cuts between 2011 and 2015 has been implemented by the Stormont coalition, including reductions in capital spending, education and welfare. Because Northern Ireland's proportion of public spending is higher in comparison with other areas in the UK, the cuts have exacerbated the problem of unemployment, with thousands of public sector jobs being eliminated. The latest unemployment figures saw an increase of those out of work to 7.6 percent between April and June this year, a rise of 0.8 percent.

There is no way out of the ever-present sectarian tensions, the deepening social crisis, and rising unemployment within the existing framework of capitalist rule in Northern Ireland. The continuation of sectarian violence on Belfast's streets points to the urgent necessity for the development within the working class of an independent socialist perspective, which rejects the reactionary politics of both loyalism

and republicanism.

Against the constant efforts to divide working people along religious lines, the working class must advance a programme to defend its own independent class interests in a struggle for a workers' government against the bourgeoisie on both sides of the border, Orange and Green, in the UK and internationally.



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