

Outburst of loyalist violence in Northern Ireland

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Belfast and a number of towns in Northern Ireland have been gripped by sporadic loyalist protests over the last week. Rioting and political violence followed a decision by Belfast City Council to restrict the number of days on which Britain's Union flag will fly over Belfast City Hall.

After the December 3 vote, the union flag, hitherto permanently on display, and the Irish tricolour will both be run up for 17 or so days each per year. Immediately afterwards, 1,500 loyalist supporters, many of them young, protested outside the meeting, blocked traffic and attacked police with fireworks, brick and bottles. Fifteen police officers were reported injured. At one point, council officials were locked in their rooms as a group of protesters broke into the City Hall. Shortly after, some homes in the Catholic Short Strand area of the city were attacked.

Smaller protests took place in Derry and other towns over the subsequent days. December 8 saw further clashes following protests involving around 2,000 loyalists in the city centre and an extended standoff between police and loyalist supporters around the Crumlin Road. Cars were set on fire and police water cannon deployed.

Alongside the protests outside City Hall, loyalists have targeted the offices and leading figures of the Alliance Party, which holds the balance of power in Belfast. During the last week, a number of leading Alliance figures, including East Belfast Westminster MP Naomi Long, have received death threats, and one councillor, also in East Belfast, has been forced to flee her home.

Protests were held outside a number of Alliance Party offices, including one in Carrickfergus that was burnt out. Another arson attempt was prevented in Bangor. A number of Alliance members have also reported their

homes were attacked.

The Alliance attracted loyalist ire because it proposed and voted for the new policy, although it opposed a Sinn Fein proposal to completely remove the Union flag.

Given the sectarian split on the city council, under which neither nationalist Sinn Fein nor the hard-right, unionist Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) can muster a majority, Alliance support was crucial.

The Alliance is a right-wing bourgeois party. Formed in the 1970s as a "moderate", non-religious denominational but pro-union party, it supported the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 that built sectarian division into the power-sharing agreement under which Northern Ireland has subsequently been run. It now proclaims a common Christian community in the north and neutrality on whether or not the six counties remain in the UK or become part of the Republic of Ireland.

Post-1998, the party was eclipsed by the rise of the DUP and Sinn Fein but has recently had something of a revival. It now claims support from both Catholics and Protestants, including significant support from younger voters. Long, also the party's deputy leader, won DUP leader Peter Robinson's seat in 2010 following a property scandal involving Robinson's wife, Iris.

Alliance, the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) are now locked in a battle for control of East Belfast. It is this conflict amid deepening social tension that has driven the flags protests and the outburst of violence.

More fundamentally, the continuing sectarian polarisation within Northern Ireland, which all the major parties uphold, gives the flags issue such resonance. Flags—whether the union flag or the tricolour—along with numerous "peace walls" still define neighbourhoods along sectarian lines.

Tensions are continually stoked and manipulated by all parties to divert from the drive by Sinn Fein and DUP, who sit together in the Northern Ireland government, to slash living standards in line with the British government's austerity programme and attract investment.

In June of this year, the DUP proposed an armed forces flag be flown over in response to a city council "impact assessment" on the consequences of flying the union flag and displaying military memorabilia in the City Hall. The Alliance voted for this, and the measure was passed.

At the time, Sinn Fein asked the Equality Commission to intervene. The Equality Commission is one of a number of similar organisations, such as the reviled Parades Commission, set up in the aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement. With a brief to report on instances of discrimination on grounds of disability, sexual orientation, gender and religion, the organisation is part of an expensive apparatus designed to point out the most blatant and obnoxious expressions of discrimination while upholding the sectarian divide on which capitalism rests in Northern Ireland.

Last year, for example, the commission reported on 58 cases of discrimination. One showed the extent to which blatant religious bigotry remains part of daily life. A haulage worker complained that his supervisor described as the "token taig [Catholic]", slapped him, and hit him with a length of cable before threatening him with a Stanley knife.

Another case described Protestant primary teachers in a predominantly Catholic school being selected for redundancy before Catholic teachers with less seniority. A tribunal found that the school was selecting teachers for redundancy in line with the distribution of religious beliefs in the school.

In the event, the Equality Commission informed the City Council's own impact assessment, which concluded that designated flag days for both flags would be proposed. This is currently what happens on government buildings, and it is this that was agreed on December 3.

As it became apparent that the Alliance was going to change its position and support the impact assessment recommendations, both the DUP and the UUP escalated matters by distributing 40,000 leaflets, printed in Alliance colours. This portrayed the Alliance

position over the flags issue as "backing the Sinn Fein/SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party] position that the flags should be ripped down".

The leaflet drop sparked off the protests, reportedly organised spontaneously on social media, which appear to have caught both the police and the main political parties off guard. Facebook pages continue to suggest a number of protests being organised both around Northern Ireland and in the UK.

Whatever the immediate circumstances of the protests, they point to the toxic character of daily political life in Northern Ireland, infected at every level with religious feuds whose sole purpose is to maintain and deepen division in the working class while advancing the interests of the wealthy ruling cliques, both unionist and nationalist.

Working people have no way out of this dangerous blind alley, sustained by all the political parties, outside of the struggle for an independent political movement seeking the socialist reorganisation of Ireland, Britain and Europe.



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