

Far-right UVF behind Northern Ireland “flag protests”

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Northern Ireland’s “flag protests” are being manipulated by allies of the loyalist paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF).

The right-wing terrorist organisation has a decades-long record of sectarian murder, intimidation and drug dealing and is responsible for some of the most notorious massacres of “The Troubles”. Significant numbers of young people have been drawn into the protests, many of which are being organised through Facebook pages.

The protests began last December following a vote by Belfast City Council to fly both the British union flag and the Irish tricolour for 17 days each year over Belfast City Hall. Some 1,500 people, many waving union flags and shouting loyalist slogans, protested the decision and threatened to invade the council meeting.

Previously, the union flag was on display 365 days a year. The move, initiated by Sinn Féin, now the largest party on the city council, was opposed by both the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). Prior to the vote, the DUP and the UUP leafleted East Belfast on the issue, seeking to enflame unionist sentiment and isolate the Alliance party, which advances itself as a pro-business, anti-sectarian alternative not designated as either loyalist or republican, against which both parties were losing ground.

The UVF seized the opportunity presented by the main unionist parties, both of whom have decades of experience of working with the loyalist paramilitaries. In part the UVF hopes to use the protests to divert attention from a “supergrass” trial due to be held later this year and as a bargaining counter with the British authorities. Gary Haggarty, a former UVF leader, has assisted in the compilation of some 30,000 pages of material and 760 interviews and is reported to be

intending to turn Queen’s evidence against the current UVF leadership in return for a lighter sentence on a murder charge.

Other far-right elements involved in the flag protests have included Jim Dowson, a leading member of Britain First, a splinter from the fascistic British National Party, Jamie Bryson, who recently formed an Ulster Peoples’ Forum, and hard-line loyalist Willie Frazer.

Since the initial city council decision, protests and riots involving hundreds of youth and culminating with confrontations with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), have become a feature of daily life in Protestant areas of East Belfast and other towns in Northern Ireland. Protests have been held in a number of British cities, including Glasgow, in Scotland, which has long connections with both loyalist and republican forces.

Youth armed with rocks, fireworks and petrol bombs have repeatedly confronted massed ranks of PSNI Landrovers and riot police, backed with water cannon. The PSNI have also fired plastic bullets. Over 100 people have been arrested, and a special court has sat for the first time since 1991. A number of vehicles have been burnt out. Earlier this week a bus was hijacked and the driver injured, while up to 500 youth confronted police and nationalist youth outside the Short Strand area of Belfast. Bus services have been diverted from certain areas until further notice.

Confrontations of this sort have long been a feature of political life in Northern Ireland. But the tensions underscore how the sectarian partition of working class areas of Belfast has intensified since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1999. A sectarian apparatus of rule topped by Sinn Féin and the DUP has been constructed in which every event on the political

calendar is marked by street confrontations between Protestant and Catholic youth and the PSNI—egged on by loyalist and dissident republican organisations.

This time, the confrontations have persisted more or less daily for six weeks and are showing no signs of abating.

This is because the protests are being fed by a sharply intensifying social crisis. Sinn Fein and the DUP are jointly implementing the UK Conservative/Liberal Democrat government's austerity programme because the leading parties of both "communities" are committed to the enrichment of a narrow wealthy minority for whom they really speak. None of the parties offer anything to working people, particularly youth, on whom the impact of recession is falling with particular severity.

As of August last year, youth unemployment in Northern Ireland stood at over 22 percent, some 22,000 young people. This is more than double the figure in 1999 when the Good Friday Agreement was signed, and proves that the "peace and prosperity" promised for all the people of Northern Ireland has manifestly failed to materialise.

In addition to the spending cuts being pushed through by Sinn Fein and the DUP, and which the trade unions refuse to oppose, recent developments show the trajectory of the new Northern Ireland's social policy.

Under cover of the furore around the flag riots, the DUP's Housing Minister Nelson McCausland announced plans to break up the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), the state-run authority that controls some 90,000 social houses and employs 3,000 workers. One of the by-products of the high level of public spending during Northern Ireland's "Troubles" was that social housing was of fairly good quality, compared to either the UK or the Republic of Ireland.

The NIHE is to be broken up, and replaced with at least five smaller housing associations in order to turn social housing into a lucrative revenue stream for private investors. Since 2008 and the onset of the financial crisis, 6,337 home owners have been served with Final Possession notices by the Northern Ireland Court Service. Figures to September 2012 suggested another 1,400 possession orders have been granted in the first months of last year.

In the absence of an independent political movement in the working class, the danger is that frustrations and

anger at the sharp decline in social conditions will be directed along sectarian lines.

Pointing to the enrichment of a layer of the Catholic middle class, hardline unionists and loyalists claim, falsely, that the only beneficiaries of the integration of Sinn Fein into ruling circles in Northern Ireland have been nationalists. They ignore the fact that even now, poverty statistics in working class Catholic areas remain significantly above those in Protestant areas.

On the other side, both Sinn Fein and the dissident republicans advocating a return to the "armed struggle" alike propose only to merge Northern Ireland with the Irish Republic in a united capitalist Ireland. This will not benefit Catholic workers in the slightest. Moreover, ordinary Protestants will not welcome the prospect of being catapulted into an impoverished nation still dominated by the Catholic Church and run by a billionaire kleptocracy.



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