

State clampdown in Northern Ireland

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20 March 2013

The imprisonment of Jamie Bryson and Willie Frazer in Northern Ireland in late February has grave ramifications for democratic rights.

Both are hard-line unionists and organisers of the recently formed Ulster People's Forum. But their arrest for alleged public order offences related to the ongoing "flag" protests in Northern Ireland is intended as a trial of repressive techniques for use against the working class.

The steps taken against Bryson and Frazer will, in short order, be used against all expressions of opposition in Northern Ireland.

Frazer, 52, was arrested at his own house, while Bryson, 23, evaded arrest for a couple of days before being arrested at the house of a pastor associate.

Bryson and Frazer were charged with the supposed crime of encouraging or assisting offences by addressing a public assembly and taking part in an un-notified public procession. They were arrested along with Jim Dowson, a former fundraiser for the fascist British National Party.

Dowson was bailed provided he handed over his mobile phones, computers and agreed to stay away from parades, protests and processions. He was banned from entering Belfast.

Bryson and Frazer were held in custody, briefly sharing the same prison cell. Subsequently, Frazer, who is reported to have serious health problems, was released on similar conditions to Dowson. Bryson, who has staged a brief hunger strike, remains in Maghaberry jail.

The flag protests began last December following a decision by Sinn Fein-led Belfast City Council to fly both the British union flag and the Irish tricolour for 17 days each per year over Belfast City Hall. Previously, the Union flag had been permanently on display. The decision was seized on by the official unionist parties, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the Ulster

Unionist Party, along with the para-military Ulster Volunteer Force as a means to divert tensions arising from sharply declining social conditions in working class areas along sectarian lines.

Sporadic protests, riots, extended confrontations between the police and nationalist protestors, and outright rampages have continued ever since. A total of 215 people have been arrested, 163 charged and 20 or so still remaining in Maghaberry. Charges have included rioting, hijacking vehicles, and charges associated with a number of attacks on the offices of political parties. The pro-business Alliance party, which emerged out of Unionism and champions a non-sectarian agenda, has been particularly targeted as it is perceived to be a threat to the DUP in East Belfast.

While the protests initially served as a diversion for the mainstream unionist parties, they have revived the image of Northern Ireland and Belfast as unstable, dangerous and riven with sectarian division. Business spokesmen have complained bitterly about the protests and demanded that the ruling DUP and Sinn Fein put a stop to them.

In December, DUP First Minister Peter Robinson and his deputy, Sinn Fein's Martin McGuinness, complained that the protests were "damaging Christmas trade and the local economy" and should cease. Robinson subsequently denounced the protests as "synonymous with violence" and "mobocracy".

Simultaneous with the clampdown on the "flag" protesters, dissident armed republican groups have been targeted for police and army operations. In early March, a leader of the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA), Peter Butterly, was gunned down in an alleged internal feud over money.

Butterly, 35, was allegedly the victim of a "disciplinary squad" put together after the recent merger of several republican factions opposed to the power-sharing arrangements established under the

Good Friday Agreement. They include the RIRA, Republican Action Against Drugs, *Oglagh Na hEireanni* and a number of ex-members of the now disbanded Provisional IRA. The merged group is now calling itself the IRA.

Butterly, an ally of RIRA founder Michael McKevitt, currently in jail for terrorist activity, had previously been targeted by Dublin's Special Detective Unit and arrested in possession of various weapons and bomb-making materials. A case against him collapsed when his arrest was ruled unconstitutional under the Offences Against the State Act.

This time there were no mistakes. Butterly's killing was clearly carried out in full view of state forces. In addition to reportedly having agents in all the dissident republican groups, Butterly's killers were arrested within seconds of shooting him in a pub car park. Members of the Irish state's Emergency Response Unit and National Surveillance Unit, having been closely following their movements, rammed the killers' car as it sped from the murder.

Dissident republicans involved in lucrative diesel smuggling were also the target of a huge cross-border operation earlier this month. As many as 300 staff from both the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland worked on Operation Loft, which culminated in 22 simultaneous raids against businesses, houses and warehouses across the republic. Twenty-five bank accounts were frozen, while computers, iPads, mobile phones, cash and business records were seized.

The raids were supported by the Garda's Air Support Unit, Emergency Response Unit, and Special Detective Unit. Both the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and British Army helicopter based forces were reported to be involved in a raid on Thomas "Slab" Murphy's farm, which sits six feet inside the Republic.

Murphy was named in the ongoing Smithwick Tribunal into Garda collusion in the shooting of two RUC officers in 1998, as a former chief of staff of the Provisional IRA Army Council, something he denies. He is said to have developed differences with the Sinn Fein leadership, who must have signed off on the operation against him.

Both the loyalist flag protests and the partial revival in dissident republicanism are driven by the deepening social crisis on both sides of the 1921 partition line between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. The

devolved government in Belfast of Sinn Fein and the DUP and the Fine Gael and Labour coalition in the South are committed to intensifying the assault on working people's living standards, and doing whatever is necessary to maintain their rule.

The British government in London, along with Belfast and Dublin, are to host the G8 summit of the leaders of the world's major economic powers this June. The entire British and Irish political establishment see the chance to showcase Northern Ireland as a business-friendly and secure place to make money.

The event is being used as a trial run for security measures on a scale never seen in Northern Ireland since the partial dismantling of the British military apparatus. As with all G8 summits, an enormous, intrusive and vastly expensive security lockdown operation, associated pre-emptive raids and arrests will be mounted across Northern Ireland weeks in advance to keep the population away from the isolated golfing resort in Lough Erne, County Fermanagh, where the summit is to be held.

The PSNI has announced it expects to buy two airborne surveillance drones for the occasion, while 5,000 police officers will be deployed at the summit venue and Belfast International Airport. Thousands of police volunteers have been sought from all over the UK.

The last G8 summit in Britain, in 2005, held at Gleneagles in Scotland, also saw thousands of police deployed, an impenetrable security cordon erected, and running scuffles in the Perthshire countryside with anti-G8 protesters. The event was marked by the 7/7 London bombing, which killed 52 people, which was seized on as the pretext for a sharp escalation in the assault on democratic rights.



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