

Renewed sectarian rioting in Northern Ireland

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The last two months have seen repeated confrontations on the streets of Northern Ireland between thousands of mostly youthful loyalist and nationalist rioters and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).

The riots, triggered by disputes over Orange and republican parades, testify to the failure of the political arrangements established by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement to offer “peace and prosperity for all”. The riots follow months of confrontations over whether the Union flag should fly over Belfast City Hall.

In July, the annual march of the Ligoniel Orange lodges was prevented, by order of the Parades Commission, from marching past the nationalist Ardoyne area of Belfast. The march, an annual exercise in loyalist triumphalism, has been the scene of repeated clashes over recent years. This year, however, the Parades Commission, which annually oversees some 2,300 Orange and 70 republican parades, ruled it should stop 300 yards short of the Ardoyne.

The decision, enforced by up to 4,000 police, including 630 drafted in from the UK for the occasion, led the hardline unionist Orange Order to call for street protests. Loyalist and nationalist youth confronted each other and the PSNI repeatedly over several days in Belfast, exchanging petrol bombs and bricks. Many other towns saw incidents. The PSNI deployed hundreds of riot police, water cannon, and dogs and fired plastic bullets. A number of police were injured, and 60 people were arrested.

Tensions simmered until earlier this month when riots again erupted, this time around a parade by a coalition of republican opponents of the Good Friday power-sharing agreement to commemorate the 1971 introduction of internment by the British government. The march was simultaneous with a Sinn Féin rally in

Castlederg celebrating two members of the then Irish Republican Army (IRA) who blew themselves up while driving a car bomb into the Protestant-dominated town. Loyalist counterdemonstrations confronted both events.

While the Castlederg march, attended by leading Sinn Féin figures and guarded by hundreds of PSNI officers, passed off peacefully, the dissident march in Belfast triggered several hours of loyalist rioting. The PSNI again used hundreds of riot police, heavily armoured Land Rovers, water cannon and plastic bullets against around 1,000 loyalist protestors. Following the riots, PSNI chief constable Matt Baggot boasted, “significant custodial sentences will be handed down and prisons will be bulging”.

The riots generated a welter of condemnation and hand wringing from unionist and nationalist political quarters, and the British government, each blaming the other camp.

Democratic Unionist leader and Northern Ireland first minister Peter Robinson responded by suspending a “peace centre” at the site of the former Maze prison, where 10 republican hunger strikers were allowed to starve to death by the British government in 1981.

But what characterised the responses of all the parties was a blanket refusal to explore the political and economic roots of the circumstances that propel many thousands of mostly working class Protestant and Catholic youth into repeated confrontations with both the PSNI and their peers in the rival “community.”

Typical of the class arrogance of the British and Irish political and media establishment was a *Guardian* editorial stating that “Cross-community co-operation in Northern Ireland is actually stable and well-embedded...[but] It takes generations, even centuries, before the wounds heal sufficiently for rival communities to share a historical narrative.”

In reality, while conditioned by the extended complexities of Irish and British political history, the riots have concrete and contemporary roots. It is not accidental that since the onset of the world financial breakdown in 2008, sectarian tensions in Northern Ireland have been escalating.

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement and its follow-up at St. Andrews in 2006 incorporated Sinn Fein and a layer of the Catholic middle class into the political apparatus of Northern Ireland. The influence of the once-dominant Protestant establishment was, at the behest of the British government, significantly reduced. The end of the long-running conflict with the IRA, the removal of the British Army from the streets, would, all sides claimed, produce a flood of investment that would allow Northern Ireland to emulate the then “Celtic Tiger” investment boom in the Republic of Ireland. In the waves of cash to follow, all boats, Catholic and Protestant, would rise.

Class tensions, meanwhile, were to be controlled and manipulated by political institutions designed and dominated by the sectarian parties—with designated “communities” made the basis of political and social life. In the event, a layer of wealthy Catholics and nationalists have indeed done very well from the new arrangements and now share positions and privileges with their wealthy Protestant peers.

But, particularly following 2008, the position of the working class on both sides of the sectarian divide has sharply declined.

This has, in the absence of any progressive alternative, given new traction to both the dissident republicans who oppose the Good Friday Agreement and particularly to hardline, pro-British loyalism. Loyalist propaganda points to the political advance of Sinn Fein and growing areas of Catholic influence as evidence that Protestants are “losing out”.

A 2012 report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that while poverty in Catholic-dominated areas remains higher, there is a general trend towards greater impoverishment. Twenty-six percent of Catholics lived in poverty, as did 19 percent of Protestants. Thirty-five percent of working-age Catholics were not in work, along with 26 percent of Protestants. In total, 380,000 people were living in poverty, including 21 percent of pensioners.

The report warned that the British government’s

brutal public sector spending cuts, rigorously passed on by the shared Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party administration, were having a comparatively greater impact in Northern Ireland than across the rest of the UK. Thirty percent of all jobs in Northern Ireland are in the public sector, which has been the specific target for austerity cuts, compared to 20 percent in the UK.

Benefit cuts also affect more in Northern Ireland because of the higher proportion of working people relying on threatened disability benefits.

Another 2012 report by Northern Ireland’s Community Relations Council confirmed the pattern, and noted that among the economically inactive, 36 percent had no educational qualifications, while amongst those of working age, the figure was 20 percent—twice the UK rate. Only 4 percent of workers were employed “in the knowledge economy”. The report warned that 19 percent of youth were officially unemployed.

The reality is that, under capitalism, there is no way out for working people *regardless* of whether Northern Ireland remains part of the UK, joins a united capitalist Ireland or establishes some new intermediate position between the two. All three options can only mean deeper poverty, inequality, tax cuts, low wages and rampant sectarian strife.

It is only on the basis of a united struggle by the working class for the expropriation of the capitalist class in both islands, for the socialist unification of Britain, Ireland and Europe, that the material and cultural resources be found and sustained to eliminate Northern Ireland’s poverty and provide a good and prosperous life for all.



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