

The real legacy of Martin McGuinness: Sectarianism and austerity

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The funeral of Martin McGuinness, ex-Irish Republican Army (IRA) commander, Sinn Fein leader and former Northern Ireland deputy first minister, took place yesterday following his death Tuesday, aged 66.

Former United States President Bill Clinton, Irish President Michael Higgins and Taoiseach (Irish prime minister) Enda Kenny attended alongside McGuinness's unionist political opponents in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland Secretary of State, James Brokenshire, represented the UK government.

McGuinness's death has triggered a flood of eulogies praising his role as chief Sinn Fein negotiator in the Northern Ireland peace process. His role as leader of the IRA is mentioned only to the extent that it prepared him for this role.

Clinton described how "Martin" believed "in a shared future, and refused to live in the past." Ex-US President Barack Obama called his leadership "instrumental" during the peace process.

UK Prime Minister Theresa May said McGuinness "made an essential and historic contribution to the extraordinary journey of Northern Ireland from conflict to peace." Tony Blair, who was Labour's UK prime minister during the Good Friday peace negotiations, spoke of his "immense gratitude" to and "genuine affection" for McGuinness.

In Northern Ireland, outgoing Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader, Mike Nesbitt, declared he was "a man of his word, a straight-dealing individual, and he was a man of political integrity." Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leader Arlene Foster said history would show that "his contribution to the political and peace process was significant." Ian Paisley Jnr, who as a junior minister worked alongside his father and founder of the DUP, Reverend Ian Paisley, declared that McGuinness, once regarded as the "godfather of the IRA," had become "the necessary man in government to deliver a stable and necessary peace, and that's a complex and remarkable journey."

The effusive praise for McGuinness's key role in stabilising the rule of British capitalism was embarrassingly close to the bone for Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams, his co-collaborator in the peace process. Adams complained, "Reading and watching some of the media reporting of his life and death, one could be forgiven for believing that Martin, at some undefined point in his life, had a road to Damascus conversion and abandoned his republican principles, his former comrades in the IRA and joined the political establishment."

In a way perhaps unintended by Adams, his complaint is correct. McGuinness's evolution from gunman to bourgeois politician was not a break from his republican principles, but the outcome of the petty-bourgeois nationalist perspective of republicanism. Sinn Fein utilised

socialist and anti-imperialist rhetoric, but this was based on an adoption by a bourgeois movement of the Stalinist two-stage theory, which insisted the immediate aim was to create a united capitalist Ireland to be followed at some later unspecified time by socialism. Sinn Fein never represented the interests of the working class, but rather a layer of the middle class who were denied social advancement by the old unionist setup.

The IRA, which McGuinness joined in 1970, was virtually recreated during the international eruption of the class struggle in the period 1968-75, which in Northern Ireland took the form of the civil rights movement. It sought to channel discontent away from an independent class solution into a national "armed struggle." It was able to take the leadership in working class Catholic areas because of the protection it afforded against the British Army and Unionist thugs and because of its promotion as a "national liberation movement" by Pabloism. McGuinness rose rapidly through the ranks of the IRA, becoming in 1972, aged just 21, second-in-command in Derry.

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement revealed the essential class character of Republicanism. In a world undergoing the fundamental changes in capitalist production associated with globalisation, which had initially resulted in the collapse of the USSR and Eastern European states, the previous arrangements through which Ireland was governed had become unviable.

The Republic of Ireland had abandoned its policy of building a relatively isolated and independent economy and successfully transformed itself into a cheap labour investment platform for corporations seeking access to the European market, earning itself the nickname of the "Celtic Tiger".

In contrast, the north's manufacturing base virtually collapsed, while three decades of military conflict and partition had forced Britain to spend vast sums on policing and welfare in order to preserve a measure of social stability.

The Agreement sought to create more favourable conditions for profitable investment by international capital, in the north as well as the south, in particular Ireland's largest investor, the US. The Clinton administration became intensely involved in the "peace process", seeing it as a means to develop its dominant economic power in Ireland, and safeguard its interests there and establish new ones.

The incorporation of Sinn Fein into the ruling structures was the essential prerequisite for this shift. Military conflict had to be brought to an end, cross-border trade and investment with the South developed and new political institutions created. At the same time, Irish workers had to be excluded from any real say over the future course of events. To that end, the Nationalist and Unionist parties were needed to control the working class while maintaining the old sectarian divisions

that have prevented the emergence of any effective social and political opposition to the ruling elite.

The IRA, having proved incapable of securing the basic social interests of working class Catholics and no nearer to achieving its stated goal of a united Ireland, agreed to a ceasefire. McGuinness and Adams persuaded Sinn Fein to abandon its boycott of the Irish parliament and take its seats.

With the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the basis was laid for republicans to join the Stormont Assembly, under complex and sectarian “power-sharing” arrangements in which parties were defined as the representatives of two opposing “communities.”

In the absence of a genuine socialist alternative capable of unifying the working class in defence of their independent social and political interests, support for the “peace process” was widespread, as it was seen as a way to halt the civil war, end anti-Catholic discrimination, overcome religious divisions and usher in a new era of peace and prosperity. Referenda on the Agreement won the support of an overwhelming majority in the South and of Catholics in the North, and a small but significant majority of Protestants.

The signing of the agreement did not overcome sectarian divisions, but institutionalised them. Since then, scores of “peace walls” have been erected at “sectarian interfaces” and the more “moderate” nationalist and Unionist parties have lost ground to Sinn Fein and the DUP, parties perceived to be most aggressive in standing up for the interests of their “own” community.

At the same time, the promised prosperity it was supposed to bring has failed to materialise. While a small upper middle class layer has profited, largely as a result of new jobs created by the peace agreement and new state structures, the experience of ordinary Catholics and Protestants has been one of continuing austerity, which Sinn Fein has helped impose as coalition partners to the DUP. Billions have been slashed from the Northern Ireland budget, cutting services, jobs and new infrastructure.

A key policy objective of Sinn Fein alongside the DUP is the transformation of Northern Ireland into a low-tax investment platform, a prerequisite of which is the devolution of powers so as to halve corporation tax to the levels in the Republic of Ireland. This can only mean further attacks on social conditions and increased poverty, already at higher levels than both Britain as a whole and the Republic of Ireland.

Weeks before he died, McGuinness’s official retirement from political life brought to a head a conflict between the DUP and Sinn Fein over the Renewable Heat Incentive scandal, which involved over half a billion pounds in handouts to businesses and which McGuinness declared had “led to enormously damaging pressure on our public finances and a crisis of confidence in the political institutions.” When DUP leader Foster refused to accept responsibility for the scheme, McGuinness resigned as Deputy First Minister, provoking new elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly earlier this month.

Sinn Fein was the main beneficiary. For the first time since Ireland was partitioned in 1921, following the Irish War of Independence, pro-British Ulster unionist parties lost their combined absolute political majority in the regional government—mustering just 40 seats in the 90-seat assembly. It is now up to Sinn Fein and the DUP to agree another coalition before March 27, otherwise another round of elections will follow or direct rule from London will be imposed.

Overshadowing the election was the crisis surrounding Britain’s planned departure from the European Union (EU). Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU by 55 to 45 percent, reflecting the

significance of EU subsidies to the local economy. Not only will Brexit disrupt the flow of these handouts but the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic will become an external boundary of the EU.

Sinn Fein is using the Brexit threat as an argument for a “border poll” referendum on Irish unification, a provision allowed by the Good Friday Agreement, and a position that has been endorsed by Kenny. However, the allure of the “Celtic Tiger” model has been thoroughly tarnished. Since the 2008 global financial crash and collapse of its banking and property sector, the Irish bourgeoisie has carried out a massive political and social offensive on workers to impose the savage austerity measures demanded by the EU, European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Workers on both sides of the border confront savage austerity imposed by their own rulers.

The nationalist movements led by disaffected layers of the radical petty-bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie have everywhere proved incapable of establishing any genuine independence from imperialism. In the Republic, both the main parties emanating from the War of Independence, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, have ended up completely dependent on their role as local representatives of international finance. Sinn Fein has only followed more recently in their footsteps.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned at the time of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement,

“A resolution of the profound social and democratic problems facing Irish workers cannot and will not be overcome by attempts to refurbish the existing mechanisms of capitalist rule. Sweeping away the legacy of backwardness and religious antagonism requires a radical restructuring of economic and political life. The working class is the only social force capable of mobilizing all of the oppressed to carry out such a revolutionary change. The critical question is the development of a politically independent movement of the working class, and this requires a conscious break with the politics of nationalism and reformism.

“A new party of the working class must be built based on a programme that addresses the universal need of working people for decent jobs and living standards, champions the defence of democratic rights, and fights for social equality. On the basis of such a socialist programme, all sections of workers—Protestant and Catholic, Irish and British—can and must be united in a struggle against the common oppressor—capitalism.”



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