

Rioting in Northern Ireland manipulated by Stormont and Westminster

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Eight days of sectarian rioting in Belfast and other areas of Northern Ireland has solicited an outpouring of hypocritical condemnation from the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont and Boris Johnson's Conservative government in Westminster.

On Thursday evening, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) used water cannon—for the first time in six years—and dogs to quell rioting in west Belfast. Riot police were deployed alongside Armoured Land Rovers at the Lanark Way interface separating the Irish republican nationalist Springfield Road from the British loyalist Shankill Road.

Other areas of Northern Ireland—Londonderry, Derry and Tyrone—were also locations of violent scenes over the last week.

On Thursday, following discussions between Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) Micheál Martin and Prime Minister Boris Johnson, all five parties in Northern Ireland's Assembly in Stormont condemned the rioting.

After ministers at a special meeting of the Northern Ireland Executive were briefed on the situation by PSNI Chief Constable Simon Byrne, a joint statement on the “violence and unrest” from the devolved government of Northern Ireland read, “Attacks on police officers, public services and communities are deplorable and they must stop.” Those who would ‘seek to use and abuse our children and young people to carry out these attacks have no place in our society’. It concluded, ‘While our political positions are very different on many issues, we are all united in our support for law and order and we collectively state our support for policing and for the police officers who have been putting themselves in harm's way to protect others.’”

The Executive is led, based on a power sharing arrangement, by First Minister Arlene Foster from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill, representing the Republican

movement, Sinn Féin. The other parties signing the statement were the Ulster Unionist Party, Social Democratic and Labour Party and the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland.

Jen Psaki, Press Secretary of the US Biden administration, said Thursday, “We are concerned by the violence in Northern Ireland and we join the British, Irish and Northern Irish leaders in their call for calm.”

These statements are rampant hypocrisy. The conflicts of the past week are the deliberate outcome of a campaign led by the DUP with the active support of large sections of the Tory government.

Two issues are routinely cited as the cause of the latest outbreaks: Britain exiting the European Union (EU) and the fallout from the funeral last year of former Irish Republican Army intelligence chief Bobby Storey.

The relationship between Northern Ireland and Britain was a central area of conflict in the fractious Brexit negotiations with the EU. Both sides were anxious to prevent the return of a “hard border” between the six counties of Northern Ireland—which is part of the UK—and the Republic of Ireland, which remains an EU member.

But this outcome was inevitable given Britain's separation from the EU's Single Market. After two years of negotiations an agreement was reached for Britain to leave the EU, including a component part known as the Northern Ireland Protocol. The Protocol displaces external EU customs checks on trade from the North/South border into the Irish Sea, with ports in Northern Ireland and the UK functioning as the EU's external trade boundary. Johnson and then Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, ignored the Northern Ireland Assembly, only allowing Stormont the opportunity to reverse the protocol after four years.

To seal agreement with the EU, Johnson had to override opposition to the Protocol from the DUP, which had been the Tories coalition government partners after the 2017 general election after Johnson's predecessor, Theresa

May, lost the Tories their majority. The Protocol was denounced by hardline Brexiteer Tories and the DUP as drawing a border down the Irish Sea.

As soon as Britain's EU withdrawal began, conflicts erupted over the Protocol's stipulation, involving everything from vaccine supplies from the EU to the impact of the measures on supermarkets and supply chains.

Johnson and the Tories gave tacit support to the campaign waged by the DUP to disrupt the new border arrangements, and even sanctioned a unilateral delay in implementing the arrangements. Many of Johnson's most bellicose statements criticising the EU were made during a visit last month to Northern Ireland to mark the centenary of its foundation. Johnson was met by Foster, while Sinn Féin refused to attend.

Staunch Unionists on the Tory's backbench 1922 Committee were even more overt in backing the DUP. Jacob Rees-Mogg declared that Britain still had an interest in Northern Ireland—a position that was denied by the Blair Labour government in their drawing up of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which established power sharing government at Stormont.

The willingness of Johnson and other senior figures in the Tory and Unionist parties to call into question of the Good Friday Agreement is indicative of the dangerous political brinksmanship being engaged in. The Good Friday Agreement ended three decades of sectarian armed conflict known as The Troubles during which over 3,500 people died, including over 1,800 civilians. Nearly 48,000 people were injured during the conflict.

Brexit is fuelling never fully suppressed sectarian divisions, with the DUP declaring that any concession to the EU is a threat to the 1800 Act of Union that abolished Ireland's existing parliament and cemented the rule of the wealthy Protestant Ascendancy, of which today's weakened unionists are the heirs.

These divisions are being accelerated by Sinn Féin's insistence that Britain's exit from the EU reinforces their case for a united Ireland. In Northern Ireland, the vote to remain in the EU won a significant majority, as a significant number of Unionist voters rejected the DUP's pro-Brexit stance.

Recent tensions flared as the DUP seized on a March 30 report by Northern Ireland's Public Prosecution Service announcing that it would not be pursuing any prosecutions over breaches of Covid-19 regulations at Storey's funeral. The funeral, held on June 30, 2020, saw about 2,000 mourners line the streets, prompting

accusations that Sinn Féin had flouted rules it was involved in creating. Among those attending was Sinn Féin's deputy First Minister O'Neill and 23 other Sinn Féin politicians.

The DUP, through their agencies in the Loyalist former paramilitary groups, staged protests in a number of Loyalist strongholds in west Belfast including the Shankill Road. None of this was spontaneous, with the mainly young people involved—as evidenced in the arrest of teenagers as young as 13—copiously supplied with petrol bombs and fireworks.

Sinn Féin mounted a counter-protest.

There is no indication that there is widespread support for such a return to sectarian conflict among Catholic or Protestant workers. But given the tensions being ramped up in ruling circles, this could change were anyone to die as a result of violence, including that meted out by the police.

The Good Friday Agreement did not resolve the sectarian tensions which are the result of British imperialisms centuries long occupation of Ireland, but made them the basis of a political set-up based on supposed Republican-Catholic and Unionist-Protestant 'communities.'

These tensions can only be overcome based on a perspective of working class unity in the fight for socialism. The struggle against British imperialism must be combined with opposition to all sections of the bourgeoisie, including the government in the Irish Republic, the EU's major powers and the Biden administration in the US. This struggle must be fought for by workers in Ireland and Britain as part of the fight for the United Socialist States of Europe.



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