Jeremy Corbyn covers for Labour’s filthy role in Ireland

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10 February 2022

Jeremy Corbyn’s speech on the 50th anniversary of the Bloody Sunday massacre in Derry, Northern Ireland added his own layer of whitewash to obscure the origins of the most infamous mass killing of the “Troubles.” 28 people were shot January 30, 1972, and 14 died, when the British Army’s Parachute Regiment attacked a demonstration opposing internment without trial.

Corbyn was speaking at the Museum of Free Derry and identified “many friends” in the nationalist audience including Sinn Féin General Secretary Mitchell McLaughlin, current Westminster Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) MP for the Foyle constituency Colum Eastwood and former SDLP leader, now a Fine Gael member, Mark Durkan. Former Unite the Union general secretary, and a close Corbyn ally, Len McCluskey was also present.

Corbyn was at ease and felt able to expound on a number of themes while never once mentioning the role of the Labour Party, in which he has spent almost his entire political career and which he led for nearly five years from 2015.

An honest commentator with Corbyn’s record would have been obliged to account for the fact that the deployment which led directly to Bloody Sunday was ordered by his own party. Under the Labour government of Harold Wilson, on August 14, 1969, Home Secretary James Callaghan authorised 300 troops being sent to Derry at the request of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and then Prime Minister of Ulster, James Chichester-Clark.

Under the pretext of defending Catholic areas, British forces were inserted to stabilise capitalist rule across Ireland in conditions of escalating opposition to anti-Catholic discrimination in the six counties of Northern Ireland, amid a deepening class struggle in the Republic of Ireland. By 1972, under the Tory government of Edward Heath, there were up to 30,000 troops in Northern Ireland, including the Parachute Regiment.

The occupation, Operation Banner, continued under the Wilson and Callaghan Labour governments of 1974-1979, with Defence and Northern Ireland Secretary Roy Mason maintaining troop levels above 20,000 and escalating the low intensity “dirty war” of infiltration, state collusion in assassinations and mass repression. Mason, a former trade union official, deployed the British Special Air Service against the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

The Troubles were only ended when, under Tony Blair, Labour negotiated the Good Friday Agreement to incorporate Sinn Féin, the IRA’s political wing, into the Northern Ireland government. This served to stabilise the six counties as an investment platform, remove restrictions on the border between the two parts of the partitioned island and release the British Army for new bloodbaths abroad.

Labour’s new arrangement, negotiated with the Irish and US governments, Sinn Féin, the Ulster Unionist Party, Democratic Unionist Party and others, institutionalised the sectarian divisions which the Troubles had monstrously enflamed. Even now, over 100 “peace” walls carve up working-class areas of Belfast.

Corbyn, however, did not make one single reference to the Labour Party’s current or historic attitude to Ireland. He evaded the subject by attempting to associate himself with the years of struggle by relatives and supporters of those killed on Bloody Sunday. A week after Bloody Sunday, Corbyn said, “We organised a march from Kilburn to Whitehall, carrying mock coffins to lay at the gates of Downing Street for the then prime minister to see.”

Blair’s government also set in place mechanisms for partial and carefully managed investigations of the numerous atrocities of the Trouble. The Saville Inquiry into Bloody Sunday reported in 2010, exonerating the victims from the decades of slander directed against them but attributing the shootings to individual solders “losing their self-control... forgetting their instructions and training”.

Earlier this year, after a sustained right-wing campaign, the only criminal case emerging from Bloody Sunday, against anonymous “Soldier F”, including two counts of murder, and five of attempted murder, was dropped. Soldier F admitted firing 13 rounds during Bloody Sunday and was, according to Saville, “at the heart of the shooting”.

Jeremy Corbyn, Roy Mason and Merlyn Rees

Corbyn noted that had the British government’s proposed amnesty for all Troubles civil and criminal cases been in place in 2010, it would have prohibited the Saville Inquiry and the partial exposure it allowed. The amnesty will also close numerous ongoing inquiries. “The idea,” Corbyn intoned, “that we must move on, move on without examining the state’s own accountability has quite rightly enraged a lot of people in the North as a whole.”

Rather than explore this question more deeply, however, Corbyn himself, “moved on”.

Had he been minded to, the former Labour leader could have mentioned recent developments in crucial “legacy” cases. These make clear the proposed amnesty amounts to a charter for the British government's torturers and assassins, many of whom were operating when Labour was in power.

• In late 2021, survivors of the 1975 Miami Showband massacre, when three members of the popular band were blown up and shot by a loyalist gang, agreed to accept £1.5 million in damages from the British Ministry of Defence (MoD) in settlement of their legal case seeking to expose collusion by British forces in the attack. Stephen Travers, one of the survivors, said he had expected to win his legal case but the threat of all cases being closed by an amnesty forced their hand. The MoD reached a settlement “without legal liability”.

• The same month, the UK Supreme Court ruled that a 2014 decision by

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the Police Service of Northern Ireland, successor to the RUC, to drop investigation into the torture of the 14 "hooded men" was unlawful. The "hooded men" were among 342 people interned by the British government during Operation Demetrius—the 1971 internment without trial of hundreds suspected of membership of the IRA. The 14 were selected for special treatment. For seven days, the men were hooded, forced to stand in excruciating positions, bombarded with white noise, deprived of sleep, food and water. They were badly beaten, and one attempted suicide. While hooded, they were thrown from low-flying helicopters. No one was ever convicted of anything.

The case was brought after Irish broadcaster RTÉ in 2014 unearthed a 1977 memo from then British Home Secretary, Labour's Merlyn Rees, to Prime Minister Callaghan stating that it was his "view that the decision to use methods of torture in Northern Ireland in 1971/72 was taken by ministers—in particular Lord Carrington, then secretary of state for defence." Rees continued, endorsing Carrington's actions and defending the torturers, "If at any time methods of torture are used in Northern Ireland contrary to the view of the government of the day, I would agree that individual policemen or soldiers should be prosecuted or disciplined; *but in the particular circumstances of 1971/72, a political decision was taken* [emphasis added]."

Despite the 2014 decision being considered unlawful, the Supreme Court rejected claims by the men for a judicial review.

• Earlier this month, Northern Ireland's Police Ombudsman Marie Anderson issued a long-delayed report investigating loyalist murders and attempted murders carried out by the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and, the organisation's cover name when murdering people, the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) between 1989 and 1993. In it, she raised "significant concerns" about the role of the RUC. Anderson investigated the activities of the North Antrim UDA/UFF. Anderson described herself as "numbed" at the extent of police collusion, including in one of the most notorious killings of the Troubles—eight people in the Rising Sun bar, Greysteel in 1993.

Corbyn made no mention of these recent cases and avoided the Labour Party's current attitude to the amnesty. The party opposes it, but, in the words of former Shadow Northern Ireland Secretary, Louise Haigh, "everyone accepts that prosecutions are going to be only likely in a handful of cases."

Jeremy Corbyn and a Border Poll

Corbyn instead meandered into a potted history of Ireland to introduce comments on the possibility of a new poll on the status of the north. He opined that a Border Poll, vague arrangements for which are included in the Good Friday Agreement should an ill-defined majority in Northern Ireland support it, would be a further expression of "justice" being achievable through pressure on the good offices of the British state.

The former Labour leader conceded that the agreement did not explain how to determine when a poll should be called or who would be able to vote. Speaking for his nationalist audience, Corbyn called on the British government "to explain how the poll can be triggered. And I call on them to begin that process, so we can have that understanding and that discussion." This, Corbyn enthused, would prove that 50 years after Bloody Sunday, "Irish people are finally able to reach toward self-determination and social justice."

Days after Corbyn's remarks, Northern Ireland First Minister Paul Givan, of the hard right Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), resigned. Under the Northern Ireland Executive's sectarian rules, this forced Sinn Féin Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neil's simultaneous resignation and the collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive. Givan cited the DUP's opposition to the Northern Ireland Protocol established as part of Britain's departure from the European Union, which created a customs border down the Irish Sea. The DUP leadership are also deeply concerned that, with an election due in May and the party trailing Sinn Féin, the election will result in a Sinn Féin First Minister and heighten the prospect of a Border Poll.

Such an outcome, Jeremy Corbyn notwithstanding, would be completely unacceptable to any wing of Ulster unionism.

Givan's decision followed a meeting between DUP leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson and representatives of the so-called Loyalist Communities Council (LCC) in east Belfast on January 31. The LCC represent loyalist paramilitary groups the Ulster Defence Association, the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Red Hand Commando group—all with long records of sectarian and fascistic violence and murder. An LCC statement hailed the DUP stance as reinforcing "the seriousness of the situation and it should be made clear that there can be no re-formation of a NI Executive until the breaches of the Belfast Agreement are repaired and normal trading within the United Kingdom is restored."

The DUP/LCC decision appeared timed to coincide with the Johnson government's Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill completing its passage through Westminster. The Bill legislates for the Northern Ireland Assembly to continue to function for at least six months without an Executive and removes the obligation for elections to be immediately called if the Executive falls. The Bill, which serves to buyUunionism time to attempt to engineer a favourable election outcome by its traditional means of flag waving and veiled threats of violence, was fully supported by the Labour Party.

Corbyn aside, some essential points should be made:

• Genuine justice for all the victims of British imperialism's brutal and ongoing crimes in Northern Ireland can only come through a political mobilisation in the working class seeking and enforcing the fullest exposure of all aspects of the "dirty war," including the detailed investigation of all state records and those of all the major parties and players.

• Corbyn's suggestion that "justice" can come through a Border Poll, necessarily overseen by British imperialism, its Unionist allies and the Irish bourgeoisie, and based on shifting demographics, is a dangerous delusion. It is a recipe for intensifying the sectarian conflict which all factions of the capitalist class have deployed since the island was partitioned 100 years ago by the British government, Ulster Unionists and the Irish bourgeoisie.

• The pandemic and the associated assault by the super-rich on all aspects of workers' lives has intensified class tensions across the entire island. Unification of the island of Ireland is a necessary task, but this can only proceed based on a struggle to unite the Catholic, Protestant, and all sections of the working class in a mobilisation for the abolition of capitalist rule in Ireland, Britain and Europe. The primary task facing workers in Ireland is building a political party to take this forward, an Irish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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