

British-Irish agreement enshrines sectarian division

WSWS Editorial Board
10 April 2023

The World Socialist Web Site is republishing a statement issued by its Editorial Board on April 25, 1998, after the signing on April 10 of the Good Friday Agreement between the governments of the UK and Ireland, and the major parties of Northern Ireland including Sinn Féin and the then dominant Ulster Unionist Party. The Agreement was ratified by referendums in Northern Ireland (71.1 percent in favour) and the Republic of Ireland (94.4 percent in favour) on May 22, 1998.

Though the Good Friday Agreement brought to an end three decades of civil war in Northern Ireland, the Editorial Board wrote in a farsighted analysis that it did not “lay the basis for ending the sectarian conflicts that have been cultivated by British imperialism for centuries.” Motivated by a coalescence of business interests in Ireland, north and south of the border, the UK and the United States, all demanding political stability, the Agreement was designed to both end the conflict and “counteract the undermining of the unionist and nationalist parties’ influence over the working class” by enshrining sectarian divisions in the political framework of the region.

Explaining that the objective conditions exist for overcoming the “divisions between Catholic and Protestant, Irish and British workers, providing they are united on a programme that articulates their basic needs for decent jobs, health care, housing and democratic rights,” the Editorial Board advanced a socialist, internationalist perspective which resonates all the more strongly a quarter of a century later, with the Northern Ireland Assembly suspended amid yet another political crisis and a brutal budget imposed on the region by Westminster’s Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Chris Heaton-Harris.

An objective analysis of the agreement reached on April 10 between the British and Irish governments on the future of northern Ireland demonstrates that this so-called peace plan does not embody the interests of Irish workers, Catholic or Protestant, north or south of the border.

The agreement has the support of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), the parties affiliated to the main loyalist paramilitary groups and the leadership of Sinn Féin. Of the major political groupings, only Ian Paisley’s extreme right Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) has come out in opposition.

The plan will be put to the electorate on both sides of the border in referendums on May 22. The text of the agreement is being circulated in a glossy brochure with a cover depicting a happy family walking towards a bright new dawn.

Despite its cross-party support, the new agreement does not lay the basis for ending the sectarian conflicts that have been cultivated by British imperialism for centuries. It upholds the conception that the fundamental divisions in Ireland are those of religion and national identity. A series of constitutional measures are to be enacted based on the division of northern Ireland into unionist and Irish nationalist “communities.”

The Irish Republic is to abandon its claim to the northern six counties, in return for a role in their governance and referendums every seven years on

possible unification. Cross-border bodies headed by a North/South Ministerial Council will codetermine areas of common interest.

A new Northern Ireland Assembly purports to be the basic parliamentary body for democratic self-government. The agreement specifies that “key decisions are taken on a cross-community basis.” To this end, “At their first meeting, members of the Assembly will register a designation of identity—nationalist, unionist or other—for the purposes of measuring cross-community support in Assembly votes.”

Policy decisions will then only be agreed by “either parallel consent, i.e. a majority of those present and voting, including a majority of the unionist and nationalist designations voting; or a weighted majority (60 percent of members present and voting, including at least 40 percent of each of the nationalist and unionist designations present and voting.)”

In a last minute addition to the agreement, the proposed system of proportional representation for winning a seat in the Assembly was modified, lowering the requirement from 17 to 14 percent of the vote. This apparently minor change has important political significance: based on present voting patterns, it would insure the smaller unionist parties representation in the assembly, while excluding organisations that seek to operate across religious lines, such as the Women’s Coalition and the Northern Ireland Labour Party.

The electoral and assembly voting provisions are being portrayed as guarantees of the democratic rights of both the Catholic minority and Protestant majority in northern Ireland. In reality, they represent the acceptance and reinforcement of the sectarian divisions that have long been exploited by British imperialism and the Irish capitalist ruling class to maintain their domination of the island.

The complex voting system will ensure that all decisions must have the support of parties that appeal to and base themselves on the existing communal and religious differences. This is a pre-emptive strike against any political movement that seeks to overcome these divisions and fight for a socialist and internationalist conception of working class solidarity. An organisation that advances the alternative of uniting workers on the basis of a program that defends their common class interests would be marginalised and the votes of its supporters would be effectively reduced to second-class status.

The underlying class interests

To understand the significance of the agreement one must examine the economic and social driving forces that have brought the parties together and shaped the character of their deliberations. The increasingly global nature of economic life—the rise of transnational corporations operating on a world scale, the international mobility of capital and the dominance of world markets over even the largest national economies—has, from the

standpoint of international capital, rendered many of the political relationships that prevailed in the post-World War Two period obsolete.

The divergence between old political relationships and the need for corporate and financial interests to gain access to wider markets, new sources of raw materials and labour, and, in general terms, the global economy, underlay the dismantling of legal apartheid in South Africa and the attempt to incorporate the PLO into a new political set-up in the Middle East. Broadly speaking, the same forces have been at work in the attempts to overcome the old barriers to capital investment and profit making in northern Ireland.

The process of European economic integration, including the scheduled launching of the Euro-currency next year, has increased the pressure for ending the armed conflict and clearing away the obstacles which hinder both international and local capital from taking advantage of the region's plentiful supply of cheap and well-trained labour, and its strategic potential as a platform for exporting goods into an expanding continental market.

As the *Sunday Business Post*, based in the Irish Republic, recently observed, "By definition, all new economic forces sweep over the political tidemarks created by former economic dispensations. The 1920 eco-political border running across Ireland, the product of the once great industrial northeast, is now as meaningless as the Berlin Wall."

The April 10 agreement sets out to remove the impediments to big business reaping the same lucrative profit margins in the north as they presently do in the south, where returns are upwards of 20 percent. Behind the glitzy campaign presenting the agreement as an altruistic attempt to bring peace to the province, real material interests are at stake.

What has brought the British, Irish and American governments together in formulating this agreement and what are their basic aims?

The British ruling class is seeking to develop cross-border initiatives with the Irish government so that British capital can benefit from increased investment in one of the last significant reservoirs of cheap labour in northern Europe, while cutting its huge and (from the standpoint of profit) unproductive outlays in Ulster.

The decline of the north's economy means that Britain subsidises the province by £3.2 billion a year to pay for policing and welfare spending—more than £2,000 per person. Such is the inefficiency of industry in northern Ireland that Gross Domestic Product per head is now 21 percent below European Union benchmark levels. Successive British governments since Thatcher in 1985 have sought a way out of this situation.

Equally important, British imperialism seeks to forestall or at least hamper the virtual economic take-over of the Irish Republic by American capital, which is using Ireland as an export platform to the huge market of the European Union. Ireland is to be a founding member of the Euro-currency bloc, while Britain remains at least temporarily on the outside.

The Irish bourgeoisie is a willing participant in the proposed changes because it is extraordinarily dependent on international investment. It believes that its relations with major corporations, particularly those based in America, will work to its advantage in any economic collaboration with Britain.

The United States, which brokered the agreement, controls fully three-quarters of foreign investment in southern Ireland. It is seeking to clear a path for extending its influence in the north as well. Blair could only secure an agreement with Clinton's constant intervention, and the former US Senate Majority Leader, George Mitchell, served as chairman of the Anglo-Irish talks. This shows the dominant role played by the US, even in Britain's oldest colony.

All those involved claim that the new arrangements will bring prosperity to Ireland on both sides of the border. This prognosis not only presumes a capitalist development free of crisis, it ignores the unmistakable meaning of the events of the past nine months in Asia. In recent years Irish

economic development has been trumpeted as the emergence of a "Celtic Tiger," comparing the island to the Asian Tigers of the Far East. The Asian events demonstrate how quickly the dreams of rapid economic growth can be dashed and so-called tigers turned into economic disaster areas.

Whatever economic development does take place will not produce a long-term improvement in the social position of Irish workers, north or south. The real beneficiaries will be the transnational corporations and a narrow and privileged layer of Irish capitalists and upper-middle-class elements who will administer the new order.

The experience in the south already demonstrates the emptiness of the promises being made to workers in the north. The economic "success" of the Irish Republic has been built on low-paid, temporary and part-time jobs and the growth of social deprivation. Public spending has been slashed in favour of tax breaks for business. A third of the population are living in poverty and the gap between rich and poor is growing.

Workers in the north start from an even worse position. Northern Ireland is the poorest region in the United Kingdom. The collapse of its manufacturing base has produced widespread poverty and unemployment, exacerbated by a lack of investment due to decades of armed conflict. More than 67 percent of the unemployed have been jobless for over one year, and a quarter of unemployed men for over five years.

Now workers are being told that the "dependency culture" that has grown up around the state service sector must be done away with, if the north is to emulate the achievements of its southern neighbour. As with similar measures in Scotland and Wales, devolving power to a Northern Ireland Assembly will enable Britain to substantially reduce its expenditure on welfare. This will be accompanied by thousands of redundancies in the state sector, the downsizing of many existing companies and the slashing of wage levels.

The crisis of nationalism and unionism

A major consideration in shaping the agreement is an attempt to counteract the undermining of the unionist and nationalist parties' influence over the working class. According to a joint *Guardian-Irish Times* opinion poll, nearly three-quarters will vote yes in next month's referendum in the north. Support is particularly strong among Catholics, with Sinn Fein supporters backing the agreement by 81 percent to 5 percent.

Such figures indicate the erosion of popular support for the traditional perspective of both unionism and nationalism. Both have demonstrated their bankruptcy and are losing their grip. However, the lack of an independent class perspective on which to unite Catholic and Protestant workers leaves the great majority prey to illusions that "peace" can be achieved through a patchwork arrangement negotiated behind closed doors by representatives of imperialism, the local bourgeoisie and aspiring bourgeois elements, and enforced under the auspices of the United States.

The loss of the system of patronage has undermined the unionist bourgeoisie's hold on Protestant workers, which was sustained above all by the fact that living standards and social conditions, however inadequate, were better than in the Catholic areas and in the south. Today the per capita Gross Domestic Product in the south is substantially above that in the northeast six counties—reversing trends that have influenced Ireland's history for three centuries.

Among Catholic and republican-minded workers, the abject failure of the IRA's strategy of "armed struggle" and the spread of poverty have contributed to a growing revulsion against 30 years of sectarian killings. It is notable that several demonstrations called in recent years by the trade

unions as protests against such killings saw Protestant and Catholic workers marching side by side.

Under conditions where its class strategy depends on utilising Ireland as a source of cheap labour, the greatest danger faced by big business is the threat of a united movement of working people acting in their own interests. The new agreement has the character of a pre-emptive action by the rulers of Britain, Ireland and the United States to fashion a new framework for maintaining their class rule.

The election of Blair was a key turning point in this process. Labour's advantage over the Major government was that the latter was dependent on the backing of unionist MPs to stay in power. In the end Blair's determination to include Sinn Fein in the agreement only met minority opposition from the unionists and has been endorsed by the Conservative Party in Britain.

The role of Sinn Féin

The most significant difference between this agreement and previous attempts to resolve the Northern Ireland question is the inclusion of Sinn Fein in the political settlement and the new state structures being established. What is the deeper political significance of this development?

Sinn Fein does not represent the interests of Catholic workers or a supposed "nationalist community." Rather it represents a petty-bourgeois layer whose social aspirations have been thwarted by Britain's reliance on unionism. That is why Gerry Adams wants Sinn Fein to take its place in an administration that defends private property and the profit system, not even balking at the continued presence of British troops.

Once again, a movement that professed anti-imperialist credentials has exchanged army fatigues for business suits and been incorporated into new mechanisms for preserving the rule of big business. This is the logical outcome of the nationalist perspective. Sinn Fein and the IRA follow in the wake of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, the African National Congress, the Sandinistas and a host of ex-guerrilla groups throughout Latin America.

The heyday of these national liberation movements was the Cold War period when the conflict between the USSR and the imperialist powers led by America allowed radical nationalist regimes to manoeuvre between the Stalinist bureaucracy and their former colonial oppressors.

Many of the national liberation movements adopted a socialist coloration in order to win support from the working class and oppressed masses for a programme of national economic development. Their political vocabulary was borrowed from the Stalinist "two-stage theory" of revolution, which ruled out any struggle for socialism until after a protracted period of national independence on a capitalist basis, during which the working class was to be subordinated to the native bourgeoisie or an aspiring layer of the petty bourgeoisie.

This was accompanied by a glorification of the "armed struggle," conducted by guerrilla armies based on the peasantry or individual terrorists, instead of the independent political mobilisation of the working class. One of the most grotesque products of this period was the perspective of the IRA, which sought to associate freedom and at times even "socialism" with the planting of bombs in pubs and shopping areas to kill English or Irish Protestant workers.

There remain a few organisations, like the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP), the Continuity Army Council and the 32 County Sovereignty Committee, who denounce Adams and Sinn Fein from the standpoint of maintaining the old methods of individual terror. Nothing could more clearly express the gulf between these groups and the mass of working people than the statement issued in response to the agreement by

the IRSP, which declared, "Armed groups exist and the fun is still in Irish politics."

The alternative to nationalism

The bitter lessons of this century demonstrate that the Irish capitalist class and the petty-bourgeois nationalists are incapable of overcoming imperialist domination and social and political inequality. The legacy of colonial and class oppression cannot be resolved through jerry-rigged agreements between the imperialist powers and parties that essentially function as their local representatives. As the experience of South Africa and Palestine show, this only results in continued unemployment, poverty and social deprivation. Even if the Irish border were removed at some future date, this would not benefit working people so long as the existing economic set-up remained.

The development of globally organised production and internationally mobile capital has rendered the perspective of independent national development inviable. Everywhere bourgeois nationalist regimes have abandoned strategies of economic self-sufficiency. Instead they seek to attract international investment by offering "their" working classes up for brutal exploitation. This is the reality in Ireland as well.

An agreement that perpetuates social inequality and economic insecurity cannot provide the foundations for overcoming the reactionary legacy of religious and communal divisions. Ireland's problems can only be overcome through a fundamental reorganisation of economic life. For this, a political and social movement that brings the great mass of working people onto the scene of history is necessary.

The objective conditions exist for overcoming the age-old divisions between Catholic and Protestant, Irish and British workers, providing they are united on a programme that articulates their basic needs for decent jobs, health care, housing and democratic rights. These needs can only be realised on a programme for the international unification of the working class against the profit system.

The economic basis for social progress exists in the form of the revolutionary advances in production technology over the past two decades. Under the control of the transnational corporations, these techniques are used to benefit a tiny elite at the expense of the jobs and living standards of the majority. In the hands of the working class they could be made to serve the needs of society as a whole.

This is the perspective of socialism and internationalism. Events have again underlined that equality and freedom cannot be achieved so long as the working class is politically subordinated to its class enemies and exploiters. What is required is the political organisation and education of the working class and the construction of a conscious revolutionary leadership in Ireland, as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact