

Irish government seizes on far-right riot as pretext for state clampdown

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14 December 2023

The Irish government has seized on last month's far-right riot in Dublin as a pretext for a series of attacks on democratic rights. The November 23 scenes were triggered by social media commentators following a stabbing incident in Parnell Square, Dublin, outside a primary school.

Three children were stabbed, one of whom is still in intensive care, along with a crèche worker who is also still in hospital. The violent assault, by a 49-year-old naturalised Irish male, was ended by members of the public, during which the attacker was badly injured.

The man is reported to have suffered a brain tumour two years ago, after which his mental health sharply declined. He had previously been charged with knife offences. No motive has yet been established and he has not yet been in a condition to be interviewed by police.

None of these facts mattered to a right-wing social media milieu which, based on inaccurate reports of the assaults apparently sourced in the police, blamed the attack on immigrants in inflammatory, racist and fascist terms.

Over the next few hours, right-wing protestors attacked police and their vehicles, setting a bus and tram on fire. Shops were looted, pointing to the broader social tensions contributing to the eruption. In all, some €20 million worth of damage was done. 34 people were arrested on November 23. The dispatch of 220 or so riot police was the largest deployment in the history of the Irish state.

Next day, the Fianna Fail/Fine Gael/Green government moved to strengthen their law-and-order arsenal. Under the pretext of targeting the far-right and criminal gangs, premier Leo Varadkar pledged to strengthen CCTV and “laws against incitement to hatred and hatred in general.” Two water cannon vehicles were borrowed from British-controlled Northern Ireland, where the legacy of the British “dirty war” and partition means that youth riots against the police are not unusual.

Fine Gael's Minister of Justice Helen McEntee announced her intention to order 200 Tasers and stronger pepper spray, recruit more trained riot police, and equip them with “enhanced” riot control vehicles and improved riot shields

to allow the use of snatch squads. The Garda Dog Unit is to be expanded. McEntee also announced legislation to expand Facial Recognition Technology, a new clampdown against shoplifters, “Operation Táirge”, and talks with social media companies to aid the removal of posts deemed to have “fueled” public disorder.

At the same time, the government used the actions of the far-right to justify adapting to its “Ireland is Full” slogan and tighten its asylum policy.

Since 2022 Ireland has seen an increase in asylum claims and migration, beyond the minimal figure of between 1,200 to 4,000 authorised since 2014. Some 13,319 applied for asylum last year; 70,000 refugees arrived from Ukraine due to NATO's proxy war against Russia.

The government has only provided minimal income, housing and social support while simultaneously overseeing an endless intensification of pressure on housing, health and living costs which are becoming impossible for much of the working population. Migrants are generally dumped in hotels and hostels, often in working-class areas or in isolated villages and army camps.

This has been exploited by Ireland's small far-right. In early 2023, in the impoverished working-class estate of Ballymun, North Dublin, the Irish National Party instigated anti-immigrant protests against the use of a local hotel for asylum seekers, previously used for homeless people. As many as 169 protests were reported concerning immigration up to August this year, although the numbers have since fallen off.

Many migrants have been totally abandoned and left defenceless. In May, 520 migrants were left to sleep in tents in the middle of Dublin. One encampment, in Upper Sandwith Street, was burnt out following a confrontation with anti-migrant protesters. Further confrontations took place on Mount Street. As late as November, days after the Dublin riots, some 437 vulnerable migrants were still living in tents. Some asylum seekers were displaced to the remote Kilbride army camp in County Wicklow.

Days before the Dublin riots, Varadkar had already

announced his intention to “slow the flow of migration.” Last week, the Irish state refused to offer 83 asylum seekers any accommodation at all, eventually offering places to only seven of them. Those without accommodation will get €113.80 a week, far short of the cost of even a room in the cheapest shared house in Dublin. Ukrainian refugees, now numbering 100,000, will in future only be offered accommodation for 90 days. Entitlement to €220 weekly job seeker’s allowance will be removed for new arrivals. Ukrainian refugees will now face the same miserable circumstances as asylum seekers, crammed into unsuitable hostels with a pittance of €38.80 on which to live.

The far-right is being deliberately strengthened because its agenda corresponds to the needs of the ruling class to destroy democratic rights, scapegoat the most vulnerable, drive down wages and conditions and prepare for war.

Particularly in a country like Ireland, from where emigrants have set sail for centuries seeking a better life, and in which there is broad sympathy for the oppressed everywhere, the carefully nurtured far-right serves as a knife in the hands of the financial oligarchy with which to attack the democratic and social rights of the working class.

They are only able to play this role because the so-called “left” parties and organisations, particularly Sinn Fein, the trade unions and their pseudo-left apologists, offer no genuine alternative or opposition.

Ahead of the ruling parties in the opinion polls and hoping to be part of the next coalition government, Sinn Fein—the former political wing of the disbanded Irish Republican Army—responded to the Dublin riots by praising the police and putting themselves forward as the party of law and order. It proposed a no confidence motion in the Fine Gael Justice Minister.

Sinn Fein leader Mary Lou McDonald said, “Let me be clear, I have full confidence in gardaí and the garda on the beat but I have zero confidence in the Justice Minister Helen McEntee.”

Sinn Fein has nothing to offer the working class to alleviate the social crisis. The bourgeois nationalist party’s recent budget proposals amount to a few disposable measures to offset the very worst aspects of the cost of living, health and housing crises, without encroaching in the slightest on the wealth of the super-rich or disrupting the vast flow of profits made and recycled in Ireland to large numbers of US-based corporations. Sinn Fein’s sole budget comment on corporation tax is a pledge to ensure “that volatile corporation tax receipts are not used to fund day-to-day current spending.”

On immigration, speaking in a December 6 Dáil Éireann debate proposed by the right-wing Rural Independents, Sinn Fein speaker after speaker made clear they had few

differences with the government. Pa Daly, parliamentary representative for Kerry, proclaimed, “Nation states can and should manage their borders and we do not believe in an open border policy. We believe that all states should manage migration, and this includes having an immigration and asylum system with well-functioning rules and regulations.”

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions roundly condemned November’s anti-immigrant riots and called demonstrations of some thousands of workers on November 27. But the trade unions are organically tied to the Irish capitalist state and to the stability of Ireland as an investment platform for the expansion of profit. They offer nothing by way of alleviation of the deepening social crisis, working to suppress strikes and the class struggle in the interests of the employers while diverting struggle after struggle through the operations of the Labour Court.

Hundreds of thousands of workers and young people have marched in Ireland over the last weeks against the Israeli government’s genocidal war against the Palestinians. These protests have far outnumbered the miserable and disoriented layers mobilised by the far-right.

This outpouring of social and political opposition terrifies the ruling class as it testifies to a profound egalitarian, democratic, internationalist and anti-war sentiment in the working class. This sentiment must be given conscious political form through the development of a mass socialist and internationalist movement against austerity and war and for the defence of migrants and asylum seekers—the task to which the Socialist Equality Group in Ireland is dedicated.



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