

Stormont's return in Northern Ireland: Not a "new dawn" at all

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The deal between the British government and the sectarian Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to revive the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive has opened the door for Sinn Féin's Michelle O'Neill to assume the office of First Minister.

On January 30, DUP leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson announced, following a five-hour meeting of the DUP executive, that he had been given a "decisive" mandate to rejoin the power-sharing administration it brought down two years ago. Then DUP First Minister, Paul Givan, resigned in February 2022 in protest over the Northern Ireland Protocol, collapsing both the Assembly and Executive.

The protocol is part of the arrangements cobbled together covering the UK's departure from the European Union on December 31, 2020 which imposed customs documentation checks at Irish Sea ports between Britain and the Six Counties. The restrictions were viewed by pro-British unionists as compromising Northern Ireland's position in the UK.

Simultaneous with Donaldson's announcement, the UK government issued a command paper, "Safeguarding the Union". Under the proposals, the "Windsor Framework" which amended the protocol to allow for goods directed solely towards Northern Ireland from the UK to go through reduced customs checks in comparison with goods intended for the Republic of Ireland, an EU member state, will remain in place but with reduced customs scrutiny.

New bodies to promote trade between the UK and Northern Ireland are to be created. Any new regulations in the UK are to be investigated for their impact on Northern Ireland. This affirms Northern Ireland's position in the UK, without either breaking the 1998 Good Friday Agreement which instigated power-sharing between Unionist and Irish Republican parties, or the UK's Brexit arrangements with the European Union. For the moment, Northern Ireland businesses will effectively both be in the UK's internal market and have access to the EU Single Market.

Two days later, legislation was hurriedly accepted in the UK's House of Commons, without a formal vote or opposition, approving the changes.

On February 3, to press fanfare and a theatrical descent of Stormont's grand staircase past a statue of James Craig, Northern Ireland's first post-partition prime minister, Sinn Féin's Vice President Michelle O'Neill was elected as First Minister by the reconvened assembly. The DUP's Edwin Poots was selected as Speaker and Emma Little-Pengelly was chosen as Deputy First Minister. O'Neill and Little-Pengelly have equal authority, but under power-sharing rules Sinn Féin, as the largest party, holds the more influential First Minister position.

Ministerial positions were also allocated according to power-sharing rules and party preference.

O'Neill described her election as "an historic day which represents a new dawn. For the first time ever, a nationalist takes up the position of First Minister. That such a day would ever come would have been unimaginable to my parents and grandparents' generation."

This is only half the story. The entire political structure of Northern Ireland was designed, from Ireland's partition in 1921/2 onwards, to

ensure the hegemony of the unionists, come what may. O'Neill's rise to power testifies to the protracted and bitterly contested loss of influence by Unionism and the demographic shift in the population to a situation where Catholics outnumber Protestants.

But O'Neill's new position also points to the decades-long rapprochement, backed and orchestrated by the United States, between the Irish republicans of Sinn Féin and British imperialism. O'Neill's elevation, along with the Sinn Féin's emergence as a coalition contender in the South, underscores the party's commitment to capitalism in Ireland and opposition to any threat from the working class.

O'Neill was explicit on her priorities: "With new leadership in the Economy Department, we will work in partnership with business, the trade union movement, education providers, and the community sector to improve economic performance." She pledged to "seize the considerable opportunities created by the Windsor Framework, to use dual market access to grow our exports and attract higher-quality FDI [Foreign Direct Investment]."

Many working people will view the revival of the Assembly as a necessary and very belated response to the deep crisis in public services. Since the institutions were brought down by the DUP in 2022, Northern Ireland has been run by caretaker administrators and subject to a funding freeze by the British government. But while some immediate resources will be made available, Stormont's revival in fact signals new attacks on the working class.

O'Neill's speech made clear that the resuscitated institutions will be devoted to attracting global investment. Public services, such as water, are being set up for charging and privatisation, while demands are being made for corporation taxes to be reduced in line with the notoriously low rates in the South.

O'Neill is assuming office under conditions where the imperialist powers to whom she is beholden, on both sides of the Atlantic, are in the opening stages of a new world war against Russia, China and Iran. It is out of efforts by the ruling class to reduce tensions between imperialist allies in the US, UK and Europe, heightened by Brexit, that the new agreement has arisen.

The Good Friday Agreement

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which brought British imperialism's hated dirty war in Northern Ireland to an end, was, in large measure, a product of the growing influence of the United States in the politics in Ireland on both sides of the border. With US investment pouring into the Republic of Ireland, seeking markets in Europe and internationally, the British colonial outpost in the North, propped up by heavy subsidies and a huge military commitment, was increasingly viewed in London as a

financial drain requiring the removal of obstacles to profits that could be made across the entire island.

The agreement, brokered by the US and supported by the EU, opened the door to Irish nationalists—Sinn Féin but also the smaller Social Democratic and Labour Party—sharing power with the then dominant Ulster Unionist Party and the DUP of the Reverend Ian Paisley.

A complex voting and electoral system was, however, devised to ensure that sectarian divisions between Catholics and Protestants, the traditional tool of British rule in Ireland, were institutionalised into the structures of the new Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive in Stormont. Every decision needed to be signed off by representative of both designated “communities”. The agreement’s premise was that US investment directed towards Europe would provide “peace and prosperity” for all.

In return, the Irish government renounced its claim on the North and, most importantly, the Provisional Irish Republican Army wound up its military campaign, in line with the evolution of bourgeois nationalist groups such as the African National Congress and the Palestine Liberation Organisation worldwide, while much of the British military apparatus was also dismantled.

Although US investment largely failed to materialise in the North, there was a stabilisation. The 300-mile North/South border, once defended by British Army helicopters, watch towers and check points, disappeared, now crossed hundreds of thousands of times daily. Investment, despite disruption by the 2008/9 financial crisis, continued to pour into the South.

But, in 2016, expressing the deepening contradictions of world imperialism, a section of the British ruling class attempted to undercut their rivals on the world markets by quitting the European Single Market and the regulatory restrictions on their profit-making bound up with it. Taking advantage of the deep alienation of much of the working population from the political establishment, Brexit was presented by the Tory right, led by later Prime Minister Boris Johnson, as a popular reclamation of national sovereignty, supposedly usurped by the EU in Brussels, and a means of channeling taxes back to the National Health Service and a revival of British imperialism’s halcyon days as the leading world power.

However, Brexit threatened to unravel the agreement that had brought “the Troubles” to an end. So long as the UK and Ireland were both in the EU, there was no need for customs or trade restrictions between the two islands or between both and the EU. Irish nationalists could point to the increasing integration on the island, overcoming the irrational border, and slow demographic change as moving towards Irish unification, while Unionists could reassure themselves that the North was going to remain in the UK for as long as they wished.

With the UK’s departure from Europe and the threat of trade war, the North/South line of partition became, and remains, an international frontier between the UK and the EU. Everything was thrown in the air.

Political tensions within Northern Ireland were enflamed. Although a majority in Northern Ireland had voted against leaving the EU, DUP members of parliament had played a crucial role in allowing the Tory government in Westminster to push through key aspects of its Brexit legislation.

After Boris Johnson’s landslide victory in 2019, however, the DUP’s services were dispensed with. Having promised the DUP there would be no restrictions on trade between the UK and Northern Ireland, the DUP and its unionist voters found themselves on the wrong side of an “Irish Sea” border agreed by the Tories under the Northern Ireland Protocol to avoid a “hard” land border. Customs infrastructure began to be constructed on Northern Ireland ports. In response, amid orchestrated threats of a loyalist backlash, the DUP collapsed the institutions in 2022.

Tensions between US and UK over Ireland

Brexit had also infuriated US imperialism by depriving it of a British counterweight to Germany and France within the EU and a safeguard against measures such as the creation of a European military capability independent of NATO. The US viewed the prospect of ever-deepening tensions between the UK and the EU with profound alarm. Particularly with the election of Democrat Joe Biden, a president with strong Irish connections, in 2020, the US began pressing for a resolution of the border question that preserved the island’s stability and defended the Good Friday Agreement and US capitalism’s huge investments in the South.

As a measure of the US stake in Ireland, the crucial chip maker Intel has built its largest and most advanced production facility, outside the US, in Leixlip, near Dublin. Intel alone employs 7,500 people in Ireland and claims to have invested as much as €30 billion.

Matters were brought to a head in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Richard E. Neal, chair of the US Congress House Committee of Ways and Means, warned the UK, “We don’t believe that Ireland should be held hostage to turbulence in the UK political structure.”

A large delegation to Ireland, led by Neal, was criticised from all quarters of Unionism, while threats were made against the delegation’s security. In 2022, 100 years since partition was enforced with anti-Catholic pogroms, the North saw the biggest Orange marches for years.

Having alienated both the EU and the US, and with prospects of a US trade deal destroyed, as the war in Ukraine raged, Johnson was forced out of office on September 6, 2022. His eventual replacement, Rishi Sunak, has rebuilt relations with the US and the EU, while continuing like Johnson to march in lockstep with the US and NATO over the war in Ukraine, the genocide in Gaza and preparations for war with Iran and China.

This is the context of the protracted efforts to cajole and bribe the DUP back into Stormont. A deal had to be found which involved no border in Ireland and very little border in the Irish Sea, and which was acceptable to the EU, the US, the UK and the DUP, Sinn Féin and the Irish government.

From late 2023 the framework of a proposal was clear: the DUP would re-enter Stormont and accept O’Neill as First Minister on the basis of a substantial handout from Westminster (several billion pounds), much reduced controls under the terms of the “Windsor Framework”, and moves towards privatisation and public service charges—with the whole package draped in the Union Jack to mollify the Unionists.

The DUP, however, was split between those who saw the advantages of the deal for business, led by Donaldson, and the most hardline Loyalists-supporting flag-wavers such as Jamie Bryson and the Traditional Unionist Voice lawyer Jim Allister.

The threat of an intervention by the working class was to force the issue. With public services starved of resources because of the funding freeze and broad sections of workers facing ever more intolerable conditions, 170,000 public sector workers took part in a one-day “generalised strike”, January 18 2024, which brought the North to a standstill.

The strike, conceived of by the trade unions as a belated warning that matters at Stormont needed to be resolved before the class struggle got out of hand, nevertheless united workers from across the religious divide. It was the largest strike in Northern Ireland since, and a sharp contrast with, the reactionary two-week strike movement of May 1974 of Protestant workers which, under the pressure of loyalist paramilitaries and egged on by the DUP and the fascistic Vanguard party, brought down the Sunningdale Agreement, a more limited forerunner of the GFA.

Within days, the DUP settled. With O’Neill installed as First Minister, the unions responded by immediately cancelling further industrial action. The deal supposedly includes some £688 million to settle pay claims, but not a single agreement has yet been reached.

Necessity for a socialist perspective independent of the trade union bureaucracy and bourgeois parties

The Unite, GMB and SIPTU unions stopped a transport strike planned for February 15, with GMB organiser Peter Macklin declaring, “The unions want to provide the politicians and Translink the space to provide a cost-of-living pay increase for public transport workers.” Thus far, a 72-hour strike scheduled for 27 February remains in place.

Planned action by teachers was also cancelled because, according to Justin McCamphil of the NASUWT, “Devolution has been restored, we have an education minister, and we have pay negotiations which will be commencing soon.”

A measure of what can be expected from the negotiations is the recent settlement agreed by the trade unions, including SIPTU, covering public sector workers in the Republic of Ireland. Some 385,000 workers are being asked to vote on a miserable offer of 10.25 percent over two-and-a-half years: 4 percent this year, 4 next and 2.5 in the final six months. Annual inflation was running at 5.8 percent in December 2023.

All workers in their struggle to defend living standards confront an alliance of the Sinn Féin/DUP devolved administration and the trade union bureaucracy no less hostile to their interests than the British government. Nor is the new administration any more stable than its predecessors. Fear of the working class might have forced the Unionist establishment into accepting a Sinn Féin First Minister but every turn of the political situation, particularly over the UK’s relations with Europe, will re-open the old disputes. Any illusions in the administration, in conditions of slump and the endless struggle for investment, will be short lived.

O’Neill, for her part, has clearly decided to devote her tenure to repaying Biden for her promotion by whitewashing US imperialism. Under conditions of repeated huge demonstrations in Dublin and large protests across Ireland, North and South, against the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza, O’Neill told *The Late Late Show*: “The US have always been a very strong partner for peace, actually a critical player in terms of achieving our own peace process. And I would hope that the US would use that same pragmatism and the same approach they took to our peace process to bring that message to the Middle East.”

O’Neill’s comments make clear that the new agreement offers no way to overcome the bitter legacy of partition, exploitation by British, US and Irish capitalists alike, collapsing living standards and the descent into war.

They point to the urgent need for the working class to develop a socialist strategy of its own, to unify across all religious, ethnic and national borders and resolve all democratic and social questions, including the unification of Ireland free from imperialist exploitation, based on the struggle for power in Ireland, Britain and throughout Europe. On the basis of a socialist reorganisation of economic life and the removal of outmoded and irrational national borders, the entire working population can be guaranteed the highest standards of living.

Support the Socialist Equality Group in Ireland to fight for this perspective.



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