

# Mass opposition to far-right and loyalist rampage in Northern Ireland

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Earlier this month, fascist, loyalist and anti-immigration thugs went on a rampage in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

On August 3, thugs smashed hotel and cafe windows and other property in Belfast's Botanic area and threw fireworks at opponents. Masked men threw chairs through the windows and attacked immigrant-owned businesses. When the far-right thugs appeared to be heading for the Islamic Centre, up to 100 residents lined the streets in the Holyland area, stopping the protests with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) at first nowhere to be seen.

The same evening, in the Sandy Row area a Syrian-owned supermarket was destroyed after being set on fire and a café owned by immigrants was burnt out. Cars were burnt and missiles including petrol bombs and chunks of masonry were thrown at police, injuring three officers. Four people were arrested for the violence. Other parts of the city including Donegall Road and University Street saw rioting and other immigrant owned businesses attacked.

Elsewhere, the M5 motorway was closed due to protests in Newtownabbey, and there were protests in Bangor and Carrickfergus.

August 5, there was further violence in the Sandy Row area where business was targeted for a second time, and armoured PSNI Land Rovers were attacked with petrol bombs and bricks. Police fired two plastic bullets in response. A man in his 50s was seriously injured in a racially motivated assault, which is being treated as a hate crime. Witnesses reported seeing attackers stamp on the man's head, while members of the public tried to shield him.

Police said that there was loyalist paramilitary involvement in the violence. Loyalist paramilitary groups are rife with police informers. Sandy Row

remains a stronghold of the Ulster Defence Association. Speaking at a press conference August 6, Temporary Assistant Chief Constable Melanie Jones said, evasively, she had "no doubt there is a paramilitary element to this, but I am not in a position to say that it is this that is the main organiser or orchestrator of these events."

The same day, in the Shankill Road area in Belfast, masked men rammed a hijacked car into an estate agent amid false claims that the agency was renting homes to asylum seekers. Masked men were also reported to be kicking in doors, attacking immigrant owned homes and cars in the Woodvale area.

On August 10 there was further unrest with a petrol bomb thrown at a mosque in the town of Newtownards and cars set alight in Belfast. A man was arrested in connection with the Newtownards attack.

As well as being simultaneous with far-right riots and anti-immigrant protests in the UK and the Republic of Ireland, the disturbances took place amid the annual tensions surrounding the July 12 marching season.

Supposedly commemorating King William of Orange's victory at the Battle Of the Boyne in 1690, Orange Order and Ulster loyalist parades are held every year. Streets are decorated with Union Jack flags and bunting, while huge intimidatory bonfires, commemorating the beacons which guided Prince William into Carrickfergus, are lit in loyalist neighbourhoods.

A quarter century after the Good Friday Agreement was supposed to open a new era of "peace and prosperity", Irish tricolours flags, nationalist Sinn Féin, Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and pseudo-left People Before Profit posters, along with Palestinian flags, are regularly burnt on the bonfires.

The marches, parading Protestant supremacy but

passed off as a community festival, are routed through Catholic areas, and are an annual trigger for confrontations between young people from Catholic and Protestant communities.

A recent addition of tensions is the decoration of the so-called “Balls on the Falls” public sculpture on the Broadway roundabout, passed daily by 100,000 motorists. Constructed in 2011, officially entitled “Rise”, the public artwork can be seen for miles around and was intended to symbolise a new future for the city, directed towards tourism and transnational investment. Year after year, however, the sculpture is draped with loyalist flags and emblems, and, this year, with an Israeli flag.

Loyalist paramilitaries are attempting to expand their influence across the six counties with swastikas, Combat 18 (AH-Adolf Hitler) graffiti, and “locals only” posters aimed at terrorising minorities away from a new housing estate in Antrim.

As in the UK, the far-right violence generated mass revulsion and opposition. On August 10, up to 20,000 anti-racism protesters gathered in Writers Square Belfast City Centre. The “United in Diversity” rally was organized by United Against Racism and supported by more than 160 groups including community groups and political parties.

Speakers included Saeb Shaath, who owns a Middle Eastern shop in Belfast. He said: “There are 3,000 asylum seekers in Northern Ireland. They are not illegal immigrants. They came here because bombs landed on their houses, war came to them and they sought sanctuary.” “The wars are caused by who? By imperialists and the Zionists.”

Bashir, whose supermarket was burned out, said, “They call me the unofficial mayor of Belfast, can you believe that? ... Four days ago when I was working, six guys wearing masks attacked me, and I was almost killed.”

But political speeches were banal and devoid of any analysis of the origins of the far-right violence, the serious danger it represents or viable means to combat it.

Sinn Fein MP Deidre Hargey opined, “The seeds of Islamophobia and racist violence and destruction and thuggery are disgusting and not reflective of the Belfast we know and love.”

SDLP MP Claire Hanna thanked those attending for

“pushing back on the joyless empty rhetoric from the same people who look for new ways to divide our community and look for new wedges to divide through this society.”

People Before Profit Northern Ireland Assembly member Gerry Carroll referenced the social crisis, “Migrants didn’t cause the housing crisis, greedy landlords caused the housing crisis. Migrants didn’t cause the health crisis, profiteering and austerity caused the health crisis. We’ve said before that the enemy doesn’t arrive by makeshift boat, the enemy arrives by private jet and limousine.”

But neither Carroll nor anyone else made the slightest mention of capitalism, nor of the policies of successive British governments, carried through by the power-sharing Northern Ireland Executives, which have imposed austerity and systematically targeted migrants. Carroll made no mention of the Labour government’s frothing anti-immigrant measures or of the trade unions’ refusal to mobilise workers in defence of living standards and democratic rights.

Instead Carroll’s empty references to socialist republican James Connolly, “from a family of migrants”, served as a smokescreen for the policies of the Labour government, the trade union apparatus and the ruling parties, Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party.

In a recent article, “Mass protests erupt against UK’s far-right: The way forward” Socialist Equality Party National Secretary Chris Marsden insisted that there could be no successful struggle against the far-right danger that did not “base itself on the fight to mobilise the entire working class against the ruling capitalist class and the war and austerity agenda of its Labour government. Only such a socialist programme of struggle can cut across the divisions among workers systematically cultivated by the political elite and the media and cut the ground from under the far-right.”



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