

Loyalist anti-migrant pogrom in Northern Ireland

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15 June 2025

Five nights of anti-migrant protests, riots and attacks on property has left the streets of several Northern Ireland towns littered with debris and burnt out cars. At its height, following protests involving hundreds of far-right thugs, migrant houses were set on fire and a leisure centre, in which migrants were thought to be sheltering, petrol bombed.

The riots followed an alleged sex attack on a teenage girl in the town of Ballymena on Saturday, June 7. Two Romanian teenagers have been arrested and have denied charges of attempted rape in Coleraine Magistrates' Court.

Ballymena is a Protestant-dominated industrial town in County Antrim, home of the unionist dynasty of the late Reverend Ian Paisley. It registers some of the highest deprivation indicators in Northern Ireland, having lost a number of major employers over the last few years. Those that continue are increasingly dependent on migrant workers to fill low paying jobs.

The Ballymena attack, as in the UK following the 2024 stabbing deaths of three children in Southport, and in advance of any facts being established, was seized on as a pretext by far-right forces for a large demonstration on June 9. Estimates put numbers at several hundred to 2,500 people who assembled in the Harryville area of the town.

The demonstration, undoubtedly with the approval of loyalist paramilitary groups, and amplified on social media, moved toward the Clonavon Terrace area where a number of migrant families live, and rapidly became a pogrom. A section of the demonstrators broke off and set up barricades against Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) Land Rovers and riot police who were blocking access to Clonavon Terrace.

Over several hours, six houses were attacked, four of them set on fire. Shops were also damaged. One family with young children barricaded themselves in an attic. Rioters threw petrol bombs, bricks and fireworks at PSNI

vehicles.

The next day, Romanian residents of the street told *the Irish News*, "We didn't expect the riots to happen last night, we tried to get out of the house and go to a safe place around 7 p.m. I've lived here 15 years... I have so many friends from here, we got so much support. Everyone was texting us to ask if we are ok."

A Filipino factory worker, employed at the nearby Wrightbus factory, who shared a house with other workers at the factory told the *Belfast Telegraph*, "They were screaming outside... after a minute, they trashed our door and stole our bikes. They got something from our garage and... came and smashed our windows, trying to get in. But we locked the door and then they were screaming outside. They told us to come out. They threatened to kill us."

Early Tuesday morning a petrol bomb was thrown at the home of another Filipino factory worker in the village of Cullybackey. His car was burnt out and family traumatised. Reports suggested a Facebook page was broadcasting addresses of these to be targeted.

On Tuesday evening, conflict flared up in the Clonavon Terrace area with riot police, Land Rovers and a water cannon deployed. The police also fired plastic bullets. Many house windows were smashed in the street despite foreign residents putting Union Jacks on the doors and windows to save their homes from attack. Protests were reported in loyalist areas of Belfast, Lisburn, Coleraine and Newtonabbey, while bottles and masonry were thrown at police in Carrickfergus.

On Wednesday evening, Larne Leisure Centre was attacked by masked individuals, windows smashed and the facility set on fire following reports that it was being used to house migrants displaced from Ballymena. According to Mid and East Antrim Borough Council the leisure centre had been opened as an emergency rest centre, but by the time it was attacked any displaced

people had been moved. A brick thrown through a window interrupted a yoga class.

The *Irish News* reported that on Thursday, in the town of Portadown, a local housing association warned that a planned demonstration in the town “could lead to an unsafe situation and we would recommend that you stay with family or friends during the protest.” A sinister post circulated on social media by a group calling itself the Loyalist Edgarstown Bonfire called for migrant owned businesses, houses and hostels accommodating migrants to be targeted. Some 400 loyalist protesters confronted large numbers of police, rocks were thrown and fires lit. Further conflict took place on Friday evening, while Ballymena was reported as quiet.

Elsewhere on Thursday, a family with three children were forced to leave their Coleraine home after it was set on fire, and bricks were thrown through house windows in Avoniel Road, Belfast. In total just 15 people have been arrested so far, and three teenagers charged with riotous assembly. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive reported that around 50 families have received assistance following the Ballymena attacks, 14 of which needed emergency accommodation. As many as 63 police are reported to have been injured.

The political response to the riots has been muted. The power-sharing Northern Ireland Executive, with ministers from Sinn Féin, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the Ulster Unionist Party and the Alliance Party issued a pro forma statement, June 11, appealing for calm, calling for justice to take its course, and criticising those “weaponising the situation in order to sow racial tensions...”

Most heat was generated when Sinn Féin First Minister Michelle O’Neil—supported by the Labour government’s Northern Ireland Secretary, Hilary Benn—called for the resignation of DUP Communities Minister Gordon Lyons after a social media post in which Lyons pointed out the use of Larne Leisure Centre as a refuge for immigrants shortly before it was petrol bombed. Lyons claimed the information was already in the public domain. DUP leader Gavin Robinson insisted that Lyons was “doing a good job” and had been “fundamentally misrepresented”.

O’Neil made clear she wanted to move on to business as usual, covering for the far-right xenophobes of the DUP by insisting that all the Executive were “on the same page.” Seeking to restore confidence and stability, she told the British-Irish Council, “We have a job to do and I am committed to continuing to lead in that Executive to work with colleagues in the area, particularly to get us

through this period that we’re in now.”

The hardline unionists gave the anti-immigrant riots, led by their loyalist base, a seal of approval. Jim Allister, Westminster MP for Traditional Unionist Voice complained of “unchecked migration” and insisted that “those who came onto the street last night in the main had a perfectly legitimate purpose and cause of being there.”

Various Loyalists outfits—which operated as paramilitary forces to carry out the dirty work of British imperialism for decade—are a ready-made fascistic force which, as these events show, can be mobilised to terrorise immigrants as the spearhead of attacks on the wider working class.

The riots follow repeated similar outrages across Ireland over the last two years. Last August, far-right forces went on a rampage in Belfast, smashing windows, throwing petrol bombs and attacking migrants in their homes, cars and businesses. In the Republic of Ireland around the same period, far-right anti-migrant protests took place in the Coolock area of Dublin against plans for a migrant hostel in the area. Other hostels were targeted, while asylum seekers forced to camp out in Dublin were attacked by masked men with knives.

In both sections of partitioned Ireland, as in the UK itself, the fascistic right is continually bolstered by the anti-migrant rhetoric spewing from governments and the major capitalist parties. Migrants are systematically scapegoated for every social ill arising from the breakdown of capitalism and the insatiable demands of the financial oligarchy. The necessary defence of migrants from loyalist and fascistic violence is inseparable from the struggle to unify the working class on a socialist perspective for a political struggle against the capitalist system.



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