

Garvaghy Road provocation: British imperialism deliberately stokes sectarianism in Northern Ireland

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The return leg of the Portadown District Orange march from Portadown Orange Hall to Drumcree Church in the same Northern Ireland town, passes along the Catholic area around Garvaghy Road. It is the most provocative of all Orange marches. Held every year since 1807, six years after the Act of Union incorporated Ireland into the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, the march seeks to intimidate Catholics and proclaim Protestant supremacy.

It was first banned in 1995 as part of the protracted manoeuvres preparing for power sharing between Northern Ireland's pro-British unionists and Irish nationalists, led by Sinn Féin, negotiated as an end to the decades long dirty war between British imperialism and the Irish republican Provisional IRA. The ban resulted in a two-day mass standoff between thousands of loyalists and Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) riot police. The march eventually proceeded without the traditional Orange bands.

In 1996, the confrontation escalated, with 4,000 Orange Order supporters confronting thousands of army soldiers and police. One thousand additional British troops were mobilised. The standoff, which triggered rioting, the violent eviction of Catholic families and the sectarian killing of a Catholic taxi driver, lasted four days. The RUC allowed 1,200 Orangemen to march. The following year saw more of the same, with the march authorised by Labour's Northern Ireland Secretary, Mo Mowlam.

In 1998, following the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), which included the establishment of a Parades Commission to manage sectarian marching, the march was rerouted to avoid Garvaghy Road. The planned diversion triggering huge levels of Protestant Loyalist violence around Portadown and across Northern Ireland: 140 mostly Catholic families were forced from their homes by loyalist paramilitary thugs. On July 12, 1998, the loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) firebombed the home of the Catholic Quinn family in Ballymoney, Co. Antrim, killing three children.

The Orange Order still does not accept rerouting. The standoff has continued, although without the same level of mobilisation or tension. Every year, the Orange Order has applied to march down Garvaghy Road and every year its application has been rejected.

This year matters took a turn. In July, the Parades Commission, as usual, rejected the Orange Order's application for a 10-man token parade. In August, however, the High Court in Belfast rejected the Parades Commission decision, on a technicality, following a case taken by "Loyalist activist" and lawyer, Jamie Bryson. Bryson has repeatedly offered himself as a spokesman for the Loyalist bonfire and flag protests of recent years.

This event was then magnified thanks to a sharp expression of growing inter-imperialist antagonisms. On 12 September, during a two-day visit to Ireland, US President Donald Trump was asked his views on Irish unification. The genocidal war criminal, sitting beside a happily nodding

Irish Taoiseach Michel Martin, responded, "I think it would be a great feather in everybody's cap if that happened. You know what? The way I look at it, it's going to happen eventually. It may as well happen now."

Trump described Martin as "the right man over here to get it moving". Later during his visit, speaking at the US Embassy, Trump reaffirmed his position, stating, "You have Northern Ireland and you have Ireland and it would seem to me that one of the naturals of all time is to put them together."

Trump's comments, which were not the subject of any fence-mending retraction from the White House, came only a fortnight after recently installed British Prime Minister Andy Burnham stated that, in his view, a border poll on Irish unification, provision for which is contained within the GFA, was "off the table." UK government officials accused Trump of being "unhelpful" and "completely wrong".

Trump's comments are unprecedented. Never before, since Ireland was partitioned in 1921 at the end of the War of Independence, and the Irish bourgeoisie offered government of the 26 counties of what is now the Republic of Ireland, has a US president explicitly endorsed Irish unity.

Hitherto, during the interwar period, during World War Two, the Cold War and up to and beyond the 1998 agreement, official US policy, maintained through successive presidencies, has been to avoid criticism or contradiction of its close British ally. Even John F. Kennedy, of Irish Catholic background, avoided the question in deference to maintaining relations with Britain.

After the outbreak of the Troubles in 1969, during which tens of thousands of British troops were mobilised to prop up the Ulster Unionist government of Northern Ireland and combat Irish republicans, there was consistent financial and material support from across the Atlantic for the Provisional IRA. But the official position of the president was that the US, in the words of Ronald Reagan, "must not and will not interfere in Irish matters nor prescribe to you solutions or formulas."

Following the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1986, and ever more explicitly with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, US policy, seeking to advance US investment interests as well as to placate the Irish American lobby, was to pressure the UK towards some form of power sharing in the North. US President Clinton gave Sinn Féin leader, Gerry Adams, a US visa in 1994, in defiance of British demands. Clinton, however, carefully avoided any open endorsement of unification.

The GFA finally saw British imperialism, under Labour's Tony Blair, drastically wind down its expensive and decades-long military operation in return for a ceasefire. Sinn Féin, then the Provisionals' political wing, took a role in government in the North alongside pro-British unionists. The entire process was overseen by US Democrat senator and special envoy, George Mitchell.

The GFA sought political stability across the island, readying the

Republic in particular as an investment platform for US companies producing for the European market, and vice versa. It replaced British troops and a slow-burning, low-intensity dirty war with a connotational set-up that enshrined sectarian divisions in the name of “community” based politics. In the Northern Ireland Assembly, parties had to designate themselves unionist or nationalist, so they could be said to represent these “communities”. Billed as offering “peace and prosperity” for all, the agreement served to maintain religious and political divisions in the working class while freeing the British Army for international operations alongside the US.

The agreement, and subsequent modifications that paved the way for a growing integration of the North and South economies and included provisions for an eventual border poll, has been upheld by presidents Bush, Obama and Biden.

Trump’s break with US presidential reticence can only have been intended as a slap in the face to the British government. In April this year, the Reuters news agency reported that the Pentagon was considering ways to punish members of NATO for their lack of enthusiastic support for the US/Israeli attack on Iran, tardiness in increasing defence spending and refusal to join the blockade of Iranian waters.

A leaked email outlined options including suspending Spanish NATO membership and reviewing US support for British imperialism’s claim to the Falklands/Malvinas islands in the South Atlantic. A spokesman for 10 Downing Street responded to the US threat to its South Atlantic interests, stating that the British government “could not be clearer about the UK’s position... sovereignty rests with the UK and the islanders’ right to self-determination is paramount”.

This is the context of the second Parades Commission decision, 25 September, two weeks after Trump’s remarks, to allow a march down Garvaghy Road.

According to the *Journal.ie* news site, the ruling acknowledged the march as previously having resulted in “some of the most serious and sustained disorder in the history of Northern Ireland, including loss of life and serious injury.” The commission continued, “It is the most well-known parading dispute, with a legacy of violence and disorder, with effects that last until today.”

Despite this, the commission received a submission from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), post-GFA successor to the RUC, to the effect that there was no “specific information” that the march would produce “disorder or violence”. This disregarded the experience of decades and effectively endorsed the march.

The British state apparatus had found a way to remind Trump and his administration that stability in Ireland, on which large amounts of US investments depend, can be destroyed at will.

Sinn Féin had welcomed the US shift, with president Mary Lou MacDonald responding, “The conversation on Irish unity has shifted, and the onus is on the Taoiseach to begin planning.” The party sent leading figures to the protests that rapidly emerged at Garvaghy Rd among a largely working-class nationalist community alarmed at the prospect of a rerun of the terrifying events of the 1990s.

MacDonald, Northern Ireland First Minister Michelle O’Neil, Gerry Kelly, a former hunger striker who sits on the Northern Ireland Policing Board, and even former president Gerry Adams all appeared.

When on September 27 the small Orange march approached, it was met with well-organised opposition. A bin lid sounded the alarm to warn that the march was approaching. Parked cars were used as roadblocks. Protestors split into three groups spread along the length of the contested road. Orange order members retreated into Drumcree church.

Protests spread across the North, to Belfast and Derry and the UK, including London and Glasgow, drawing support from artists and cultural figures. Republican-influenced rap trio Kneecap turned up in Portadown to show solidarity, visiting schools and youth clubs. Kneecap’s members,

along with a long list of musicians and artists, signed a letter calling for the Northern Ireland Secretary to appoint an independent international mediator to resolve the standoff.

Importantly, a letter was sent from hundreds of Northern Ireland Protestants with “a wide range of views on politics, faith and identity” who are “committed to our shared society”. The letter described the writers as “distressed by the trauma that is being visited on the residents of the Garvaghy Road after 28 years of calm” and called on the Orange Order and the British and Irish governments to “avoid the abyss we are currently staring into”. Signatories included charity workers, writers, historians, schoolteachers, retirees, GPs and lecturers.

Court cases, negotiations, rallies, further protests and counter protests saw many thousands of opponents of the march attend a mass rally, while a near permanent presence was maintained on the road.

After nearly a fortnight of protests the British government’s Northern Ireland Secretary of State, Sir Chris Bryant, finally announced that “in the interests of wider public interest and safety” the procession authorised by the Parades Commission could not go ahead. Bryant’s decision followed a statement from the Chief Constable of the PSNI that forcing the march through would require a “major intervention” and “unacceptable risk of serious injury, disorder and a wider contagion effect across Northern Ireland”.

Nothing is resolved, however. The shifting relations between the US and the UK have intensified efforts by both Irish nationalist and pro-British unionist political camps to divert attention from their shared role overseeing the starving of resources from essential social services in Northern Ireland.

Under conditions of a growing strike wave in the North and South, and protests internationally, which underscores the shared experiences of Protestant and Catholic, unionist and nationalist workers and youth, the unionist parties and Sinn Féin have seized upon the Garvaghy Road standoff to again pose as the most determined defenders of “their” community.

For unionism, reeling from the jailing of former DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson for child abuse, Garvaghy Road has become the occasion for its most hardline elements, in the words of DUP MLA Carla Lockhart, to “Walk tall, walk proud, keep the faith, and keep fighting for this wee province”.

Lockart, who recently resigned her role as a DUP party officer, addressed an Orange rally last weekend in Portadown, attended by 25 Orange bands and thousands of supporters. She has called for Emma Little-Pengelly to resign as Deputy First Minister, thereby forcing First Minister O’Neil out of office.

Rushing to the head of protests against the reactionary and intimidatory Garvaghy Road march allows the pro-capitalist and increasingly right-wing Sinn Féin, with an eye on assembly elections in May, and a potential coalition role in the Dublin parliament, to refurbish its much-faded radical veneer.

For the working class seeking a way forward, there are key strategic issues to consider. The Loyalist provocation in Portadown, following repeated outbursts of anti-migrant violence, is a warning that none of complex historic issues bound up with centuries of domination by British imperialism have been resolved.

The Good Friday Agreement, which was supposed to usher in a new era of “peace and prosperity” in the North, has instead perpetuated the corrosive influence of British imperialism and its rivals, maintained partition and enshrined sectarian division as the default basis of official politics and the essential instrument of class rule.

In the South, the ruling national bourgeoisie, through Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and now Sinn Féin, has had over a century in which to find a way to unify the island and liberate it from imperialist domination. Instead, it long ago reconciled itself to partition and transformed the Republic into a

plaything of US transnationals and the European Union, a source of super profits pumped out of the working class through huge rates of exploitation and impossible living costs.

A “border poll” would seek to establish whether a majority of voters in the North want to join the Southern capitalist state, a prospect that offers nothing to resolve the desperate problems facing workers in the north, not only Protestants. Under current conditions, such a poll, under rules set by the imperialist powers, would inevitably be accompanied by a dangerous outburst of Loyalist provocations and utilised to enflame every form of sectarian tension.

The key question is the conscious political struggle for the unification and mobilisation of the working class, North and South, Catholic and Protestant in pursuit of its independent interests. Finally erasing the border means expelling both British imperialism, a source of such enduring misery, and its US and European rivals from the island of Ireland. This requires advancing a perspective to dramatically improve the living conditions, democratic and social rights and life prospects for the entire working population, including Protestant workers in the North.

Such a programme is inconceivable on a purely national basis. Rather it requires a direct assault on the wealth, resources and political rule of the financial oligarchy in Ireland, Britain and internationally. The crucial allies of workers in Ireland are their class brothers and sisters in Britain, Europe and America.

The perspective of permanent revolution, first formulated by Leon Trotsky, explains that the democratic challenges once posed to the bourgeoisie, including finally expelling British imperialism without falling under the tutelage of Washington and Brussels, can only be resolved through the struggle for socialism in Ireland and internationally.

The future of Ireland is inseparable from the struggle to overthrow British imperialism on the mainland, and for the United Socialist States of Europe, part of a world socialist federation.



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