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The bigots won't keep us apart

Aileen O'Carroll

1992

IT'S BEEN a year of little change up North. Just as the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1986 led to a rampage by Loyalist gangs, in the wake of the Brooke talks 36 Catholic civilians were killed in random attacks. Six taxi drivers were killed, singled out as easy targets.

Newspapers talk of carnage, of a situation totally out of control, of the sectarianism of the IRA and the Loyalists, with the heavy emphasis on the IRA. Not many papers talk about the sectarianism of the entire state and it is interesting to note that the security forces killed more people than the IPLO, yet they are never described as terrorist murder gangs.

Contradictions such as these arise from the view point that the northern state is merely the neutral ground upon which these crazed madmen practice their blood frenzy. What is the reason for all this? What's special about the North, why is there not a sectarian divide in the South also? Why aren't Catholics being killed down South by Protestants? Obviously, there must be something that is causing this conflict, and if it's not the basic nature of the northern statelet what is it?

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	Stats for 1991 from Irish Press, Jan 1, 1992
Republicans	
Formers members of security forces, informers, Loyalist terrorists, those supplying services to the security forces	17
Serving members of security forces killed	19
IPLO	5
INLA	2
IRA mistakes	4
Total killed by Republicans	47
Loyalists	
No. of (targetted?) victims of Loyalist groups	37
No. of victims of random loyalist attacks	32
Total killed by Loyalists	69
'Security' forces	
Members of IRA killed by 'Security' forces	04
Civilians killed by 'Security' forces	02
Total killed by 'Security' forces	06

Political commentators leave this question hanging in the air, it's as if there is something poisonous in the water. It's no wonder that many people are not only confused but fed up with hearing about the North. It's no wonder that many political parties hide behind emotive condemnation using trite meaningless phrases to avoid discussing the issues involved.

So what are the issues involved? Why is there this Loyalist sectarian backlash? Why despite the statistics, are the IRA portrayed as the main threat to civilians?

Initially the North was partitioned in order to artificially keep the Protestants in the majority. The Protestants were then given marginal privileges, better housing and job prospects. The North was the richest and most industrialised part of Ireland, and most of that industry (linen, then ship building) relied on exporting to Britain. Therefore it was vital for the owners of business that the North remained tied to Britain.

By splitting Catholic worker from Protestant worker they formed an allegiance between Protestant worker and Protestant boss, and of course the British state. This was the 'orange card'. The North is now Britain's last colony. A majority of people in Britain have said in all the recent opinion polls that they would like to see them pull out.

Why do the the British stay? One important reason is that a chief sustainer of any state is the myth of invincibility. Once the cracks start to show, as Gorbachev discovered when he lost his job and the Soviet Union, the whole shebang can quickly crumble.

When India was struggling for independence they looked to the lessons learned by Irish nationalists. Indeed John Biggs-Davidson, a leading Tory politician, said as much when he said that "if we lose in Belfast we may have to fight in Brixton or Birmingham". This is not to say that a British withdrawal would spark revolution throughout Britain, but certainly it is a risk for the British government to allow such an upheaval, a risk that for the moment they are not willing to take. It's a

risk as regards the reaction of their own population at home, and its also a risk to have a wild card statelet, out of acceptable control so close to your own border (see the USA's reaction to Cuba and Nicaragua).

At the moment though Protestants still are marginally better off than Catholics. Unemployment is two and a half times higher in Catholic areas. However, loyalists believe that talks such as the Brooke talks could be a forum for Britain to slowly slip out of the North. It is to prevent this happening that the 'orange card' is again being played. It is for this reason loyalist sectarian attacks occur, they serve to divide Catholic and Protestant and ensure thus that the Protestant working class will fight to maintain the status quo i.e. its allegiance with the bosses and the state.

This isn't always the case though. There have been times when both sides united, for example, the DHSS strike against UDA death threats to Catholic workers. Last year workers at the Hyster factory in Lurgan walked out after three of their workmates were murdered by loyalist gunmen. However more often than not when unity occurs it has occurred on 'bread and butter' issues, rarely raising the issue on the border. Avoiding the issue leaves the door open to the bosses to once again play the orange card. The result is that in many cases such unity was followed by a loyalist backlash as the bosses attempt to prevent it reoccurring.

Therefore on one hand it is true that Protestant workers learn that they are more powerful and successful in struggles when the combine with the Catholic working class. However on the other they still see the bosses and the British state as necessary in order to protect what minor privileges they have. These are indeed minor, as Northern Irish workers, whether Protestant or Catholic, are the worst paid in the British Isles. Unemployment is higher in the North than any other part of the British Isles.

Sectarianism is a weapon that has been used again and again by the ruling class. In 1932 it split unemployed Catholics and Protestants who had come together in the Outdoor Relief Strike and it is being used today to entrench the loyalist side. Without workers unity against the bosses the situation could continue on and on. As long as the Orange state exists to divide Catholic and Protestant there will be sectarianism. Our goal is a socialist Ireland, where the freedom of the individual is respected and where the working class hold direct and complete control through their own councils. In the struggle for this loyalist workers can be won away from their bosses, and only then will the cycle of sectarianism be broken.