

IRA Cease-Fire

The Politics of Peace

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On July 19, 1997 the Irish Republican Army (IRA) announced, “the unequivocal restoration of the cease-fire of August 1994.” The renewed cease-fire came soon after the Orange Lodge (a Protestant cultural organization loyal to the British government) canceled some and rerouted two of the four Orange Order parades scheduled for July 12. Nationalist outrage at the beginning of the Loyalist marching season (Loyalists, also called Unionists, support the enforced “union” of Ireland’s six northern counties with Britain), forced the Orange Order to cancel the parades. The widespread demonstrations, protests and rioting caused an estimated \$30 million of damage in the first week in July. This massive show of resistance followed the July 6 Drumcree Parade which thrust its way through Republican neighborhoods accompanied by the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary) and the British Army.

The 1994 IRA cease-fire now being restored was ended by the IRA after 17 months because Loyalist political parties refused to meet with Irish nationalist political party Sinn Fein, and the British government (under former Prime Minister John Major) demanded that the IRA begin disarming at the start of all-parties peace negotiations. The IRA resumed its military campaign on February 9, 1997 with the bombing of the Docklands in London. The IRA and Sinn Fein both believe that all-party disarmament (including that of Republicans, Loyalists and the withdrawal of the British Army) should begin only after significant progress has been made in the political negotiation process.

The current IRA cease-fire is timed to increase the pressure on Loyalist forces. It came on the heels of more than a week of nationalist rioting, and just days before the July 23 deadline for all parties to respond to the British and Irish governments’ proposals on the process for negotiations and the timing for disarmament.

Anti-Catholic Terror

In the past few years, Loyalist terror campaigns and parades celebrating British imperialism have become a focal point for Republican resistance to the British occupation of the six northern counties of Ireland. This year Republicans began gathering days before the Spirit of Drumcree parade through the small nationalist town of Portadown. The Spirit of Drumcree and other Loyalist forces engaged in a campaign of anti-Catholic terror; for weeks they attacked church-goers and tried to burn down at least one church in the village of Dunloy in the months preceding the marching season. In response to last year’s nationalist rebellion, Mo Mowlam, the newly-appointed British Secretary of Northern Ireland, held more than 20 secret negotiations, feeding speculation that the new British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s administration was going to cancel all parades through Republican areas. On July 6, the RUC, British Army, and over a thousand Orangemen invaded the town of Portadown attacking peaceful nationalist protesters. Instead of forewarning nationalist forces, as Mowlam had earlier promised, the government ordered all Catholics to stay in their homes. The Republican movement went on the offensive against this pattern of harassment, to the marching season, and to the persistence of British occupation and discrimination.

The Blair administration has made a number of concessions to the Republican movement including maintaining a public dialogue with Sinn Fein despite continued IRA military actions, and proposing a process of parallel discussions on issues of disarmament and peace negotiations. The

cease-fire succeeded as a well-timed political tactic, forcing Loyalist parties to the negotiating table and winning concessions from the British government.

After meetings with Tony Blair, the main Loyalist political parties rejected the disarmament proposal brought by the British and Irish Governments. To avoid looking like the only ones who will not negotiate, the Ulster Unionist Party, the largest Loyalist political party by far, announced its willingness to enter some sort of parallel negotiations process. The Loyalist call for the IRA to disarm before negotiations on the future of Ireland even begin is basically an insistence on a symbolic surrender; it serves only to subvert the process of British military withdrawal from the north of Ireland. The British know that they cannot defeat the Irish national liberation movement.

In the days after the IRA announced a cease-fire, international journalists proclaimed that Sinn Fein has softened its commitment to a united Ireland. The IRA and Sinn Fein have thus far been clear and consistent in their goals of a united Ireland. Martin McGuinness, chief negotiator for Sinn Fein, said on July 22 that the IRA would not surrender “a single bullet” before British troops are out of Ireland and that “Sinn Fein will enter any negotiations as an Irish republican party seeking national self-determination for the Irish people and an end to British rule...It is our view that an independent Ireland achieved by agreement offers the best and most durable basis for peace and stability.” Despite lofty pronouncements, Sinn Fein has suggested that with some form of interim agreement the IRA would probably be willing to begin disarming before the completion of British withdrawal. It is unclear how much the IRA will be willing to compromise as negotiations continue.

Legacy of “Peaceful” Solutions

More than a few people who participated in or witnessed the massive outpouring of opposition to the Loyalist marching season are now asking themselves, “A cease-fire? Why now? We’ve got ‘em on the ropes, let’s finish them off.” Negotiations with the British government that include unclear references to interim agreements and parallel negotiations evoke the specter of Michael Collins and the 1921 partition of Ireland. [Michael Collins was a member of the Irish Volunteers in the 1916 Easter Uprising and the director of organization and intelligence for the IRA until 1921. He played a central role in negotiating the partition of Ireland, and was one of the signatories of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. The Treaty partitioned Ireland into the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland and a six-county statelet under direct British rule. In the civil war that followed, Collins commanded the government forces against the IRA. He was killed in an ambush in 1922.] Many committed revolutionaries for good and bad reasons reject this negotiation process especially when it becomes bogged down in confusing details. But while abstaining from all negotiations might hold the moral high ground, it doesn’t grasp the current conditions of struggle.

Are all negotiations equal?

The left in Palestine and elsewhere points to the example of “the peace settlement” in Palestine and Arafat’s and the PLO’s bankrupt leadership as proof of the futility of negotiations. The current negotiation process in Ireland does differ slightly from the situation that brought the PLO to the negotiating table. Sinn Fein and the IRA are in positions of relative strength. While the IRA’s military power may have declined compared to its height in the early 1980s, the Republi-

can movement as a whole is growing, particularly those forces that are closest to the IRA and Sinn Fein's politics. For example in the recent Irish elections Sinn Fein won its largest electoral victory ever. The British Labour Party's electoral victory also adds pressure to Loyalist parties in the north of Ireland who almost uniformly support (and are supported by) the Tories.

A more fitting comparison for the Irish than Palestine, might be the EZLN (Zapatistas) in Mexico. While upholding negotiations with the Mexican ruling class, the EZLN have put the majority of their energy into building mass resistance to Neoliberalism and mass support for indigenous rights and autonomy—and they have an army to back them up. In both cases, the revolutionary movements have used every tactical military option at their disposal while continuing to develop and rely on the mass movements that brought them to their current position. Of course an important distinction between the IRA and the EZLN to note is the Zapatistas' rejection of taking state power.

In recent weeks the Republican movement, including Sinn Fein, has continued to emphasize substantive political issues, demonstrating for the release of Republican political prisoners, and against police brutality, state repression, and job discrimination. This emphasis on mass social movements is more than just another means to a negotiated settlement; it recognizes that even in the best case scenario, negotiations will not solve all of Ireland's social problems. This contrasts markedly to current-day Palestine, where the PLO, and now the Palestinian Authority (PA) strives to manage social protest and mass mobilizations to use solely as a bargaining chip against Israel. Yasir Arafat and the PA have at times banned public protests and detained political organizers when negotiations with Israel seemed to be going well. Arafat and members of the PA have even arrested Palestinian journalists and activists who have simply questioned policy decisions or challenged their leadership. Sinn Fein and the IRA have not engaged in this type of activity and stand against such sectarian politics.

While emphasizing mass protest and resistance, Sinn Fein has continued to build a Pan-nationalist alliance with more moderate and middle-class political forces, such as Fianna Fail, the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) and segments of the Catholic Church. The Workers Solidarity Movement (WSM), a libertarian communist organization in Ireland has sharply criticized Sinn Fein for this Pan-nationalist, united front approach. WSM argues that building a united front submerges the class struggle for broader unity. This is certainly a real danger, and has no doubt happened at specific times in Ireland. But this effect is not an inevitable result of the united front, but dependent on the relationship of forces in the united front and in Ireland as a whole.

Recent Bombing challenges the Peace Process

Since the opening of the September 15 Stormont talks (without the participation of the main Loyalist parties), the situation has changed rapidly. Protestant paramilitaries considered to be significantly dominated by British intelligence agencies are now talking of a renewed campaign of murder in Catholic areas. And more importantly, the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) and the Continuity Army Council—IRA (CAC), two small Republican military organizations have both declared their intention to challenge the Stormont talks with renewed military activity.

On September 16 an RUC station was bombed in Markethill, a small town just outside of Belfast. A few days later the INLA launched a failed grenade attack in Derry. The IRA has denied the Mar-

kethill bombing, and denounced the two attacks. Recently the CAC took responsibility for the bombing. The CAC is an armed organization that may be linked to the political party Republican Sinn Fein, a 1987 split from Sinn Fein. Republican Sinn Fein differs from Sinn Fein in (1) their refusal to take seats in or recognize governmental bodies in the northern counties while Ireland is partitioned, and (2) their demand that Britain declare its intent to withdraw from Ireland before any negotiations take place. As for the INLA, they have repeatedly stated that the IRA has conceded too much too soon. The Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) offers an interesting model for such a consultation. The EZLN has held locally-based meetings in southern Mexico where their supporting communities decide on political and military questions. In 1995 the EZLN circulated a series of questions in their base areas as well as nationally and internationally on what general direction the Zapatista movement should go. Who knows whether a similar process could work under conditions of the "hot" war in northern Ireland. Nevertheless the IRA cease-fire, the Stormont talks, and their outcome are momentous events that all Republicans should have a voice in. Some sort of consultation process is in order. Even so, the INLA has recognized that the cease-fire has popular support, and have gone as far as to say that negotiations could move the liberation struggle forward.

The INLA is the armed wing of the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP), a left-wing split from the Official IRA which halted operations in 1972 to become the Provisional IRA. The INLA, and the IRSA are explicitly republican socialists who fight for a united, democratic socialist republic. Neither the INLA nor the CAC are not against negotiations in principle; they simply reject the particulars of the Stormont talks. While the CAC and the most recent incarnation of the INLA have much less active support now, some independently-minded Republicans who are uneasy with the IRA and Sinn Fein's strategy of a negotiated settlement seem to be looking to these other groups to keep Sinn Fein on the right path. And if the IRA and Sinn Fein do "sell-out," the anti-negotiation Republican organizations might see a rapid increase in support.

Meanwhile all of the Loyalist political parties have seized upon the recent bombings as examples of IRA deceit, and have called, unsuccessfully, for the expulsion of Sinn Fein from the Stormont talks. The Loyalist parties have suggested that the (Provisional) IRA and the CAC and the INLA are somehow linked organizationally and politically, even though British intelligence sources quoted in the mainstream press acknowledge that there is no working relationship between the organizations.

The recent bombing and calls to resume armed struggle may short-circuit the negotiations process and in turn divide and demoralize the Republican movement. Right now the Stormont talks seem to offer the best possible solution to the colonial occupation and partition of Ireland. The IRA and Sinn Fein have seized on this opportunity with massive support from the Republican community. While different organizations committed to uniting Ireland should continue to struggle politically with each other and in the broader society, military actions by the more marginal groups that have no chance of winning the liberation of Ireland can only cause a major division in the Republican movement. At this time a deep division in the Republican movement can only serve the interests of the Loyalists and the British government. So far Sinn Fein has conceded nothing. If Stormont were to lead to a settlement similar to the Treaty of 1921, then revolutionaries would have a responsibility to push forward by whatever means possible.

What does the future hold?

What the negotiations will bring is unclear. Sinn Fein and the IRA have always been clear that freedom for all of Ireland requires both military and political struggle; and that in order to win, negotiations are a tactic Republicans need to employ. The tragic history of national liberation struggles that have led to neocolonialism illustrates that there are no easy answers and that a healthy dose of skepticism is crucial. But this should not lead us to dismiss the Stormont talks out of hand. The route of a just peace and its form must be worked out in practice. A massive assault on the British Army occurred in response to a Unionist parade held the previous day. Thousands of Irish nationalists chanted “no cease-fire, no cease-fire.” Sinn Fein seems to understand that nationalist demands for justice and a free Ireland cannot be negotiated away. Time will tell if they truly understand.

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