

If you want peace, prepare for...

Anarchist Communist Federation

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On 15 September representatives of eight unionist, loyalist, nationalist and republican political parties gathered at Stormont Castle in Northern Ireland as the faltering 'peace process' took another shaky step forward. There was high drama at this first meeting of the multi-party talks since the announcement by the IRA of another 'total cessation' of military operations, and was the first major political initiative since the bloody clashes that had once again accompanied the annual 'marching season'. To make sense of the 'peace process' currently underway in Northern Ireland, it's important to understand the context in which the 'endgame' of 'the Troubles' is being played out. Although it's still an unthinkable 'heresy' for the Left, it's readily apparent that British ruling class has no interest in keeping possession of the six counties of the north of Ireland. Not only does the province not generate profits, it sucks in expenditure from the British treasury, and will continue to do so indefinitely without a 'peace settlement'. The international investment that was briefly on offer during the last IRA cease-fire, shows just how much the province could be economically regenerated if the area became a 'normal' capitalist democracy. Few significant elements in the British ruling class feel any meaningful commitment to northern Irish Protestant unionists, or have any interest in maintaining a unionist statelet in the north — an uncomfortable truth that increasing numbers of Ulster loyalists now recognise. A majority of Sinn Fein leaders now recognise both these facts, but acknowledge that the 'long war' and the 'ballot box and the armalite' have been strategic failures, and have calculated that a new political approach was needed to take forward the republican project. The leading unionist political party, meanwhile has identified both republican war-weariness and the decline of British interest in the province, and has calculated that a policy of negotiation with Irish nationalism might serve long-term unionist interest better than a blanket refusal to consider any further reform of Protestant ascendancy in the statelet, and the narrow focus on ever tighter military and security responses to the armed republican campaign. None of which means that the 'peace process' will 'succeed', only that the chances for some kind of deal are probably better now than at any time since the deployment of British troops on the streets of Derry and Belfast in 1969. For the first time, since the new republican 'peace strategy' articulated by Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams became official Sinn Fein (SF) policy, the two leaders were able to head a SF delegation into substantive talks on the future status of the Six Counties, with the full blessing of the British and Irish governments, and the US Presidency. Sinn Fein's inclusion in the talks process came at a price that the New Labour administration calculated was worth paying. It was inevitable that Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) — flag-bearers of old-time fundamentalist (and deeply sectarian) Ulster unionism — would refuse to 'sit down with Sinn Fein-IRA' and quit the talks, to fume and scheme from the sidelines. But increasingly the DUP is not the unionist party that matters.

The Mainstream

David Trimble, leader of the larger, more mainstream (and much more politically significant) Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), had waited until the very last moment to confirm that the UUP delegation would attend the talks — to the palpable relief of both the Blair government and the McGuinness-Adams Sinn Fein leadership. The UUP's assessment that negotiation is a less risky strategy for unionists than condemnation and the Paisleyite reflex of 'Ulster says no' effectively saved the talks. All the participants are aware that a prospective 'peace deal' might conceivably

survive a boycott by the DUP (especially now with the loyalist paramilitary parties signed up) but would be killed outright by the refusal of the UUP to take part. It would have heralded a return to military and political stalemate on all fronts, and confirmed for the paramilitary hawks on both sides that 'politics' was a proven dead-end. For the British and Irish governments desperate to engineer a stable long-term solution to the 'Northern Irish question', to bring Sinn Fein in without letting the Ulster Unionists slip away was a major political coup. Eight out of the ten parties entitled to be there, are now locked into a talks process that is required to agree a draft settlement package by May 1998. The British general election changed the political context for the talks, and shifted the balance of power between several of the key players in the north. During its last months in office, the enfeebled Major administration, relied on the Commons votes of the unionist parties to keep it in office, as its majority crumbled seat by seat. The UUP and DUP were able to stall the process for as long as they could prop up Major. The scale of New Labour's election victory robbed the unionists of that parliamentary leverage. In the province itself the UUP continued to advance at the expense of the DUP. The SDLP lost one seat, as large numbers of nationalist voters switched support to Sinn Fein — which celebrated its best ever poll showing. It won 126,000 votes (a 16% share), and two Westminster MPs — as Adams was elected in West Belfast, and McGuinness in mid-Ulster. The IRA's announcement on 20 July of a ceasefire, saw the new British NI Secretary Mo Mowlam agree that Sinn Fein could enter the talks in September if the cease-fire held, if SF would forego the use of political violence, commit to negotiating in good faith, and if an agreement on the vexed question of paramilitary arms 'de-commissioning' could be hammered out. Sinn Fein duly signed up to the Mitchell Principles on 'democracy' and 'nonviolence', agreed with the Blair government a formula for its entry into talks, and — along with loyalist paramilitary groups — reached an agreement on parallel (rather than prior) weapons decommissioning. Though this strategy has now won Sinn Fein seats at the negotiating table, it will require tangible progress in advancing republican interests for the Adams-McGuinness leadership to retain the support, and maintain the unity of, the republican camp. Within days of Sinn Fein's entry into the talks process, stories of 'splits' in the IRA, and resignations by at least a dozen long-standing Sinn Fein activists, opposed to the Adams-McGuinness 'peace' line, appeared in the Irish press. The republican weekly *An Phoblacht* condemned these reports as 'mischievous' propaganda, but carried an acknowledgement by the IRA that 'a very small number of people have left the army over a period of a few weeks' (13 November). The losses may well be small, and there is no sign yet that the dissidents are an organised alternative, but the defections are a sharp reminder to Adams and McGuinness of the risks of republican revisionism. The history of 'physical force republicanism' shows all too well that the movement splits when it reinvents its ideology or overturns cherished principles — in this case, renouncing the use of political violence. But times have changed since the IRA tore itself apart in the 1920s (over the act of partition), and again in the 1970s (with the onset of 'the Troubles'). After the 1981 hunger strike campaign, and the policy of 'criminalisation' that triggered it, British strategy was to try isolate and marginalise diehard republicanism, and to try to construct a new middle-ground built around the more moderate nationalist SDLP, that would uncut support for republican 'terror'. The new strategy is not to lock hard-line republicanism out (or hard-core loyalism either) of the 'democratic process', but to lock it in. The British government now share with the leadership of Sinn Fein an interest in maintaining cohesion and order in republican ranks. The Brits want to do business with republican leaders that command the support of their core constituency, and with the ability to police any settlement they sign up to both in the Army Council and down on the

Falls Road. McGuinness and Adams need to prove to the Brits that they can deliver nationalist and republican obedience. The worst-case scenario for both is that the republican movement fragments in all directions, and that a new wave of rejectionist paramilitary groups emerges — eager to prove their ferocity, and run by Volunteers with no interest in ‘talking to the enemy’. The previous IRA cease-fire which lasted from August 1994 to February 1996, was ended, as frustration in the ranks mounted, in order to maintain the unity of the movement, despite the political costs for Sinn Fein’s leaders already being feted in Washington as ‘statesmen for peace.’

Capitulation?

Two minor republican currents have never endorsed the IRA cease-fires, nor Sinn Fein ‘peace’ policy. The INLA, recently emerged from a typically bloody feud, has carried out a number of attacks in recent months, including the killing of an off-duty policeman last May. The Continuity Army Council (CAC) has carried out a number of attacks, most pointedly with a 400lb car-bomb that wrecked a police station in Markethill, South Armagh the day before the Stormont talks reassembled. Both groups attack the ‘capitulation’ of the Provisional IRA, and Sinn Fein’s ‘acceptance of partition’, but they remain marginal paramilitary forces. Their respective political wings, the Irish Republican Socialist Party and Republican Sinn Fein, also remain essentially marginal although the latter has experienced a certain amount of growth recently. However, at present, occasional spectacular INLA or CAC actions help (rather than hinder) current IRA strategy — they serve to ‘remind the Brits’ of the power of ‘the military option’, without getting the IRA’s own hands dirty, which would compromise Sinn Fein. There is no question whatsoever that if the INLA, the CAC, or any other armed republican group, attempted to start a paramilitary campaign to which the Provisional IRA were opposed, the Provos would first warn — and then quickly disarm/liquidate — any units that refused to comply with its order to stand down. The two minor parties representing loyalist paramilitary groups, the Progressive Unionist Party and the Ulster Democratic Party, have an uneasy working alliance with Trimble’s Ulster Unionists — joining the temporary ‘walk-outs’ that are a necessary component of UUP engagement with the Stormont talks, then dutifully accompanying Trimble on his return to the table. It is an indication of the marked decline of Paisley-style unionism, that the ‘political representatives’ of loyalist terror squads see more value in joining a talks process with Sinn Fein, than in operating as the ‘left face’ of implacable unionist hostility to any deal. PUP and UDP leaders have gained credibility in British government eyes from their effectively handling of loyalist prison protests and riots last April, and from local election successes that have seen the PUP win six local council seats. Their new ‘respectability’ has however been undermined by constant breaches of the (now defunct) Combined Loyalist Military Command ceasefire, and the appearance of a new sectarian murder gang, the Loyalist Volunteer Force, which broke away from the Ulster Volunteer Force just prior to the general election. Tensions between the various Loyalist paramilitarists were particularly acute last summer, regularly erupting in violence, and this is likely to continue periodically. The lack of one dominant paramilitary force has allowed new, autonomous Loyalist factions to develop unhindered and to develop local power bases. As for the talks process, it seems inconceivable that they will produce a settlement package acceptable to a majority of those on all sides in time to meet the May deadline insisted on by Blair. There is certainly no ‘magic formula’ waiting to be revealed: all the potential solutions to the NI question are known,

from complete incorporation into Great Britain, on the one hand, to Irish re-unification, on the other. Any capitalist deal, designed to bring about a new stability, isolate the ‘militants’, and able to overcome the in built ‘unionist veto’ in the north, will be a compromise between unionist and nationalist aspiration.

The initial deal

What astute unionists, and indeed loyalists, are after is a deal with northern Irish nationalism that protects the union with Britain, but which concedes the nationalist community in the north enough concessions to buy the acquiescence of the majority, which isolates and marginalises hard-line republicanism and which puts an end to ‘the Troubles’ by drawing the IRA’s sting. What politicians like Trimble will hold out for is a new constitutional deal that nationalists and republicans accept as fixed and permanent. The McGuinness-Adams’ republican strategy, in contrast, is to draw unionists into an open-ended settlement process, in which each ‘new settlement’ is accepted as temporary and transitional, and through which the chains of the union can be snapped or rusted link by link. In this scheme the threat of renewed republican terror, the promise of ever-increasing inward investment, and the evidence of the rewards of ‘normalisation’, are together intended to cajole and entice unionists down the constitutional path towards future Irish re-unification. The initial deal would have to have several key components: Northern Ireland would remain part of the UK, but a devolved power-sharing government in the province would have more autonomous responsibilities. Weighted majorities in these new assemblies would undercut automatic unionist dominance. There would have to be some form of ‘all-Ireland council’, through which the Dublin government in the Republic could have influence and some input into the government in the north. Continuing reform of sectarian discrimination in northern Irish society, would be rewarded by major injections of cash from the British, Irish and American governments. The Brits would scale down military and security operations, in parallel with the surrender of paramilitary weaponry, and the release of prisoners on both sides, as northern Irish society would be encouraged to ‘normalise’. This is clearly the kind of scenario favoured by the British, Irish and American governments, and recognised as probable by both Trimble for the pro-talks unionists, and Adams for the pro-talks republicans. As the old, and the new, political leaders of the divided communities of the Six Counties sit down together at Stormont one thing is clear. If a new constitutional deal is lashed together – and the process may yet fall apart, or seize-up in deadlock – it will be because enough of the politicians in Belfast, Dublin, London and Washington have agreed on the need to move ‘the troubles’ in the interests of a new post-Cold War European capitalist order. The ‘peace process’ in Northern Ireland is being driven forward by the most forward thinking sections of the political and economic bourgeoisie inside and outside Ireland who recognise that their interests will be better served by the resolution of ‘the long war.’ For those concerned to advance an agenda around global proletarian interests, there are still opportunities being opened up through the operation of the ‘peace process’ – despite the best efforts of the participants in it to counter their effects. Green nationalism and red republicanism have always been ideologies of a boss class in waiting. Now that its ‘most radical’ leaders are the welcome guests of US presidents and British prime ministers; now that its economics advisors are warmly embraced by corporate America; now that all talk of a ‘secular, socialist’ united Ireland has been confined to the fiery graveside speeches, that fact is

indisputable: it should now be clear even to those around the anarchist movement seduced by its paramilitary trappings into cheerleading for 'the Provos', whilst ignoring the existence of Sinn Fein. The recasting of republicanism is both an opportunity and a challenge, a challenge most of all for those who oppose a 'normalisation' of capitalist social relations presented as a victory for the working class of Ireland.

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