

Is the 'peace process' collapsing?

Anarchist Communist Federation

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Contents

Fundamentalist	3
Internal Settlement	3

The 'Peace Process' in the North of Ireland is in serious crisis once again. As Organise! goes to print Sinn Fein are beginning a suspension from the multi-party talks, following Unionist and British government assertions that the IRA has breached the Mitchell Principles of non-violence. Sinn Fein, for their part, have denied both that they are representatives of the IRA (!) and that the IRA "cessation" has been ended. They talk of returning to the table "on their own terms". Whilst the Process has never been exactly stable, why does it appear to have gone seriously awry?

The assassination by the Irish National Liberation Army of Loyalist Volunteer Force fuhrer Billy 'King Rat' Wright in the Maze prison on December 27th marked the turning point. Wright's death was used by the LVF as an excuse to launch a campaign of sectarian murder against working class Catholics. The notion, however, that the murders of the likes of taxi drivers Larry Brennan and John McColgan were somehow merely 'revenge' or 'reactive' killings is very wide of the mark. Rather, the LVF, with the assistance of elements in the UDA, used the death of their leader to intensify their sectarian murder campaign which had already taken the lives of numerous innocent Catholics during 1997, and to attempt to wreck the talks process. Whether indeed, Wright's death was connived at by forces within the state, for whom the breakdown of the 'Peace Process' would be welcomed, remains to be seen.

What is clear, however, is that anti-'Peace Process' elements on both sides have had an impact out of proportion to their (albeit growing) numbers.

Fundamentalist

On the Loyalist side, the LVF, who apparently rejected overtures from the Ulster Volunteer Force to rejoin the fold shortly before Wright's death, have been recruiting outside of their Portadown base and have obviously attracted UDA /Ulster Freedom Fighters. A working relationship has developed which we probably haven't seen the last of. The LVF has no 'political' wing because Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party, with its rejection of the 'Peace Process' and its old time Protestant fundamentalism, serves that function quite nicely.

The LVF has vowed to take the fight against the 'sell-out' of Ulster to the 26 counties and has already attempted an unsuccessful bombing of a Gardai station in Dromad, County Louth. Its main field of operation will, however, remain the six counties.

Meanwhile, on the Republican side, tension is certainly rising as dissension on the 'Peace Process' grows. The INLA claimed responsibility for the killing of UDA commander Jim Guiney on January 19th and has reaffirmed its commitment to the armed struggle, despite some support for a tactical cease-fire amongst the Irish Republican Socialist Party leadership. The INLA, however, are not the main concern of those in the 'unarmed strategy' Sinn Fein leadership. The main 'threat' to the leadership of Sinn Fein lies in the IRA itself and the growth of dissent amongst the rank and file of the Republican Movement.

Internal Settlement

The likelihood of, at best, some sort of 'Internal Settlement' featuring continued partition but new, cross-border bodies with limited but tangible powers and a 'reforming' of the Northern Ireland statelet, has led to elements within both Sinn Fein and the IRA rejecting the 'Peace Process'. This years Ard Fheis of Sinn Fein may see these elements attempt to openly challenge the leadership.

At the forefront of these will be the 32 County Sovereignty Committee, who count Bernadette Sands McKeivitt, sister of 1981 hunger-striker Bobby Sands, as one of their spokespersons, but other critics of the leadership are developing and the possibility of a split, if not immediately then later in the year, is not unthinkable.. Where such a split would go from there is not so obvious, the only ready-made alternative being the abstentionist Republican Sinn Fein.

The bombings of Moira and Portadown at the end of February , like the massive car-bomb in Enniskillen on January 24th, would appear to be the work of the Continuity Irish Republican Army, the paramilitary force associated with Republican Sinn Fein. Although no group has claimed responsibility and the IRA has made a point of distancing itself from the bombings, the possibility exists that the CIRA was assisted by elements recently resigned from the IRA or even still nominally part of it. If this is the case then the potential split in Sinn Fein could be mirrored in the IRA. The option for the pro 'Process' majority then would be to either silence the 'splitters' or face their probable exclusion form the talks and, therefore, the end of the 'Peace Process' in its current form. The likelihood of a 'settlement', of whatever kind, by May 1998 is not exactly strong.

Whatever develops, one thing remains certain, that is that when the gunfire dies down and the rubble is cleared away the bodies on the floor will continue to be the working class of Ireland and not those of its exploiters and leaders.

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