

Peace Process in Pieces

Anarchist Communist Federation

1996

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The recent elections in Northern Ireland on May 30 showed the rifts and stresses that are growing within both Unionism and Republicanism.

The Unionists had insisted on these elections, and the Major administration, who depend on their support for keeping in power, readily agreed. The results showed that support for the Ulster Unionist Party, led by David Trimble, has fallen in practically every area. The combined Unionist vote, was now split between 11 different parties. This reflects the fragmenting unity among Protestants, where class interests are beginning to re-emerge. The Protestant working class, was relatively cushioned economically, in comparison to Catholic workers, in terms of jobs and standards of living. But increasing levels of unemployment, attacks on welfare benefits and rising poverty have made many worry about the future. They begin to question whether the Northern Ireland State can guarantee the living standards to which they were accustomed. This explains the vote for the Progressive Unionist Party and the Ulster Democratic Party, both of which use working class rhetoric. Both of these parties are the political wings of Loyalist paramilitaries, have the shadowy presence of British intelligence hovering behind them. Their bogus talk of class conflict is designed to ensure that the Protestant working class stays within the limits of Loyalist sectarianism (See the article in Organise!38 on these parties). Nevertheless, a certain disenchantment and disorientation seems apparent in the lower than average turnout, where the vote is traditionally higher than in Britain.

For its part Sinn Fein did nothing to win over Protestant workers. In the past it has come out with the rhetoric of saying that it fights for all the people—notice the word people and not working class but its practice during the election revealed that this was Nationalist cant and it concentrated on trying to prove how it represented and defended the Catholic minority. It got its highest vote ever in the elections — over 15 per cent, in some Catholic strongholds polling as much as 50 per cent. In some ways, this vote for Sinn Fein vindicates Gerry Adams' position. One of several reasons that Sinn Fein abandoned its old policies was because electoral support was diminishing. Adams can justify his stance by pointing to this increased vote. Sinn Fein had decided that joint work with the Dublin government, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in the North and the Irish American lobby would “advance the struggle”, leading on to the TUAS — totally unarmed strategy.

This culminated in to Adams' meeting with President Clinton at the White House. This collaboration with Sinn Fein is important to Clinton for a number of reasons. He hopes to retain and indeed increase the Irish-American electoral support for the Democrats. He hopes to boost his image as world peace maker, also very helpful at the polls. In line with US interests, a world wide “American peace” is required to boost America's position as world policeman. US economic interests would prefer “peace” (absence of armed conflict and civil strife) so that they can better exploit the working class in Northern Ireland, and indeed throughout Ireland. Sinn Fein and the IRA could be used as a pawn in the USA's game in Ireland, with its increasing economic and political influence in the South.

Collapse

Things have moved on from this scenario. A few weeks after the ceasefire, the Reynolds government in the South collapsed following a child abuse scandal in which Catholic priests were involved. The Major administration, under pressure from the Unionists, rejected the findings of

the Mitchell commission on decommissioning and announced that elections would take place in the North. Labour failed to oppose this move, and abjectly followed every precondition for talks laid down by the Tories. This means a big reverse for the TUAS tactic. The leadership of Sinn Fein, in order to further its change in tactics, has made it clear, both to Republicans in general, and to the rest of the world, that its previous tactic of bullet and ballot box was a failure, and a United Ireland was not achievable using these methods. Indeed, the leadership dropped any talk of a United Socialist Ireland, in line with this, and in order to placate its allies in the new partnership.

These allies, including the SDLP, certainly do not want any sort of United Ireland. They want political and economic stability. This leads on to Nationalists and Unionists running their own areas, with the British, Irish and American administrations acting to police this. This would lead, not to an ending of the sectarian divide, but to its institutionalisation, and the possible development of specific 'enclaves'. Remind you of somewhere else? Adams has publicly announced that Sinn Fein would drop the United Ireland demand. He admitted as much in a Financial Times interview. Sinn Fein has agreed to practically everything put forward by the Mitchell commission. The continued use of armed struggle by the IRA is either a bargaining counter used by the Republican leadership to squeeze more concessions out of the British government or a sign of dissent within Republican ranks, or a combination of both. Opposition to the leadership's manoeuvres does exist, both in the north and the south. For example Cork Sinn Fein sent out an open letter to all Sinn Fein branches calling for opposition to the leadership's concessions to Mitchell.

What is apparent in all of this is the increased failure of Republicanism to offer any solutions to the social and economic problems that plague Irish working people. This, and the divisions that are beginning to emerge within Loyalist ranks, point to the possibility of new spaces opening up for revolutionary libertarian politics. The small numbers of Irish revolutionary Anarchists must do their utmost to build a libertarian alternative, and revolutionaries in Britain must express their support and solidarity. One interesting result of the dead-end in the peace-talks is the enhanced position of Labour in the eyes of sections of the British ruling class and State. A desire for "stability" to pursue economic interests in Ireland is hindered by the Conservative administration's blocking of the "peace process", hostages to the Unionists as they are. A Labour government would be unlikely to be in this position. This is one of many reasons why Blair and Co. are being feted in the media.

Update

All of the above has been highlighted by the events of the "marching season" when the RUC, with the approval of the British government, allowed the Orangemen to march through a Nationalist area after 5 days of stand-off. This shows how deeply the Conservative government is in hock to the Loyalists; it also shows the stresses among the movers in the peace talks, with polarisation between the British government and the Irish government/SDLP. The TUAS policy of the Sinn Fein leadership is in shreds and there is clamour among the Catholic population of the North for a return to armed action to defend their areas against Loyalist aggression. The Enniskillen bombing is a strong indicator of this. There is a distinct possibility that now there will be a rift between those who want to continue with the policies of the leadership and those who wish to return to armed action, coupled with a call for a United Ireland-socialist or otherwise. This

scenario is borne out by history, with a series of splits in Republican ranks between those who wanted to do a deal with the British State and those who took a more intransigent position. But the intransigent position is not an option for Anarchist Communists. It is based on elitist armed action, and no attempt at united class action. The way capitalism has evolved, with production spread all over the world, makes the Nation State less and less important for the needs of ruling class economics. Separate national economies are more and more impossible, and this in its turn has rendered any national liberation movements mute in opposition to imperialism. They now hustle to be first in line in offering sources of cheap labour and raw materials to the multinational and transnational corporations. For their part the mainstream Loyalist politicians like Trimble and co. are keen to broker a deal to hang on to power in their own areas. As we noted in Organise! 42 this will also be jeopardised by those who want confrontation with Catholics, and who advocate driving out Catholics from predominantly Protestant areas. The latest events have shown that the process of disintegration of both Loyalist and Republican blocs is accelerating.

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