

# **Sectarianism in the north and the fight against it**

Andrew Blackmore

February 5th, 1992

# Contents

The 1919 Dockers and Engineers strike in Belfast. . . . .	5
The Outdoor Relief Strike 1932 . . . . .	7
The last example . . . . .	9
Conclusion . . . . .	9

Sectarianism is something that has existed to a greater or lesser extent in Ireland since the plantations and must be overcome if socialism can be introduced in the North.

Like racism in South Africa, sectarianism is not just something that came out of thin air. As racist laws are enshrined in the South African constitution, denying blacks equal rights to whites, so is sectarianism an integral part of the northern statelet.

When the state was formed it was designed deliberately so that Protestants would have a permanent majority, six counties was the perfect size. 3 counties would have been too small and 9 counties was rejected because it would have meant a majority of Catholics.

By 1923, the Stormont government had set about gerrymandering the electoral boundaries to secure Protestant controlled councils and MPs were elected. This was so effective that the nationalists went from controlling 25 local councils out of 80 in 1920 to only controlling 2 at the next election in 1924.

The most famous example of Gerrymandering was in Derry, with a 66% Catholic majority was fiddled to return a Protestant controlled city council. The Catholic population in that city increased so fast that Stormont had to gerrymander again in 1936 to keep the unionists in control!

Not only did the state twist and turn the electoral boundaries whichever way it suited them to get unionists elected but they also abolished PR and only allowed people paying rates to vote. Both had the effect of decreasing the Catholic/nationalist representation.

Other devices were used to favour Protestants, the allocation of houses by councils was purely arbitrary and since letting a house to someone meant one new ratepayer, and so one new voter, Unionist controlled councils were strongly against giving houses to Catholics. And from the start of partition Protestant employers were urged to employ Protestants only.

Northern Ireland was truly a Protestant State for a Protestant people. This was not because there was something inherently superior about Protestants in Northern Ireland, nor was it because Protestants were naturally in favour of retaining the union with the British empire and Catholics were naturally in favour of becoming independent.

The reality was that there was a clear economic reason for dividing the working class on religious grounds. If Ireland had achieved complete independence from the British Empire it would have resulted in huge losses for the textiles and shipbuilding Industry concentrated in the North of the country.

They relied on selling their goods to the rest of the Empire - the Belfast shipbuilders were part of the triangle of Glasgow, Liverpool and Belfast which supplied Britain with the bulk of its navy and commercial ships. In 1907 95% of goods manufactured in Belfast was exported to the British Empire. It was cheaper to ship goods to Glasgow than to send them by rail to Dublin.

If Ireland was to become independent, the raising of tariffs, economic wars etc would have seriously damaged the profits of the industrialised North. The rest of the country was much less industrialised and still largely based on farming which is why the Southern bosses wanted independence with the protectionist policies that could go with it.

So there was a clear difference of interests between the bosses up in the North and the bosses in the rest of the Country. Likewise it was more vital for Britain to hold onto the industrialised regions of the north than any other part.

In order to keep the North British, the bosses of the North and the British ruling class exploited the difference in religion between the majority Protestants in the North East of the Country and the majority Catholics everywhere else. They used the old imperialist ploy of divide and rule to split the working class. Divide and rule meant working on the working class so that one section

allies itself with the bosses and sees its interests as being the same as the bosses. The enemy is made out to be the other section of the working class which is made out to be the main threat to standard of living, jobs etc. Thus by dividing the working class, the ruling class get to rule.

In the early 1900's, sectarianism was encouraged to grow politically and militarily. The ' Solemn League and Covenant' which was against Home Rule was signed by 400,000 people in 1912. Unionism began increasing its military presence as well.

The UVF, a private unionist army was recruited from the orange order. The Orange order was and is a Protestant only club and has been a strong breeding ground for the Protestant supremacy politics of sectarianism. The UVF was taken over by a retired British General and in April 1914 they landed 25,000 rifles and 2.5 millions rounds at Larne. The arm were for the express use of fighting against a united Ireland.

They were backed in their organisation against Irish Independence by the Tories and the British military establishment. In July 1912, Bonar Law the Tory leader said " I can imagine no length of resistance to which Ulster will go in which I shall not be ready to support them." As we know, the Unionists managed to create partition and the Orange state was created with sectarian divisions and has been that way ever since.

But of more interest to us as socialists than why were anti Catholic laws made, is why did the Protestant working class believe the crap that they were better than Catholics and should unite with their bosses to keep Catholics down.

The working class in Northern Ireland has always been poor and the Protestants have always been told that there are only a few jobs going around. Catholics are made out by Unionist leaders to be a threat to their jobs unless they are kept down. This is what is called playing the orange card. Any show of strength by the Catholics is portrayed by Unionist leaders as a direct threat to the livelihood of the Protestants. The orange card is also used against the left wing Protestants who go on strike.

This has been why Catholics have been attacked murdered kicked out of their homes and pogromed with the full support of the British government and the Northern Irish ruling class throughout the history of this state.

Two weeks ago over 15 ,000 people commemorated the twentieth anniversary of Bloody Sunday where 14 people were murdered by British paratroopers. For those people their only crime had been to go on a civil rights march.

The first Bloody Sunday is now hardly ever mentioned. It took place in 1920 in Derry. That time it was after the Catholics had done something completely inexcusable - they had elected Sinn Féin to the city council. This incensed the Unionists and gave confidence to the Nationalists. After the local head of the RIC was shot by the IRA, the UVF started firing indiscriminately from the walled city into the Catholic Bogside, the RIC did nothing to stop them.

Fighting broke out for a week, Catholic families were driven out of the Protestant Waterside and Prehen areas. Several Catholics were stopped by the UVF, asked their religion and shot dead. The Catholics sealed off the Bogside and shot the son of the Governor of the Apprentice Boys and another Protestant.

Like in 1972 the British troops moved in in force. They fired on the Catholics, using machine guns and occupied the city with 15,000 soldiers. The UVF were left unmolested. The final death toll was 18, 14 Catholics and 4 Protestants.

In order to create a socialist Ireland, sectarianism which can lead to what happened above needs to be confronted and defeated. This is not going to be easy. Protestant workers are told

that it is good to keep down Catholics because it means that Protestants will get the jobs, and houses. They are not told that because they fight Catholics instead of uniting with them that the working class of Northern Ireland has higher unemployment, and lower wages than anywhere else in Britain.

In order for us as anarchists to work out how we will convince the majority of the Unionist working class to our views we should look at some examples of how sectarianism was beaten, albeit temporarily, in the past, analyse it and find out what went wrong so that we will not make the same mistakes.

## **The 1919 Dockers and Engineers strike in Belfast.**

For a time the 1919 strike looked like it had won Protestant workers away from their bosses, but these hopes were pinned on shaky ground and the increased support for class politics was only temporary.

During the First World War the shipyard and Engineering workers had been working 54 hour weeks and once peace came they wanted to get back to the old conditions. The bosses were having none of it. In fact this action was part of a UK wide movement as there were strikes in Britain as well at the time, especially in Glasgow.

The strike was voted for by 20,225 to 558 at a public meeting, after they had marched to the city hall.

On the 25 January the strike started and from the beginning it had a big impact on the city. Gas was cut off, electricity limited to hospitals and essential services, trains stopped and any shop turning on lights was stoned. By the end of the first week there were 40,000 out and 20,000 others laid off by the businesses closed due to having no power.

The strike was solid for the first 3 weeks despite the orange card being played. The Belfast Newsletter of 8 February called the strikers "Bolsheviks, anarchists and the hirelings of Germany" The Belfast Grand Orange Lodge condemned the strike. The state then got more involved. The Defences of the Realm Act was invoked to make it illegal not to supply electricity. 3 magistrates were moved into the city to deal with the increased number of arrests. The army was moved into the power stations.

After four weeks the strike ended with a 47 hour week won and what seemed to be 10's of thousands of Protestant workers won away from unionist politics to class politics.

A few months later 100,000 took part in a May Day march to Ormeau Park in a Protestant area of Belfast and listened to speeches demanding more labour representation. And next January Labour candidates won 12 seats out of 60 on the local council elections where they had previously held none. This included one Labour councillor who topped the poll in the Protestant stronghold of Shankill.

And at the next May Day march there was another massive demonstration with a resolution passed supporting the Bolshevik Government in Russia.

However this shift to the left was short lived. By the end of July there started a massive pogrom against Catholics, and left wing Protestants. According to the Catholic Protection Committee, 10,000 Catholic men and 1,000 Catholic women were expelled by Protestant workers from the shipyards, engineering works, and linen mills. The Labour vote at the 1921 general election was minimal.

To see why this happened, we must look at the political composition of the strikers and how the Unionist bosses reacted to the growing "socialist threat".

In order to coordinate the strike, a strike committee had formed composed on one side of trade unionists (like the mildly anti-partition members of the Independent Labour Party such as Charles McKay, James Baird and Sam Kyle) and on the other side members of the Unionist Labour Association such as Robert Weir and William Grant who was later to be a Unionist MP and Cabinet Minister.

The Unionist Labour Association was obviously pro unionist and allied to the bosses politically. There was only a slight disagreement on the hours of labour that workers should have to work. William Grant said afterwards that he had voted against the strike and had only joined the strike committee to oppose the socialists that were on it.

The two sides of the committee had opposing views on partition and so "to preserve unity" as they said the ILP said that "politics have nothing to do with the hours of labour". The Independent Labour Party made no effort to win the majority of Protestant workers over to the anti-partition side in case they caused a split in the committee.

So while Labour was popular when it came to fighting on purely economic issues like a reduction in hours worked, it had won very few anti-partition Protestant recruits.

While the anti-partition side avoided politics the unionist side did not. Edward Carson along with other Unionist leaders was deeply concerned that the workers would break with Orangism and develop their class consciousness. At the same time the IRA was waging a highly successful guerrilla war in the South and Unionists were worried that the Protestants would link with this. The Orange card was laid out.

Carson made a violently inflammatory speech at a Orange rally at Finaghy outside Belfast calling on the government to get rid of Sinn Féin and all it stood for. He then called on the UVF to do the job for the government making it clear what sort of violent methods they should use. He then went on to say about the Independent Labour Party:

"those who come forward posing as friends of Labour care no more about labour than does the man on the moon. The real object and the real insidious nature of their propaganda, is that they mislead and bring about disunity amongst our own people and in the end, before we know where we are, we may find ourselves in the same bondage and slavery as is the rest of Ireland.

On 17 July Colonel Smyth, head of RIC Munster was shot dead by the IRA. He was a well known Orange man and had told the RIC a month before "The more you shoot the better I will like you, and I assure you no policeman will get into trouble for shooting any man.

Carson's speech, the murder of Smyth, the IRA actions, combined with the fact that all jobs were under threat in the post war depression, brought sectarian tensions in Belfast to breaking point.

On the day of Smyth's funeral a meeting was held at the gates of Workman Clark and Co shipyard. It was decided to kick the Sinn Féiners out of the shipyard and the pogrom started. Armed with sledgehammers and other weapons the Catholics were attacked, beaten and driven out.

It quickly spread and as I mentioned before left wing Protestants were also removed, including James Baird a labour councillor, and Charles McKay ILP and chairman of the old strike committee.

The Protestants by carrying out their purge of 11,000 of their "disloyal" workmates had made their jobs safer and stopped what was called the "socialist threat".

The anti partitionists of the strike had not been prepared for the backlash against them and they suffered for it. Loyalty to the Unionist bosses had been reaffirmed with a vengeance.

## **The Outdoor Relief Strike 1932**

It is worth looking at the Outdoor Relief Strike of 1932 to see if any lessons had been learnt from the 1919 strike.

As before capitalism was having a depression. Wall Street had crashed and the industrial countries were feeling the pinch. In Northern Ireland the two biggest industries, textiles and shipbuilding were taking a hammering.

The famous Poor laws which had been scrapped in the South and Britain were still in use by Stormont in the North. There were also many restrictions concerning who got unemployment benefit and who didn't. Those who failed had to apply for what was called Outdoor Relief.

For a married man to qualify for Outdoor Relief he had to do two and a half days 'task work' per week on what were called Outdoor Relief schemes, which was work such as mending roads and laying pavements.

There was no Outdoor Relief for women, and single men only got anything if they were lucky enough to get task work.

Because there were so many unemployed there was not enough task work for everyone for every week so the men had to take turns. In the weeks that you didn't get task work you were paid in kind, which meant being given a donation of food. So on many weeks there was no money to pay bills, buy cloths or to spend on entertainment.

At the time of the strike there was crippling poverty in Belfast. A survey showed that 37% of working class families were living in absolute poverty. This meant such a lack of food, clothing or fuel as to endanger health. Tuberculosis killed off 45% of people between the ages of 15 and 25 and a quarter of all children dying under the age of one, died in the workhouse.

Despite the unemployment crises the government didn't give a damn. The last time the government had met had been to extend its summer holiday by a month until November.

However the unemployed were organising to fight back. Here in the south the Irish unemployed workers movement was holding large demonstrations, one as large as 1,000 in Longford and in Britain there were Hunger marches taking place alongside disruptions of political banquets and invasions of factories to appeal for an end to overtime and speed ups.

The Revolutionary Workers Group had formed in Ireland. This crowd later went on to form the communist party of Ireland but at that time, the early thirties, Stalin's crimes were not widely known and it was the only socialist organisation of note that was active.

The RWG argued for a fighting response to the dole queue and managed to win around a large amount of unemployed. An Outdoor Relief Workers Committee was set up and Tommy Geehan of the RWG who was also a delegate to the Belfast Trades Council called for a strike by the ODR workers.

They held a mass meeting on September 30th and voted to strike in four days time if their demands were not met which were abolition of task work, and an increase in payments, no

payment in kind, all street work to be paid at trade union rates, adequate outdoor allowances for all single unemployed men and women who are not in receipt of unemployment benefit.

Since their demands were not conceded they were out on strike the following Monday. It was 100% solid, there was no task work being done. That evening a crowd of 30,000 marched from Frederick St to the Custom House steps where a mass meeting was held. This was the first time since 1919 that workers had ignored the bigots and united on class lines to fight for their own interests. Catholic and Protestant made common cause against the ruling class.

The strike went on and by the end of the week rioting and looting had taken place in the main Catholic and Protestant areas. Despite baton charges by the RUC, the army being put on stand by, and partial offers of improvements from the Lord Mayor, the strike continued. When a demonstration was banned on Tuesday 11th, the fighting got serious. Hand to hand battles took place on the Falls and Shankill against the RUC, with the RUC starting to use their guns.

However the government came up with a strategy to beat the strikers. Instead of firing indiscriminately at both Catholics and Protestants, the RUC were told to only shoot at Catholic areas. The Orange card was being played. The strikers were told that the IRA were using the ODR strike as a cover to overthrow 'protestant rights'.

The newly formed sectarian Ulster Protestant League said that they "deplored that these unfortunate conditions were used as a cloak by the communist Sinn Féin element to attempt to start a revolution in our province. We also greatly deplore that some few of our loyal Protestant unemployed were misled to such an extent that they associated themselves with the enemies of their faith and principles. We congratulate the government of Northern Ireland on the firm steps they have taken to preserve law and order in our city.

In fact the IRA who had many members on Outdoor Relief at the time had given local support to the strike but had no real influence in the organisation or course of the strike.

There was little success in rekindling sectarian hatreds during the strike and they won big cash increases in their relief pay. But relief to single persons was not won and there was heavy criticism of the strike committee for ending the strike before winning this. Two were shot dead, one Catholic and one Protestant and 15 were injured from gunshot wounds - all in Catholic areas.

There is an article on the ODR strike in our pamphlet NI and BI from which I got part of this account. I did not read it word for word in case some of you have read it already.

I will go on to look at some of the problems of the strike, and they again come partly from the politics of the leaders of the strike in this case the RWG. Firstly it was Stalinist policy at the time to refuse to work with any other groups on the grounds that they were what they called "social fascists". So the RWG were not heavily involved in Trade Unions and so it was very hard to implement their plan for a general strike. If that had happened the potential for winning an outstanding victory would have been much increased.

Also, being a communist party they confined themselves to being the leadership of the strike and made no effort to give people the confidence to fight for themselves. The unemployed were encouraged to listen to speeches and then fall in behind as they went on a march, shouting the correct slogans.

But most importantly, for this talk, they did little to promote anti imperialist and anti capitalist ideas within the Protestant working class. At the barricades when they were all fighting together was the ideal opportunity to win Protestants away from support for their bosses and over to class based anti imperialist and anti partitionist politics. As it was the unity was based more on common suffering than common beliefs and so it was easily broken.

After the strike Unionist politicians started having success in stirring up sectarian hatred again. On 27 August Senator Sir Joseph Davison, Grand Master of the Orange Order made a speech saying "When will the Protestant employers of Northern Ireland recognise their duty to their Protestant brothers and sisters and employ them to the exclusion of Roman Catholics? It is time Protestant employers realised that whenever a Roman Catholic is brought into their employment it means one Protestant vote less. It is our duty to pass the word along from this great demonstration and I suggest the slogan should be "Protestants employ Protestants"

Without the unifying pressure of the strike, these words had an effect and sectarianism increased. At a Unionist rally called to protest against the Catholic Church being allowed to use the Belfast Corporation owned Ulster Hall, Protestants were told by Dorothy Harnett to "get training in firing", a mob coming home from this meeting attacked Catholic homes in the York St area of Belfast.

Violence increased until the 23 June 1935 when the aftermath of an Orange parade resulted in three weeks of sporadic riots. 56 Catholic homes were burnt out in the docks area. Mobs attacked the Catholic ghettos of Short Strand, Sandy Row and Peters Hill. Many people were killed and when the shipyard reopened after the July 12 holiday, the Catholic workers were expelled again. This time there were only 200 out of 4,000 workers to expel.

## **The last example**

Anti sectarianism, is not just a thing of the past. Now in the past two decades there have been lots of examples of Protestants and Catholics being anti sectarian.

One short and successful example was the DHSS strike of August 1986, only six years ago. After the Anglo Irish Agreement there had been a big rise in the number of sectarian attacks against Catholics by the UDA and the UVF.

In Lisburn Catholics and Protestants are not divided into separate ghettos, most streets are mixed. This is why they were picked by loyalist terrorists who wanted to separate the Catholics from the Protestants. The UDA had made threats to the DHSS, health board and housing offices of Lisburn that Catholic workers in them were going to be killed. The object of the threat was to terrorise the Catholics and force them out of their jobs.

In response all 124 DHSS workers walked out in solidarity with their threatened workmates. Catholics, Protestants and those of no religion stood together as workers. The next day 2,000 workers in another 12 offices joined in and the following morning 14 offices were shut. Without any lead from their national officials, local activists of the union (NIPSA) had organised the strikes and had found that nearly all staff were eager to stand up to the hate-mongers. Action also took place in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board. Since then workers in the DHSS have had the confidence to fight back together each time the bigots try to split them. Their example has led to a similar stance recently being agreed by workers in Northern Telecom.

## **Conclusion**

The great thing about these examples is that it shows that sectarianism can be beaten. If it happened before it can happen again. But we must learn from the historical examples.

Catholic and Protestant workers in extremely divided areas like Belfast or Derry have only got together under specific circumstances. That is when they have been thrown together to fight for a common objective. They will not get unite just by us arguing that you have to be nice to each other.

Nor will the Catholics and Protestants get together after British initiatives like the Anglo Irish Agreement or the Brooke talks, no matter how well he can sing. Since it is in the interests of the ruling class to keep the working class divided they are hardly likely to arrange talks which could possibly link them together. On the contrary such talks have always led to a big increase in sectarian violence as Protestants see their interests threatened. 36 Catholics were killed in a spate of murders after the Brooke talks last Summer.

Unity has the best chance of occurring when it is clear that both Protestants and Catholics will be materially better off by getting together. That is why they united in the 1919 strike and the Outdoor Relief strike and that is why they united in the Jim Larkin led strike in 1907, which I hadn't got time to go into.

But in order to keep them united it is crucial to win the anti imperialist pro socialist battle of ideas with the Protestant and Catholic workers while you have the chance.

Obviously it is in everyones' interests to have an anarchist society, where bosses and exploitation have been removed and there will be a rise in living standards for the whole working class. The problem is convincing Protestant and Catholic workers of this, and in the heat of the struggle is the best time. People are in those times confident enough to realise that they can overthrow the State and run society for themselves.

Not only is it probably the most profitable time to argue anarchist politics, but if they are not argued for and won, there will certainly be a Unionist backlash as Protestants realign themselves with their bosses and see the main threat to their livelihood yet again as the Catholics instead of British Imperialism and the Capitalist system.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Andrew Blackmore  
Sectarianism in the north and the fight against it  
February 5th, 1992

<http://struggle.ws/talks/sect.html>  
Talk given by Andrew Blackmore in Dublin, February 5th, 1992

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**