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Hobson's Choice

The "Good Friday Agreement" & the Irish Left

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banners proclaiming “Wolfe Tone Commemoration 1934, Shankill Road Belfast Branch. Break The Connection With Capitalism” and “James Connolly Club, Belfast. United Irishmen of 1934”. Unfortunately the Belfast comrades found themselves confronted by, and ultimately attacked by, a body of IRA men with orders to prevent them marching unless they agreed to take down their banners. The strategy of “breaking the connection with capitalism” was one step too far for the Republican leadership whose political project looked no further than the extension of the Southern clerical state north of the border. Making the links with Protestant workers would have involved breaking the links with the Catholic Church and with the southern ruling class. The Republican leadership then were unwilling to do so and, following in their footsteps — despite the occasional left-wing rhetoric — the republican leadership of today see their allies in the likes of Bertie Ahern, Bill Clinton and John Hume.

Republicanism will be forced to drop completely the remaining elements of its socialist rhetoric in the coming years. Certainly an opportunity has opened up for the development of class politics but this will not be built successfully by ignoring partition. The challenge is to build a movement of working class people involving people from all religious backgrounds — a movement which will be anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist. Northern workers have united across the sectarian divide in the past to fight on economic issues, this will happen again in the future. We must build an anarchist movement on this island which will be big enough to be in a position to turn future battles into the fight for an anarchist Ireland.

Its appeal to Protestant workers is no greater than the military campaign (i.e. none) and to date republican statements have focused on the need for a De Klerk type figure to lead the Protestants to compromise. This approach should come as no surprise to us, it is the underlying bedrock of nationalism. It is the reason we are anti-imperialists rather than socialist republicans. The ending of the armed struggle cannot simply become part of history. The issue of partition cannot be quietly dropped in the interests of winning over Protestant workers. In the short term it would be possible to build workers unity on day to day economic issues without mentioning partition but it would be building on sand. In the past we have seen how instances, some involving very large numbers, of working class unity have been swept away on a tide of bigotry. What is needed is a revolutionary movement, with consistent anti-imperialist policies that is composed from both Protestant and Catholic backgrounds.”

Although 4 years have passed since the issuing of this statement, these sentiments still stand as an accurate assessment of the challenge facing revolutionaries today. The “Good Friday Agreement” is a consequence of the failure of republicanism and the left to win over any section of northern Protestant workers to an anti-partitionist, anti-imperialist stance. Right now, this failure is complete and it may even seem utopian to put forward such a project as the principal challenge facing us. But historically, most notably at the time of the Republican Congress of 1934, sections of the Protestant working class have proved open to such a strategy and the idea of uniting “Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter” became more than a catchphrase.

A step too far

At the Bodenstown Wolfe Tone commemoration of 1934, some 500 Belfast Protestant workers marched to Tone’s graveside behind

Until the Real IRA blasted the heart out of Omagh and its people, the Northern “peace process” appeared to be close to achieving the impossible. Loyalists and Republicans alike signing up to the “Good Friday Agreement”, its acceptance by large majorities on both sides of the border, Gerry Adams and Ian Paisley sitting down in the same room as part of the new Assembly – it seemed as if what had appeared for decades to be impossible had been overtaken by the realpolitik of the pragmatic. All sides in the “conflict” – we were led to believe – were looking to a new beginning. Countless column inches in the popular press had been written eulogising the “statesmanship” of David Trimble and Seamus Mallon, the “peacemaking skills” of Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern and the “pragmatism” of Gerry Adams and David Ervine.

At the time of writing it remains to be seen what the ramifications of the massive carnage wreaked on the people of Omagh by the Real IRA will be. What is already clear, however, is that the working-class people of the 6-Counties are once again the people who suffer. Following on from the sectarian murders of the 3 Quinn brothers in Ballymoney during the Drumcree stand-off, another working class community was on the morning of August 16th counting their dead and injured. Jumping on the bandwagon of populism, right wing politicians and commentators such as Shane Ross (Senator and “Sunday Independent” columnist) and Michael McDowell (former Progressive Democrats TD) were screaming for the introduction of internment and even hinting that the extrajudicial murder of those associated with the Real IRA and the 32-County Sovereignty Committee should be considered.

While the reactions of the mainstream media commentators and political parties North and South and on both sides of the Irish Sea and in the United States to the “Good Friday” Agreement have been well commented on, this article is a look at the reactions to this deal from left wing parties and organisations in Ireland.

Desire for peace

In the May 22nd referendum on the deal the Workers Solidarity Movement called for an abstention, stating that “Neither a ‘yes’ vote nor a ‘no’ vote will advance the cause of workers unity and socialism”. We noted in a statement issued before the referendum that the great desire for peace was being

“É.Used to pressurise us into choosing between two completely flawed alternatives. The agreement, which was drawn up in secret by our so-called ‘representatives’, does not challenge the sectarian divisions which have bedevilled this country.”

Indeed our statement went on to note that the structures proposed in the agreement actually institutionalise sectarian divisions. Politicians elected to the proposed Assembly must declare themselves either ‘unionist’ or ‘nationalist’.

“Those who refuse,” we noted, “will not have their votes counted in measuring the cross community support necessary for passing legislationÉ..As the agreement was drawn up in the interests of the ruling class, the concept of working class interests is not even consideredÉ..The division between rulers and ruled, between bosses and workers, between rich and poor remains. The biggest change will be a few nationalist faces sitting down with bigots like Trimble and Taylor, to make laws which preserve the dominance of the rich over the poor.”

In relation to the aspect of the referendum which proposed changes to Articles 2 and 3 of the Southern Constitution, the statement pointed out that these amendments

who opposed the deal without actually putting forward any credible alternative. The SWP view that a ‘No’ vote would have resulted in the coming to the fore of class politics ignores completely the fact that the deal’s rejection would have been hailed by the most reactionary elements on both sides of the sectarian divide – from Paisley and the LVF through to the 32 County Sovereignty Committee and RSF – as their victory. A more likely scenario than the coming to the fore of working class politics would have been a demoralisation of such tiny progressive forces as currently exist and the filling of the subsequent political vacuum by the forces of sectarian hatred. We would quite possibly have been facing into a Lebanon/Balkan type situation with each community retreating into ‘its own’ area and the possibilities of cross class unity would at the very least have been dealt a severe blow.

As Andrew Flood wrote in Workers Solidarity 54(Summer 1998) “For anarchists looking at the future the old saying ‘if I was going there I wouldn’t start from here’ rings particularly true.” The challenge facing all of us is to attempt to break down the sectarian barriers and to build unity between Catholic and Protestant workers. The question is not whether this is desirable – All sections of the left are agreed that it is. How to do it is however the problem that remains. What is achievable in the short to medium term? And – provided that the guns remain silent – does the new situation make this task any easier?

The WSM has always drawn a distinction between the ceasefires and the “peace process”. In a statement issued on September 7th 1994, following the first IRA ceasefire we welcomed the decision to end the ‘armed struggle’ but pointed out that

“The ‘peace process’ as it is called, will not deliver a united socialist Ireland, or significant improvements apart from those associated with ‘demilitarisation’. In addition it represents a hardening of traditional nationalism, and the goal of getting an alliance of all the nationalists, Fianna Fail, SDLP, Sinn Fein and the Catholic Church.

Hopes & realities

The Socialist Workers Party, on the other hand, called for a ‘no’ vote on May 22nd. The May 1st – 14th 1998 edition of their paper “Socialist Worker” stated that many hoped that the deal “Ébrings peace to the working class areas that have suffered most during the conflict.” Pointing out however that the Agreement “Édoes nothing to dismantle the sectarian structures of the NorthÉ..institutionalises sectarian divisionÉ..doesn’t even begin to tackle the poverty that affects both Catholic and Protestant workers” and that “Having Gerry Adams in a cabinet with David Trimble will only mean that both preside over student fees, cutbacks and poverty” the SWP called for a ‘No’ vote in the referendum.

“The alternative,” the SWP stated, “is not civil war or armed conflictÉ..The pressure for a settlement came from both the elite at the top and workers at the bottom of society. Tens of thousands of workers turned up to peace rallies to demand an end to the armed campaign. In the unlikely event of the settlement being rejected that same pressure for peace would continue and socialists would give it every support. The real solution to sectarianism lies in common class struggleÉÉIt is time to break from all the sectarian agendas and put class politics to the fore. Voting No to this deal will mark a start.”

What’s the alternative?

All in all then it can safely be said that the Good Friday Agreement excited little positive support on the left. It must be stated however that those who adopted a position which might best be described as ‘critical support’ were much more honest than those

“mean nothing to usÉ..Articles 2 & 3 have never made one whit of difference to the real lives of anyone on this island.”

While rejecting the agreement as having nothing to offer the working class North or South, we went on, however, to point out that

“Those urging rejection of the agreement have no alternative to offer, just more of the same conflict that has ruined tens of thousands of working class lives. The republican forces of the 32 County Sovereignty Committee, RSF [Republican Sinn Fein] and IRSP [Irish Republican Socialist Party – the political wing of the Irish National Liberation Army] have nothing but increased communalism and sectarian tension to offer. The loyalist opponents – whose rallies are attended by vocal supporters of the Loyalist Volunteer Force death squads – want a return to a time when Catholics lived on their knees and in fear.”

The WSM statement further criticised the undemocratic nature of the referendum itself. The manner in which the deal was put to the people was such that it was not possible to support or oppose the many individual components of the agreement, allowing only one vote for or against the entire complex package.

Failed armed struggle

Having called for an abstention in the vote on the deal, our statement went on to urge the continuation of the IRA and loyalist cease-fires, stating that there must be no going back to the failed armed struggle “which gave us nothing except repression, suffering and increased sectarian hatred.” We then outlined the task facing anarchists, socialists and trade unionists in the coming period:-

“When working class people begin to ask what kind of country they want to live in, and what kind of country they want their children to grow up in, the politics of anti-imperialism will start making sense to people who up to now have been trapped in green and orange communalism.

Our struggle is for liberty, we are for the removal of the British troops from Ireland — and the destruction of the sectarian Orange state in the North and the Green conservative state in the South.

We remain committed to a united Irish Workers Republic, run by working class people in their own interests, and democratically controlled through a federated system of workers and community councils. Nobody has the right to wage war on our behalf, working people themselves must discuss the future they want and fight together for that future. Our struggle is for liberty, and no minority can impose liberty on the majority. The emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself.”

Nothing to offer

Our analysis that the agreement had nothing to offer working class people was shared by the majority of socialists and anarchists in both Ireland and Britain — although all other organisations ended up by coming down on either the ‘yes’ or ‘no’ sides. Perhaps one of the most realistic assessments of the realities of the deal was offered by the British-based Solidarity Federation in the Summer 1998 edition of “Direct Action” when they stated

“Just maybe the peace agreement will take the gun out of Northern Irish politics, or at least limit its impact. A

the Agreement would hold, that a new local administration would form and that as many as possible of the existing parties accept the ministerial reins they are offered. On the one hand this would allow the working class movement the precious ingredient of time to begin to put an alternative to these parties in place. On the other hand the fact of these parties holding responsibility for local services and for the low pay, contracting out and privatisation which goes with them, would be a positive assistance to the development of a class opposition. United class movements directed against local politicians would open the way for political conclusions to be drawn, for socialist ideas to begin to take on flesh. Forces and obstacles which today appear unshakeable, the various sectarian forces included, can be melted down in the furnace of struggle. The building of a socialist organisation which can influence and effect events can be a crucial factor in determining whether the coming political and social upheaval leads towards a ‘carnival of reaction’ or towards united class action to bring about socialist change.”

“The way to solve the national question,” according to Hadden’s analysis, “is to build unity between the working class in common struggle against the present rotten system and for a socialist society. We stand for the unity of the working class to achieve a socialist Ireland as part of a democratic and voluntary socialist federation of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland.”

Local politicians will lose the luxury of blaming London and the Northern Ireland Office for cuts in services, hospital closures and other unpopular decisions.

Their real nature will be exposed as they take the decisions in these areas in the Assembly. The Assembly would provide a focal point in the North for workers' struggles and community campaigns."

Window of opportunity

The Socialist Party decided to contest the elections to the Assembly on the basis that

"It is likely that small parties will make a breakthrough by winning seats in the Assembly. All of this can open up an opportunity for building a socialist alternative to the sectarian based parties—If a window of opportunity opens up for class based politics, we are determined to go through it."

In a lengthy article entitled "Will the Agreement bring peace?" in the May 1998 issue of "Socialism 2000", the political journal of the Socialist Party, Peter Hadden expanded on how this 'window of opportunity' might be represented:-

"There is only one way out for the working class. It is not to imitate the leaders of the trade unions and sit back and applaud the Agreement and the politicians who produced it. Rather it is to begin to build an alternative to sectarian politics, to unite working people, Catholic and Protestant, around common class interests and in opposition to all who attempt to maintain sectarian division — From a working class point of view the best scenario is that

sectarian political scene without guns will be preferable to one with guns. Perhaps this is the best we can hope for from this agreement."

This was an assessment shared in large part by Sol. Fed.'s sister organisation in Ireland Organise!-IWA. In an interview with a spokesperson for Organise! in the same edition of "Direct Action", it was stated that some members of the organisation had supported the WSM position of abstention on the referendum. "Other members of Organise!" it was stated, "like many working class people, voted 'yes' to the 'Agreement', not because they in any way support sectarianism, or want anything to do with choosing the form of government which oppresses us, but because of a simple desire to see the guns removed from the sectarian politics in the north.

Sectarian politicians agreeing a format in which to argue is better than the prospect of continued or worsening sectarian violence being counted in the lives, maiming and imprisonment of working class people— Social issues, the position of workers and the unemployed at the bottom of society etc., will not and cannot be tackled through this agreement — but surely at least a vast reduction in sectarian violence must be welcomed. Beyond this, we may also see the development of an atmosphere in which anti-sectarian working class politics may be given room to develop."

'Normalisation'

It was this hope that the agreement might lead to some 'normalisation' of the political scene which also appeared to be the primary factor behind the Socialist Party's call for a 'yes' vote in the referendum. In an article in the May 1998 edition of the SP's newspaper

“Voice”, Joe Higgins the party’s TD (Teachta Dala – member of the Irish Parliament) wrote

“Tragically, but inevitably, the terms drawn up are a reflection of the stunted politics that have dominated Northern Ireland for generations, the work of politicians and political parties, most of which are hopelessly sectarian-based or right wing or both...É. It appears inconceivable to those who have framed this agreement, that the ordinary people of Northern Ireland might want to elect individuals or parties which are not sectarian based but which represent working class people equally from Protestant and Catholic backgrounds, and who would have a vision utterly different to the narrow sectarian politics that have dominated Northern Ireland for decades with disastrous consequences.”

According to Higgins’ article, the choice was a stark one. Rejection of the deal would be seen as a victory by the most reactionary elements –

“Bitter sectarian polarisation in the communities would be the background to paramilitary outrages and open warfare on issues such as parades.” If the deal was accepted “This may at least see the main political parties carry on their strategies within the framework agreed even though they will stumble from one political crisis to the next. It would allow the continuation of the peace process and could provide a space for working class politics to emerge which could challenge the grip of the sectarian based parties.”

In the same edition of “Voice”, Peter Hadden, Secretary of the SP in the North wrote

“A yes vote is likely in the referendum, more because of the lack of an alternative rather than any conviction that the Agreement will work.”

“On offer,” he wrote, “is a choice of two roads towards sectarian conflict. The immediate and direct route is via the No camp. A Yes victory would mean a slightly longer road. There might be a limited breathing space which would give more time to the working class to challenge the sectarians. We believe the best option is to vote Yes, not in support of the Agreement, but for a continuation of the peace process and to allow more time for class politics to develop.”

Challenge

Hadden went on to offer what he saw as the challenge for socialists in the post-referendum scenario:-

“The real issue is not just to vote in the referendum but to use this time to build a socialist alternative and campaign for a socialist solutionÉÉOne advantage of the Assembly would be that the anti working class policies of the major parties on issues such as Health, Education and Economic development would be exposed to view – but this will only happen if a socialist opposition is built. This is now the key task.”

This was a theme to which the SP returned in an editorial in the June 1998 issue of “Voice”:-

“If the situation holds together over the summer”, they wrote, “then there is a possibility that the agreement can hold, at least for a period. This can open up a space for working class and socialist politics.”