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Sinn Féin's strange 'socialism'

Nationalism ... no thanks

Joe Black

1994

Anarchists are for the defeat of British imperialism. We would like to see an end to the killings in the 6 counties but we understand that the ultimate cause of the troubles lies at the feet of Britain and the northern sectarian statelet. But we want more, we stand for the creation of a new society in the interests of the working class and against the bosses, both orange and green.

This is very different from the politics of Sinn Fein. We see the way forward as unity of Catholic and Protestant workers in a common fight against capitalism. They look for alliances of bosses and workers. Their interest in Protestant workers seems to stop at who can best control them. Hence Gerry Adams speech at this years Ard Fheis said that Protestants needed a De Klerk to lead them to compromise.

This is alternated with the idea of the British controlling Protestant workers, presumably through the army, as seen in Adam's statement of Sunday 17th July when he said:

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“The London Government which has jurisdiction over part of Ireland cannot forever dodge its responsibilities”

and asked of John Major

“Is he prepared to become a persuader for peace and for justice for all the people of Ireland?”

Who is he calling on them to persuade, and which responsibilities are being dodged? Indeed this whole approach to the British government, where it is seen as one of the forces for peace and progress, must stick in the guts of all those who supported Sinn Fein in the 1980's because they saw them as socialist and anti-imperialist in a general (rather than merely local) sense. But it should come as no surprise. After the Hume-Adams talks of 1988 Adam's described them as “part of a quest for common interests between nationalist parties”, again talking in terms of an all-class alliance.

There is a real danger of this current round of talks with the British government just serving to fuel the loyalist death squads. Sinn Fein has made it clear that it sees a settlement as being in the interests of the British government rather than being forced on them. So this means that either the settlement will not solve the real economic inequalities suffered by Catholic workers or it will only solve them at the expense of Protestant workers.

Catholics are still two and a half time more likely to be unemployed. The option of bringing Catholic workers living standards up at least to the level of Protestant workers would involve a massive cost to the bosses. Anything else would promise at best a temporary peace, with the real possibility of sectarian massacres.

For anarchists, the way forwards lies in workers' unity. There has been significant unity around economic issues in the past, from the 1919 Belfast Engineers strike to the 1932 Outdoor Relief riots.

Both these saw thousands of Catholic and Protestant workers uniting to fight their common enemy, the bosses. Both of these were smashed by the bosses using sectarianism to win Protestant workers back to loyalism. This is why unity cannot be maintained by ignoring the border.

More recently we have seen strikes in the DHSS against sectarian threats and a walkout by the mostly Protestant shipyard workers over the killing of a Catholic workmate. These demonstrate the potential of workers' unity in the north, but for this unity to become lasting Protestant workers need to be won to a clear anti-imperialist position and opposition to the British presence.

Anarchists should continue to defend the right of the IRA to fight back against imperialism. But we must be clear that their nationalist politics and military methods offer no way forward. Our task is to begin the difficult task of building a mass anti-imperialist movement, uniting all workers in Ireland.