

‘Peace process’ back from the brink

Anarchist Communist Federation

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At several decisive moments over the summer months the 'peace process' in the north of Ireland stood on the verge of total collapse — pushed to the very brink by acts of paramilitary violence, and street confrontations with the police and army, instigated by both loyalist and republican militants opposed to the terms of the Good Friday deal.

But Northern Ireland's political landscape has been dramatically reshaped in the past few years, and violent 'outrages' no longer seal the fate of delicate negotiations between unionist and nationalist politicians, now agreed on the need to reform the Orange state. It was soon apparent that the same acts that threatened to destroy the 'peace process', had ended up reinforcing it, revealing hard-line opposition to the deal on both sides as isolated and lacking popular support. These turbulent weeks in the province confirmed that there is currently no positive alternative to a settlement process driven forward by the determination of the leaders of western capitalism to put an end to decades of bloody instability in northern Ireland on terms favourable to them.

The events of the annual marching season appeared once again to place negotiations in jeopardy, as violent street clashes convulsed the Six Counties, reaching a predictable intensity around the loyalist 'twelfth of July' commemoration. The fourth annual stand-off at Drumcree outside Portadown, where Orange marchers insist on their 'historic' right to parade their celebration of fading sectarian privilege along the nationalist Garvaghy Road, proved to be a decisive turning point. In 1997 the march was forced through by a massive army operation. This year the march was forbidden to march through catholic estates on the ruling of the new Parades Commission.

Blockade

In anticipation of 'Drumcree 4' the army and RUC constructed a vast blockade across the roads and fields on the outskirts of the town. The ferocity of loyalist violence that struggled in vain for days to breach the barricades was the most intense yet seen at Drumcree, but as sympathy riots by loyalist gangs broke out across the north, opinion within leading loyalist and unionist bodies polarised. The Orange Order was itself driven by bitter division over the meaning of the nightly mob battles and sniper fire at the Portadown siege. Some members saw the Drumcree actions as the 'heroic defence' of 'threatened' Protestant 'rights', and a reminder to the 'weak-willed' Trimble of grassroots loyalist anger. Other members feared it as reckless, out of control and politically suicidal. Resignations and recriminations multiplied in the ranks, as acts of sectarian arson and terror by loyalist thugs rose to a fever pitch. One such gang firebombed the home of the catholic Quinn family in Ballymoney on 12 July, killing three young brothers. The wave of public outrage that followed the Quinn killings saw the 'Drumcree 4' stand-off crumble, even as the notorious 'Spirit of Drumcree' group denied any culpability in the murders.

Loyalist groups hostile to the 'peace process' had hoped the Drumcree siege would become the issue that could cement fragmented opposition forces in the unionist camp. Ian Paisley, Neanderthal patriarch of the Democratic Unionists, is itching to lead any such revival in the fortunes of the 'no' forces. The inglorious collapse of 'Drumcree 4' took with it any immediate prospects for such a reversal in the direction of mainstream unionist political movement, and paved the way for the announcement, on 9 August, of a ceasefire by the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF) — the sectarian murder gang responsible for some of the most callous and brutal acts of random terror against the catholic-nationalist community in recent times.

The crisis within fundamentalist loyalism that followed the Drumcree debacle, intensified pressure on militant republicans to renounce their own 'armed campaign' and accept the logic of the Good Friday referendum result.

Bomb

The 15 August bomb blast in Omagh town centre, which killed 29 and injured more than 250, was a desperate rearguard action by the republican dissidents of the Real IRA (RIRA). It was intended to prove the RIRA's capability and commitment, and show that implacable republican hostility to the process remained undimmed. Counter-intelligence sources in the RUC concede that the RIRA's intention was to hit an army or police patrol, not to slaughter shoppers. But this mission objective does nothing to alter the fact that the Omagh bomb was a contemptible act of mass murder, and an appalling crime against the Irish working class, carried out in the name of a goal hostile to the interests of that class.

Reaction to the carnage at Omagh exposed the fragmented forces of republican paramilitarism to a torrent of condemnation almost impossible to counter. The Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) called an indefinite and total ceasefire on 22 August, declaring in a statement that 'the conditions for armed struggle do not exist.' The statement went on to suggest that 'the will of the Irish people is clear. It is now time to silence the guns and allow the working classes the time and opportunity to advance their demands and their needs.' The RIRA called a temporary ceasefire that became permanent within days. The 32 County Sovereignty Committee, understood to 'speak politically' for the RIRA, made no attempt to defend the Omagh killings. As of mid-October, the 'Continuity IRA' (CIRA) remained the only known republican paramilitary group yet to renounce the 'armed struggle'. The CIRA's leaders must be aware that they now face the undivided attention of British 'counter-terrorist' agencies — and (given the go-ahead) the wrath of the IRA's own enforcers should they go 'too far'.

The two events — at Drumcree and at Omagh — have ended up bolstering, rather than undermining, the 'peace process'. The complex set of negotiations inching forward at present is not under threat either from oppositionists involved in them or from rejectionists outside of them. The new Northern Ireland assembly, elected in the poll that followed the referendum on the Good Friday agreement, is destined to be the body that will share executive powers with Westminster and between the communities in the north. David Trimble, leader of the largest pro-agreement union party, the Ulster Unionists (UUP), has been elected as first minister, with Seamus Mallon, of the mainstream nationalist party, the SDLP, voted in as his deputy. Powers will be transferred to the assembly from February 1999 onwards. The reaction across both communities to this latest attempt at power-sharing and cross-border co-operation will be the critical test not only for the assembly itself but for the whole process — of which it is the linchpin.

Trouble

The issue of paramilitary arms decommissioning now dominates the immediate agenda. Gerry Adams, leader of the largest republican party Sinn Féin (SF), has made the most unequivocal statement yet that the era of the ballot box and armalite is 'over, done with and gone.' Martin McGuinness has been chosen by SF as the liaison officer between the IRA and the new decom-

missioning body. Trimble still presides over a divided UUP, and has to remain watchful of the instabilities and uncertainties that define unionism more widely. However, the majority of the UUP leadership appear to be moving towards an acceptance of the idea of arms decommissioning as a parallel process, undertaken in tandem with negotiations in the assembly, rather than as the central precondition of Sinn Féin engagement at executive level. The well publicised private meeting between Adams and Trimble, in early September, was the first acknowledged instance of direct talks between republican and unionist leaders since the civil war and partition.

On the security front, the 'normalisation' process has restarted, after being thrown into reverse during the marching season, with a number of troop deployments being downgraded or ended all together.

In total conflict with this strategy, the Irish and British governments agreed a further package of sweeping 'anti-terrorist' powers in the wake of the Omagh bomb. This new battery of legal powers may itself face challenge in the courts, but is clearly intended as a blunt instrument to batter down the last remnants of outright opposition to the 'peace process' — armed or otherwise. The word of a senior police officer is now to be sufficient evidence to secure a conviction for 'membership of a prescribed organisation'. In the post-Omagh atmosphere, opposition even to this, the effective abolition of 'due process' and further erosion of the 'presumption of innocence', has been muted and marginal — although, to placate its own membership, Sinn Féin went through the motions to 'condemn' the new laws as 'unnecessary'. The early release of convicted paramilitary prisoners is critical to buying the acceptance, or at least acquiescence, of militants on all sides, and is a clear pay-off by the British state for the agreement by armed groups to stand their forces down, and for the tightening of the thumbscrews on the remaining renegades in the ranks.

Challenge

The Northern Ireland 'peace process' is beset with problems, and stressed by counter-pressures from within. Negotiators will have to confront a number of seemingly irreconcilable differences in the months ahead. But the collapse of republican and loyalist paramilitarism is another clear testament to the ascendancy of the 'talks option'. What is needed is a challenge to that process that is not fuelled by Sect or sectarianism but by the determination of the working class to seize control of the political agenda in pursuit of its own independent interests. That requires not the reform but the destruction of the state — not just in Ireland, but the world over.

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