

Peace or Revolution?

Solidarity Federation

Summer 1998

Contents

| | |
|--|---|
| remember 1690 | 3 |
| remember 1916 | 4 |
| anarchism and republicanism | 4 |

The Northern Ireland peace agreement is now accepted in referenda north and south of the border. It introduces a Northern Ireland Assembly, North-South bodies, and a British-Irish council.

Where is the peace process going, and what does it mean for the traditional beneficiaries of sectarian violence — the politicians?<

Northern Irish politics have hitherto been fought on the basis that a gain for one side is a loss for the other. So, getting Loyalists and Republicans to accept this deal has been greeted as the achievement of the impossible. Countless column inches have sung the praises of the politicians involved — we've read of "Blair the peacemaker", of Trimble's "great statesmanship", even of the "pragmatic" Sinn Féin leadership.

DA refuses to go along with this hype. We remember Trimble and Major stalling at every opportunity during the first IRA cease-fire, when first its "permanence", then "decommissioning" of weapons, became excuses to delay talks and eventually led to the cease-fire breaking down. We remember the long line of sanctimonious politicians refusing to talk to "the men of violence", not accepting that peace would have to include those who were at war. We remember the long years it has taken for it to dawn on the Republican movement that a million unionists were not going to be forced into a united Ireland, or that the British army was not going to be driven back across the Irish Sea. We remember politicians, some of whom are now saluted for their great vision, whipping up sectarianism whenever it suited their purpose.

For us, therefore, peace has been held back by incompetent, stubborn, and downright sectarian political parties and politicians who, with their predecessors, must share the blame for agreement not being reached after the August 1994 IRA cease-fire, if not earlier. This point has been ignored amongst all the back-slapping.

Back to the so-called miracle. The apparent unionist/nationalist harmony is the result of a massive fudge that allows some Loyalist parties to portray the agreement as strengthening the Union with Britain, while Sinn Féin can simultaneously paint it as a step forward for Irish unity. But herein lies a potential hurdle — what happens when either the Union or Irish unity appears to be under threat? However before we reach that particular pass, there are many more rivers to cross.

remember 1690

The Protestant King William of Orange crossed the River Boyne in 1690 to defeat the Catholic King James II. This is commemorated all over Northern Ireland by the Orange Order every 12th of July at parades which celebrate "Protestant" supremacy over the "defeated" Catholics. Where parades pass through nationalist areas, the population is forced to endure a torrent of sectarian abuse and threats. In recent years, Drumcree, where Portadown's Orange Lodges exercise their "God-given" right to march along the nationalist Garvaghy Road, has become a Loyalist rallying point. This 12th of July, "Drumcree 4", promises to be a focus for all those Loyalist groupings for whom the agreement is yet another concession to the IRA — Paisley's DUP, the Orange Order, and the paramilitary Loyalist Volunteer Force among them. The LVF is based in Portadown, and its opposition to the agreement has already resulted in the random murders of Catholics. Little wonder then that Portadown has been dubbed "Ireland's most bigoted town".

remember 1916

The Easter Rising of 1916, when a small force of Irish Republicans occupied key buildings in Dublin, declaring independence from the British Empire, is celebrated every Easter. This year's commemoration followed the agreement by 2 days. Since then, the Republican movement has split. There is a new political grouping, The 32 County Sovereignty Committee, and an armed wing, the Dissident/Real/True/Anti-Agreement/Anti-Treaty (delete as appropriate) IRA. This, among the three Republican paramilitaries now opposed to the agreement, seems the most serious threat. They, along with the INLA and Continuity IRA, are wedded to the mistaken idea that the border can be bombed and shot out of existence. They see Sinn Féin's recognition of partition, and the changing of Articles 2 & 3 of the Irish Republic's constitution as selling-out those who died in 1916, as well as the more recent "martyrs", whose memory is aroused by the presence of Bernadette Sands-McKevitt in The 32 County Sovereignty Committee.

The existence of this unholy, if unrecognised, alliance of Loyalist and Republican groups threatens the agreement's chances of long term survival. Add this to the potential strife of prisoner releases, decommissioning, policing reforms, let alone getting the assembly and the North-South council to work, all in a continuing sectarian atmosphere, then it's easy to be cynical about those survival chances.

anarchism and republicanism

There has been a small tendency within anarchism to view the IRA's armed struggle as somehow revolutionary. This may result, on one hand, from confusing Irish Republicanism's enmity for the British government for a kind of anti-statism. On the other hand, it may be accounted for by the love common to many anarchists for things that go bang in the night. Either way, they are mistaken in viewing the Republican movement, or any particular faction of it, as revolutionary. Merely changing British rulers for "better" Irish ones, as Republicans intend, is not anarchism — nowhere near it.

Having said that, we do agree that the partitioning of Ireland is anti-working class. It has divided the working class north from south, and has further deepened the sectarianism that already existed between the "nationalist" and "unionist" working class in the north. However, the border is a reality and cannot be wished, or bombed, out of existence. For anarcho-syndicalists, the ending of partition must be part of a strategy aimed at winning working class minds away from sectarianism, a strategy that fights all attempts to divide the working class, be it worker against worker, employed against unemployed, man against woman, Protestant against Catholic, or northerner against southerner.

Just maybe the peace agreement will take the gun out of Northern Irish politics, or at least limit its impact. A sectarian political scene without guns will be preferable to one with guns. Perhaps this is the best we can hope for from this agreement. Nevertheless, it is of more use to Irish anarchists than armed struggle. It would therefore be more helpful if anarchists outside Ireland, who feel they have a contribution to make, were to help their Irish comrades than to get embroiled in Republican in-fighting. As for SF, we will continue to give our unconditional support to Organise!-IWA, our sister organisation in Ireland.

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