

UK: Unionism in crisis as Loyalists lash out

Bernie McAdam, Red Flag Thu, 15/04/2021 - 10:25

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For over a week, Loyalists have been attacking the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) in riots in Belfast, Derry and other parts of Northern Ireland. Despite their fairly small numbers, protesters using Molotov cocktails, bricks and fireworks, have succeeded in injuring over 70 police. On April 7, in Belfast they attempted to break into nationalist areas, at the Lanark Way/Springfield Road interface, but several hundred nationalist youth repelled them.

The following night, larger nationalist crowds gathered, and the police used water cannons, plastic bullets and dogs to disperse them, in marked contrast to their kid gloves approach to the far more violent Loyalist riots earlier in the week. This provided the media with an opportunity to return to their old narrative of "sectarian conflict". The Loyalist burning of a Translink bus was answered by a strike and protest by bus workers in Belfast the following day.

Some might think it ironic that this year marks the centenary "celebrations" of the creation of the Northern Ireland state. Others, nationalists and socialists, will remember that the Six County statelet was born in an orgy of pogroms in which hundreds of Catholic workers, men, women and children, were killed or driven from their workplaces and burning homes. And that was far from the last time that ?Loyalist? mobs ran amok.

Now loyalism?s most partisan supporters are lashing out at the defenders of ?their own state?. The Loyalists, who were fanatically pro-Brexit, justify this as a response to the ?betrayal? of the Northern Ireland Protocol, the agreement with the EU to have the economic border down the Irish Sea, and their perception that this brings a united Ireland ever closer.

The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) under Arlene Foster, as the main Unionist player in the north, and also pro-Brexit, is fanning these fears. For two years, they were able to hold Theresa May?s minority Tory government to ransom on Brexit, but Boris Johnson?s landslide win in December 2019 freed his hands to do a deal with the EU at the expense of the Unionists. As a result, the DUP are seen by Jim Allister?s Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) and the Loyalist Communities Council (LCC) as having been being shafted by Johnson and thus responsible for a gigantic "sell out".

Although Johnson is famous as a stupendous liar, the hapless Arlene Foster and the DUP believed him last August when he said, "there will be no border down the Irish Sea, over my dead body"!

The LCC includes the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and Red Hand Commando paramilitary groups, all with a notorious history of murdering Catholics and involvement in feuding drug gangs. This did not stop the DUP meeting them recently and using them to advance their agenda. As in 2012, when the DUP orchestrated a campaign to stop Belfast City Council from reducing the flying of the Union flag from every day to 18 days a year, the campaign whipped up Loyalists in the streets and inevitably ended up with major riots.

The LCC/DUP meeting plotted the campaign against the NI Protocol; the closure of port offices was organised by the DUP, and its Agriculture Minister, Gordon Lyons, halted work on new permanent border control posts. Sammy Wilson, DUP MP, said he will oppose the Protocol "with every means we have" and that included "guerrilla warfare". He later claimed that this was only metaphorical, but it highlighted the not so coded messages they typically send out for Loyalist mobs and paramilitaries to act on. This didn't stop Wilson's office being daubed with "Traitors" and it was one amongst a couple of hundred incidents of criminal damage and graffiti since January against the Protocol, including attacks on Sinn Fein and Alliance offices.

So, the DUP is being squeezed from the Loyalist right in particular but also by the pro-EU liberal unionists of the Alliance Party. The LCC, in its meeting with the DUP, claimed that they would collapse the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont, effectively pulling out of the Good Friday Agreement if the Protocol is not scrapped. The DUP denied discussing this but, of course, it is an option they will certainly have considered if all else fails.

The next DUP gamble to restore its credibility involved Arlene Foster calling for the resignation of the province's Chief Constable, Simon Byrne. This was because the PSNI had not prosecuted Sinn Fein leaders for attending the 2,000 strong funeral service of senior Republican Bobby Storey, in defiance of Covid restrictions. This really was the spark which lit the fuse for the Loyalist riots with the police. The DUP as always will distance themselves from the actual violence and even condemn it, but their dirty fingerprints are all over last week's riots.

Defence

Despite the storm of condemnation of Loyalist attacks on the police, hilariously even the LCC denied involvement, the prospect is for more street action. Loyalists had already given notice that more protests would take place at several interfaces in a move that is intended to provoke sectarian clashes with nationalists. If this transpires, then it is obviously desirable not to fall into the Loyalist trap of provoking nationalist youth.

However, the logic of Loyalist mobilisations has always been to target nationalist areas for intimidation and terrorism, so the question of defence is critical. As well as rampaging Loyalist mobs, they are used to being subject to police and army attacks. They have learned to defend themselves before and not to rely on the state for protection. As the "marching season" approaches, the period from April to August when nationalists and Catholics are the target of ugly and belligerent demonstrations of the Protestant Ascendancy, Loyalists have given notice that they will not abide by rulings from the Parades Commission, which limited the routes they take.

One community group which has had previous experience of defending their area from Orange Order marches is the Greater Ardoyne Residents Collective (GARC). They have been alerted to plans for Loyalist confrontations in the days ahead. Their advice focussed on parents to be aware of where their children are and stay away from flashpoint areas, but they were quite clear about the need for defence. "As always, residents retain the right to defend their homes from attack and GARC fully supports this defensive action should it be necessary".

It is reported that community workers, political activists and youth organisations have played a proactive role in "defusing" confrontations with Loyalists. This may well have helped to reduce tensions in some areas but, in itself, is no substitute for organised defence squads that can primarily repel incursions and that can harness the militancy of youth in a disciplined way. Some of those political activists on the ground, like Sinn Fein and SDLP, are pro-PSNI and would thwart any form of self-defence. Not too dissimilar is the

People before Profit group, who would prefer to keep the streets clear rather than organise any meaningful defence.

The response of nationalist youth to the Lanark Way incursion was commendable and not a sectarian response. Very suspiciously, no police were in the immediate vicinity or stopped the ramming of the interface at the time, despite trouble in the area previously. The question of defence could well become more pressing in the months ahead. The resurrection of Citizen Defence Committees, organised against Loyalist pogroms in the late 1960's, would be a welcome development and such defence bodies should be democratic and politically independent from the state.

Birth of the Orange State

Boris Johnson once compared the border in Ireland with the borders of London's traffic congestion charge zone. This merely demonstrated the wilful ignorance and contempt that Irish people have come to expect from British politicians. In fact, the so-called "Irish border" is a problem the British gave to Ireland. It is a British border. It never had any democratic legitimacy from the Irish people as a whole. The overwhelming Sinn Fein victory in the Irish seats in the Westminster General Election of 1918 signified the wish for a united and sovereign Irish Republic.

The British would not accept this, and a guerrilla War of Independence ensued, which ended in the signing of a Treaty in 1921 which split Republicans and in turn led to a civil war. The "agreement" fell far short of an independent 32 county Republic. Partition resulted in the creation of a six county, colonial "Northern Ireland" with a gerrymandered Protestant/Unionist majority and a 26 county Irish Free State, that is, "Home Rule" along with dominion status and an oath to the Crown. Both were reactionary and confessional states beholden to the British Empire.

James Connolly, the great Irish socialist murdered by the British in 1916, wrote that partition "would mean a carnival of reaction both North and South, would set back the wheels of progress, would destroy the oncoming unity of the Irish Labour movement and paralyse all advanced movements whilst it endured".

He was right. The border disrupted and stunted the economic life of the island as a whole. Communities in the border areas had families and farms split up and still remain some of the most impoverished parts of Ireland. The Orange state nurtured systematic discrimination against Catholics across employment, housing, education, even voting rights, and operated a Special Powers Act, the envy of apartheid South Africa. It reduced Catholic citizens to second class status resulting in a 30 year war of resistance to the sectarian state and its British military backers, opened up by the Civil Rights Movement in 1968.

In the Free State and the truncated Republic, it also enshrined enormous powers for the Catholic Church in education, culture and healthcare, which women and children suffered for many decades.

Thus, British imperialism was able to divide and rule the northern working class on the basis of marginal privileges for Protestant workers and a supremacist ideology that was both anti-Catholic and anti-Irish. The insistence today that Orange marches should be able to go through Catholic areas is a direct consequence of this reactionary and triumphalist pro-imperialism. No less does it explain the latest UVF ethnic cleansing outrage in ordering the removal of Catholic families from a Carrickfergus estate.

Good Friday Agreement and Brexit

When the outbreak of peace was sealed by the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998, it seemed to some that the Orange state was disappearing. The power sharing project between all the major parties was in itself a reform quite different to the historic running of the north by the Unionists. Many in the DUP never

really accepted the idea. Some of the more blatant forms of discrimination had been whittled down since 1968. Some Orange marches had even been rerouted.

This was not down to the peace deal though but to the mass struggles of Catholics over thirty years including the IRA's armed struggle from the 1970s to the 1990s. The Orange state had not been smashed and, crucially, the GFA acknowledged the northern state's right to exist for as long as the majority wanted it, a huge concession by the Republican Movement. This consigns the minority, and its political representatives, to a permanent subordinate role. It has copper fastened the Unionist veto over a united Ireland and denies the right of the people of Ireland as a whole to determine the future of the six counties.

The resulting power sharing Executive rested on an elected and devolved Assembly at Stormont, based on a sectarian headcount and a sectarian hand out of resources that benefited the political supporters of the GFA in both communities. In line with its anti-working class nature, it has faithfully implemented British government austerity measures as dictated by the hand that feeds it at Westminster. Sectarianism has not diminished since the GFA, the sectarian state and the "peace walls" remain and there has been no "peace dividend" for the working class.

But everyone swears blind by the Good Friday Agreement. From Joe Biden to Tony Blair, from Sinn Fein to the Tories, from the DUP (grudgingly) to the EU it is heralded as the deal that must not be tampered with in any new arrangement with the EU post-Brexit. Since the Good Friday Agreement, with the Unionist veto over a united Ireland assured, British and Irish capitalism, with the aid of the EU, has ensured an "invisible" border for the purposes of smooth and profitable business. Brexit was always going to disrupt this frictionless trade but then Brexit was not conceived with Ireland in mind.

The fact remains that membership of the EU has demonstrated how futile a border is on the island of Ireland. It follows from this that Brexit has quite unintentionally put the border right back into Irish politics with a vengeance. It is part of the "carnival of reaction" that internationalist socialists predicted and warned of during the Brexit referendum and in the years of negotiations. It is ironic that this renewed interest in a united Ireland was not what the rabid pro-Brexiteers of the DUP and their Tory/UKIP pals expected when propelling their Brexit campaign.

The conundrum for the Tories is they either have a Brexit with an Irish Sea border or else they have a Brexit with a hard land border. The former will antagonise the Loyalists, the latter would antagonise Biden, EU and the Irish government. So far, Johnson has gambled on the former plan and the response to that is now playing out in the streets. But the Loyalists are not loyal to British state, or to Westminster let alone to a Tory government. They are "loyal" only to themselves, their declining privileges, their domination of the Catholic minority. No doubt the UK and the EU will try to cobble together a cosmetic deal to smooth over the implementation of the Protocol, since any return of a hard land border would be even more damaging.

The Tories would then have to sell their new plan to the DUP, and the DUP would need to sell it to the Loyalists. So, an uncertain future lies ahead, and the next casualty may well be the GFA, with the collapse of its Assembly/Executive, having only recently been reconvened in 2020 after 3 years' suspension. Loyalists have already withdrawn their support from the GFA.

Labour's Keir Starmer can only blandly condemn the violence and call on Johnson "to step up" and convene all-party talks. Labour's bottom line is defence of the GFA, as was Jeremy Corbyn's foolish optimism that it was a "defining moment in Irish history". Yet the GFA has not changed the sectarian nature of the state nor challenged the notion of permanent Unionist consent. At least Corbyn has stated that his ultimate goal would be a united Ireland but, like the GFA, even this was qualified by safeguarding the Unionist veto over a united Ireland.

The Labour left today appears to be largely silent on the Loyalist violence, continuing the traditional wall of silence on Britain's occupation of the north. Genuine socialists and internationalists must say it is time for the border to go! Indeed, we are equally opposed to the economic border in the Irish Sea, which will mean economic decline, job losses and barriers to free movement of labour.

The Unionists, a minority in both Ireland and Britain, should not have a veto over anything be it abortion, same sex marriage, Brexit or the border itself. The Irish people on the island of Ireland must decide and British forces should immediately be withdrawn from the north. However rotten its record on Ireland, Labour should now do the right thing by the Irish and break with its pro-imperialist and bipartisan policies once and for all.

For a Workers' Republic

After a century of oppression and repression, Britain's prison house Orange state continues to teeter from one crisis to another. British imperialism is responsible for this little monster, as it is for dividing the working class in the north. Alongside the impending economic devastation from Brexit and the pandemic, the working class on both sides of the "peace walls" face a future of hardship and unemployment.

It is of course crucial that working class unity around a militant action programme is forged to defend living standards and jobs. There is a lot more that unites workers than should divide them. Every job and every cut must be resisted with solidarity action and trade unions must be shaken up by the rank and file so that their leaders are held to account within the union and by democratic assemblies at the workplace. Working class action is key to resisting the attacks that will come from any DUP/Sinn Fein Executive on orders from Westminster.

British Imperialism's legacy in Ireland shows that working class unity cannot be fostered by common economic interests alone. Class consciousness does not spontaneously or automatically spring from economic struggle. It is disingenuous to believe that ignoring the politics of discrimination and national oppression will make it easier to unite workers. The pro-imperialist ideology of Protestant workers is a barrier to prosecuting the class struggle against capitalism and a weapon in the hands of reactionary Loyalists.

There is deep unease within the Protestant and Unionist community as they see their majority slipping away, a perception that they are being demonised and the possibility that they will lose their British identity in a united Ireland. We must point out to them that, if the British government so chooses, it will ignore your concerns and hammer you down just as they did the nationalist community. When your so-called best allies care little for you, it is time to think afresh about your real class interests.

Indeed, if you do fight to protect your economic interests you can expect the same response from capitalist governments north and south. That is why we need unity across the sectarian divide, the better to organise a more powerful fight against the bosses. Better to throw in your lot with workers across Ireland and Britain and fight for a society owned and controlled by the working class, a Workers' Republic in Ireland as part of a Socialist United States of Europe.

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