

The Partition of Ireland

Workers' Solidarity Movement

Contents

Imperialism and nationalism	3
Communal identity	3
Historical roots	4
Unionism and Loyalism	5
The south	6
Republicanism	6
1960s to today	7
Armed struggle	8
The peace process	9
Sectarianism in the north today	10
Workers unity	11
An end to partition?	12
Short Term Perspectives	13
Debate with loyalists	13
Reform of the 6 county state.	13
The role of the British state	13

Imperialism and nationalism

1.1

As anarchists, we oppose imperialism¹ and believe it cannot play a progressive role. The role of the British state in Ireland is a particular case of imperialism which we have always opposed. The relationship of the British state with Ireland is imperialist because the decisions it has imposed have always been autonomous of the wishes of the people of the island and any section of the people. That is British state policy follows the perceived needs of the British state and not the wishes of the 'Irish people', those who are 'loyal to the crown' or even the local ruling class.

1.2

However in opposing imperialism we see no form of nationalism as offering a definitive solution to either the working class in Ireland or the working class across the globe. In the final analysis nationalism argues for a common interest between workers and bosses of one 'nation' against the workers and bosses of another. As anarchists we stand for international working class solidarity against all bosses.

Communal identity

2.

However as anarchists living on the island of Ireland we have to deal with rather than ignore the divisions in the working class that exist based on communal identity in the north and the issues of state repression that continue around them. When we talk about "communal identity" we acknowledge that not all Catholics are nationalists, not all Protestants are unionists, and not all nationalists and unionists are religious believers. There are, however, two main communal identities, which can be summarised as Catholic/nationalist on one hand and Protestant/unionist on the other. In this paper the terms 'communal identity' and 'religion' are used interchangeably.

3.

We reject the idea that there are any differences between workers from different religions on the island that make partition either desirable or inevitable. Rather we see partition as the main reason why conflicts based on religious divisions continue to exist.

4.

All sections of the working class have lost out as a result of these religious divisions. In the north the divisions in the working class make it more difficult but not impossible to unite against the bosses. In the north the divisions have historically meant that workers from a catholic background suffered state discrimination and were often the targets of loyalist and Orange attacks. In the south, the birth of mass socialist politics in the working class has been delayed for decades, Southern workers were subject to a theocratic state regime which not only denied abortion rights

¹ See our paper on Capitalist globalisation and imperialism.

but also subjected the vulnerable, in particular children, to brutal regimes of 'discipline' based on physical and all too often sexual abuse.

Historical roots

5.

Partition is not a historic accident but rather the result of centuries of imperialism and struggles against imperialism. From the reformation onwards the British State encouraged religious conflict in Ireland in order to divide and rule.

6.1

The radical republican rebellion of 1798 offered the opportunity to simultaneously remove the rule of the British state and to end sectarian conflict as a major political force. The defeat of the rebellion in part through the deliberate deepening of sectarian divisions enabled the British state to not only preserve its rule but entrench and extend the sectarian divisions that existed prior to the rebellion.

6.2

Of particular significance was the encouragement of the Orange Order as an instrument of counter-revolution open to 'Dissenters' as well as Anglicans with the common purpose of physically suppressing Catholics and radical Protestants alike. The creation of the founding nationalist and loyalist mythologies towards the end of the 19th century saw even that rebellion presented as part of a seamless history of catholic Irish versus the British state and its loyal defenders / local dupes.

6.3

Thus the period of the Home Rule crises and the War of Independence saw the creation of two distinct nationalist identities that were to be cemented by partition and the carnival of reaction - north and south - that followed it. The class politics that emerged - north and south - in the opening years of the 20th century was to vanish to be replaced by the Catholic Irish and the Ulster Protestant - each with their own statelet containing unhappy minorities.

6.4

These myths of separate national identities continue to be built by reactionaries north and south to bolster their agendas.

7.1

The truce of July 1921 happened at what we now know to be the closing of the period of intense class struggle in Ireland that opened with the 1907 dockers strike. 1919 had seen saw large scale land and workplace occupations as well as the 'Limerick Soviet' when the trades council ran the city for 14 days during a general strike. In Belfast in 1919 40,000 engineering workers struck. All this in the context of the revolution in Russia and the attempted revolution in Germany.

7.2

With the ruling class of Britain and Ireland - including many of the nationalists - worried about revolution partition represented a compromise that could offer stability. The economic differences between the agricultural south and the industrial north meant that most of the rulers north and south could accept partition as an unavoidable tragedy. British imperialism was guaranteed the military bases it needed to patrol the north Atlantic because it kept the north and the five treaty ports in the south. And instead of the threat of a working class united by a struggle for better wages and conditions partition held the promise of deepening the sectarian divide in the working class and strengthening national identity over class.

Unionism and Loyalism

8.1

The 6 counties of the north was separated out of the 9 counties in Ulster so as to ensure a permanent unionist rule based on tying Protestant workers to their bosses in return for marginal privilege. This was not a secretive project but openly talked of by Northern Prime Ministers (e.g. Brookborough's famous statement about employing 'good Protestant lads') in particular when workers did start to unite around shared economic issues.

8.2

Sharp sectarian divisions around the issues of access to jobs and housing already existed, particularly in Belfast. But the rhetoric of those who ran the northern state helped further build a sense amongst a layer of protestant workers that they had to actively defend 'their jobs and houses' against the demands of catholic workers for an equal share. This layer could be mobilised not only against catholic workers but also against protestant workers who either identified with the call for a fair redivision on humanitarian grounds or who saw the possibility of more being won for all workers through a united struggle.

8.3

This layer represents a minority of protestant workers but it has been and remains a sizeable minority. When its interests have coincided with the unionist ruling class tens of thousands have been mobilised on the streets, in 1969 in response to a peaceful civil rights movement demanding basic democratic rights, in 1974 in the strike against power sharing that brought down Stormont, in the 1980's in the mass demonstrations against the Anglo Irish agreement and in the 1990's at Drumcree. But as the examples from the 80's and 90's show its power is dependant on its demands corresponding with a significant section of the British ruling class. Where such support is not forthcoming this movement fractures and retreats into an abstract loyalty to the more reactionary symbols of the British state (the monarchy, the empire and the flag) coupled with a sense it has been betrayed by the same British state.

8.4.

Thus loyalism is a reactionary ideology in all its forms including those that try to appear socialist. It serves only to maintain sectarianism and Protestant privilege and protect the interests of the British and northern ruling classes.

The south

9.1

Not all of the reasons why northern protestant workers support partition are reactionary. Post partition the southern state followed a path that did indeed lead to a form of 'Rome rule'. A huge amount of formal and informal power was handed to the Catholic church. From 1937 to 1972 the Irish constitution even included the statement that the Catholic church held a 'special position'. Taoiseach's would routinely pledge loyalty to the catholic church or even the pope as with Costelloe 1947 letter pledging "our devotion to your August person".

9.2

It is not just a question of rhetorical statements - the catholic church was given de facto control of almost every school, hospital and orphanage in the country. Until the 1990's it had an effective if informal veto over government policy. It was also not subject to the criminal justice system - the Gardai not only ignored hundreds of reports of physical and sexual abuse of those in church run institutions but at least up to the 1960's they went so far as to capture and return even adult women who had fled Magdelene laundries into the hands of the clerics. There was no equivalent of the religious pogroms of the northern state in the south but all the same partition was followed by mass migration of the southern protestant minority and a sharp decline in the percentage of protestants in the population.

10.

The struggle to achieve workers unity in the North can not be separated from the struggle to build an anarchist workers movement in the south. Such a movement in the south attacking both capitalism and the dominance of religious law will be a great spur to winning over Protestant workers in the North. The Catholic Church's position of power in the South has been severely weakened over the last decade. However it still maintains a dominant role in crucial areas such as education and health. The complete smashing of this dominance will help in the building of common links between northern and southern workers.

Republicanism

11.

Republicanism seeks to create a society where there will be a fairer division of power but where capitalism and a ruling class will continue to exist. Republicanism in Ireland and internationally contained radical democratic roots but with the development of autonomous working class politics these were relegated to the fringes in order to eliminate the threat of the working class seizing the reins during any upheaval.

12.1

Irish republicanism is now based on a practise which first seeks to unite Catholic workers with Catholic bosses in a common struggle for a united Ireland. Republicanism has considerable support among sections of the catholic working class in the north but it has no attraction for Protestant workers and has no strategy for approaching Protestant workers beyond rhetorical appeals.

12.2

However, republicanism unlike loyalism often developed significant left strands within it because, at least in theory, it was based on the 'equal rights of all' rather than the 'god given destiny of the chosen people' or the secular variations on this theme. After the rise of Leninism however these strands were deeply contaminated with authoritarian socialist ideas. Still they sometimes, as with the Republican Congress movement of the 1930's, could win support from small sections of the northern protestant working class around the slogan of the workers republic. Although we and other anarchists have used that slogan as in the past, it is no longer a useful shorthand for why we have different politics to republicans, so we prefer to simply say that we are for 'an anarchist Ireland'.

13.1

Left republicans talk of combining the struggle to end partition and the struggle for socialism into a single struggle. But the sectarian reality of the conflict meant that whatever the rhetoric their only audience was amongst catholic workers. And they also lack any strategy for winning over protestant workers beyond hoping they will see beyond their 'false consciousness'. This would be a weak strategy in any case but coming from organisations which promote Leninist politics and are frequently seen as infested with sectarian, criminal and thuggish behaviour it is no strategy at all. Whatever variants of republicanism can be sketched in theory the history of the last decades means that the language of republicanism is not a way to initiating a meaningful dialogue with any large number of protestant workers.

13.2

In any case because of globalisation the period when republicanism represented a viable strategy is over. The integration of the world economy means there is no longer space for a small economy to go it alone without its economy collapsing.

1960s to today

14.1

In common with most of the western world Ireland as a whole began a process of radical transformation in the 1960's - here as elsewhere it focused around democratic demands for equality. In the 6 counties however the demand for equality was rightly seen as undermining the base of the northern state. So as elsewhere in the world a non-violent movement for democratic rights

found itself confronted with both the physical force of the state and 'popular' mobilisations of reactionary movements.

14.2

In some areas of the world like the USA the emergence of mass Civil Rights movements forced capital to modernise the state in order to achieve stability - a modernisation that only happened on the back of intense struggle but which nevertheless was to see the federal government impose reforms on individual states. In others like South Africa the state was used to violently clamp down on the movement. In the north meant that both reform and repression were rolled out alongside each other as divisions within and between the British and northern state structure were played out without any real resolution. Significant reforms were won by the civil rights movement but much of the old structure of unionist power remained in place. And the violent repression unleashed against the civil rights movement meant many came to the conclusion that there was no peaceful road to the reform of the northern state.

15.

British troops were not sent into the North in 1969 in order to keep the peace but rather to provide a breathing space for the northern security forces and to stabilise in the interests of the British ruling class what they thought could have become a revolutionary situation. This remained their role, which is why we call for "Troops out now". In addition they were used also to break the back of any mass peaceful reform movement through actions like Bloody Sunday in 1972.

Armed struggle

16.1

The tactic of armed struggle, as carried out by the Republicans, was never capable of forcing the withdrawal of the British state because it was incapable of delivering a military victory over the British army. The British ruling class cares little for the deaths of individual soldiers in its army. The 'commercial bombing campaign' caused civilian casualties and heightened sectarian tensions.

16.2

The armed struggle was also faulted because it relied on the actions of a few, with the masses left in either a totally inactive role, or one limited to providing intelligence and shelter to the few. It is claimed that it did serve to maintain the gains made in the 60s and early 70s. The mass campaigns (civil disobedience, rent & rates strike, street committees, etc.) would have been a far greater protection for the gains won than the elitist militarism of a few.

17.

The British state is responsible for the long history of armed conflict in Ireland. As long as the British state remains in Ireland there remains the possibility of armed struggle against it,

especially when there is no mass movement to demonstrate an alternative to militarism. We have opposed the republican armed struggle because it was an impediment to working class unity. It was based on wrong politics, it was a wrong strategy and it used wrong tactics. However we refused to blame the republicans for the situation in the six counties. Their campaign was the result of a problem and must not be confused with its cause. In the final analysis, the cause lies with the continuing occupation by the British state.

18.

The IRA was not responsible for the creation of sectarianism. Rather it was re-created in 1969 as a response to the sectarian attacks by the security forces and loyalist paramilitaries on what had been a peaceful civil rights movement. While individual IRA actions in the years since heightened sectarian tensions they were not the underlying reason why it continued to exist. For this reason the end of the IRA campaign did not result in an end to sectarianism.

The peace process

19.

When the 1994 ceasefire was declared we welcomed it because the ending of the armed struggle opens up new possibilities for class politics. We did not see the IRA ceasefire as a sell-out. It was the natural progression of nationalist politics in the circumstances, which was always going to lead to a compromise with imperialism.

20.1

The Good Friday Agreement came about as the culmination of Sinn Féin's strategy for over a decade which was aimed at building various broad fronts around different issues in an attempt to gain respectability by pulling in Fianna Fáil members and church figures. This involved dropping all references to socialism to maintain unity with "the broad nationalist family". This strategy was never going to deliver a united socialist Ireland, or any other significant improvements apart from those associated with "demilitarisation". It represents instead a hardening of traditional nationalism and the goal of achieving an alliance of all nationalists - Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil, SDLP, the Catholic Church and "Irish America". Such an alliance has nothing to offer working class people, North or South, and we oppose it outright.

20.2

The Good Friday Agreement offered nothing except a sectarian division of the spoils and in fact copper-fastened sectarian divisions. We called for an abstention in the referendum on this deal, refusing to align ourselves with those calling for a 'no' vote, pointing out that they 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 Movement, the Real IRA, Republican Sinn Féin, Continuity IRA and the Irish National Liberation Army has nothing but increased communalism and sectarianism to offer. The loyalist opponents-whose rallies were attended by vocal supporters of the Loyalist Volunteer Force death squads -wanted a return to the time when Catholics lived as second class citizens afraid to be even seen to protest about this status.

21.

The Assembly set up under the 'Good Friday Agreement' demonstrates quite clearly the fact that the net effect of this agreement is to copper-fasten sectarianism, with elected members having to declare themselves 'nationalist' or 'unionist' in order for their votes to count. The political parties have shown that they are capable of plenty of agreement on economic issues - with no disagreement over budgets or spending plans, but issues such as what flowers should be put on display in the lobby or what flags should fly over Ministerial buildings are used to hype up the divisions between the two sides.

22.

The huge vote, North and South, in favour of the agreement -whatever else it might have indicated - showed quite clearly that the vast majority of people do not want a return to pre-ceasefire violence. Any return to armed struggle will deliver only more hardship and repression for working class people in the six counties.

Sectarianism in the north today

23.1

Sectarian divisions continue in the north today. We recognise that many of the protests that take place around these divisions are intended to inflame them and further divide the working class rather than solve them. Often this is for the electoral gain of local politicians or to provide a continuing role for paramilitaries.

23.2

We are not neutral on these issues. We do not support the right of any group to determine who may or may not live, work or pass through 'their area'. The one exception we make to this is the parades of the Orange Order and related institutions because of the role they continue to play in inflaming sectarian hatred. But we argue opposition to the Orange Order must be built on a class rather than religious basis. This means great efforts should be made to winning workers from a protestant background to opposing the order.

23.3

We generally support all calls for public enquiries and all attempts to limit police powers even where we disagree with the politics of those who are the victims of the repression.

23.4

We argue for integrated housing and schooling and the removal of all religious and nationalist symbols from public buildings and streets by those who use them. We argue for the ending of any clerical input into any school or hospital that receives public funding in the north just as we do in the south.

24.

We condemn all sectarian actions (i.e. those carried out because of religion) including any that are carried out by republicans. We combat sectarianism not by appeals to the state forces for protection but by calling for workers to act through strikes, demonstrations etc against such outrages.

25.

We condemn without reservation the 'punishment' beatings and shootings of people accused of 'anti-social behaviour' or drug dealing carried out by both republican and loyalist paramilitaries. These actions are nothing more than a crude attempt by these groups to maintain control over what they view as 'their communities'. They are authoritarian thuggery. It is no justification for these groups to claim that there is a 'policing vacuum' or that the communities are pressurising them to act. None of these groups have any mandate to enforce their 'rule of law'. They certainly have no right to set themselves up as judge, jury and executioner.

Workers unity

24.

As anarchists we work for unity both between Catholic and Protestant workers and between British and Irish workers. The potential for unity has been demonstrated on a number of occasions in the history of the north including the 1907 Dockers strike and the outdoor relief strike of 1932 when the Falls and Shankill rioted in support of each other. More recently we have seen united actions in defence of the National Health Service and against sectarian intimidation. Smaller examples of such unity are constantly thrown up in workplace struggles in the north.

25.

We recognise that although Protestant workers have marginal advantages over Catholic workers these are far outweighed by the disadvantages faced by the division of the working class which means northern workers, both Catholic and Protestant are worse off in terms of housing, unemployment and wages than any comparable sized area in England. These are the fruits of partition.

26.1

As everywhere else workers in the north have fought to improve their lot and have come together to do so. Despite the legacy of employment discrimination the workplace is the most integrated part of northern society. There have even been significant strikes against sectarian intimidation in the workplace.

26.2

However the ideology of loyalism has been used to break and to undermine workers unity. This is no surprise as demands for improvements for all run counter to the 'a protestant state

for a protestant people' (Craig, the first PM) basis on which the northern state was explicitly founded. The Irish nationalism of the Catholic working class may not have obvious reactionary implications. However, if one keeps in mind that working class unity implies the international unity of the working class, whereas national unity requires unity between the capitalist class and the working class, it is clear to see that Irish nationalism, like all nationalisms, calls for the division of the international working class and the sacrificing of working class interests for the, inherently capitalist, 'national interest'.

27.

The interests of workers on the island dictate a need to break with the ideologies of loyalism and Irish nationalism. If this is true of day to day economic struggles it is one hundred times the case in the struggle for libertarian communism.

28.

A lasting libertarian movement can only be built on a basis that openly includes anti- imperialism and opposition to state repression and sectarianism among its policies. These issues must be debated within any libertarian movement and should not be rushed over for the sake of short term growth.

29.

We should aid British anarchist groups in developing a clear perspective on the national question committed to breaking British workers from any support for the Rule of the British State in Ireland.

An end to partition?

30.1

With the peace process the British state claimed that in the event of the population of the island voting in separate referenda - north and south - for unity that it would respect such a decision. It is no coincidence that this concession was made in a period when the elected wing of the British state was imposing a program of modernisation of the overall state structure. All of these changes faced opposition from other factions of the ruling class and all may prove to be reversible. The record of Britain and other imperialist powers in sticking to the terms of verbal or written agreements is not something to be relied on. But alongside the peace process a shift has taken place in European politics where increasingly the EU becomes the guarantor for capitalist stability. After all global corporations have little concern with which national government preserves stability for them.

30.2

This opens up a disturbing new route by which partition could be ended. Previously anarchists including the WSM thought partition could only be ended by a revolutionary upsurge that united the working class and therefore abolished sectarian politics. The removal of imperialism

was an inevitable requirement of such a scenario. Now partition could end through a referendum in which a yet to be formed majority impose a new settlement on a minority but in which sectarianism remains in place. As anarchists we would welcome the removal of imperialism even under such circumstances but recognise that in the short term at least it would probably deepen sectarian divisions in the northern working class.

Short Term Perspectives

Debate with loyalists

S1.1

The political organisations linked to loyalist paramilitaries have become more active since the 1994 loyalist ceasefire. While the Progressive Unionist Party claim to be socialist it is important to remember where they have come from. They are the public face of the UVF, which waged a blatantly sectarian war against the nationalist population of the six counties for two and a half decades. Unless and until they renounce these actions, they cannot be considered part of the socialist movement.

S1.2

We do not, however, agree with the position that socialists should not enter into debate with members of these parties. It is only through such debate that the ludicrousness of their position of claiming to be socialist while at the same time pledging loyalty to a monarchy can be exposed. In order to win Protestant workers in the six counties to the fight for anarchism we must first convince them to break with the sectarian ideology of loyalism/unionism.

Reform of the 6 county state.

S2.

We previously held that the 6 county state was irreformably sectarian. However the current peace process may result in a state apparatus that is divided into feuding sectarian forces on the one hand and the encouragement by these politicians of communalist sectarian conflict on the other. It appears that capitalism being unable to step forwards has stepped side-wards in a manner that does nothing to resolve grassroots sectarian conflict but overall results in a 'parity of intervention' by the state in these conflicts.

The role of the British state

S3.

It is no longer possible to assign a single motive to the British state with regards to the north. The transfer of power to the European union, the end of the cold war and the economic growth of the south have all tended to do away with the historical reasons why the British ruling class as a whole wanted to retain the north. Now the majority faction seem open to power sharing

with the southern government and even eventual unification. The major priority of the southern and British ruling classes is maintaining stable conditions for capitalism.

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