

# Ireland: a Bosnia waiting to happen

**F**or a while in July and August, the people of Northern Ireland found themselves lurching unexpectedly back into the old sectarian nightmare which most of them had hoped the "peace process" was, even after the collapse of the Provisional IRA ceasefire, lifting from their lives.

The conflict about whether a small Orange Order procession from an ancient church should go by the "traditional" route, through what is now a Catholic housing estate in Drumcree, near Portadown, or agree to be rerouted, was an old one. There had been a crisis there last year too. But this July, suddenly, like dry grass in Summer, Northern Ireland seemed to be catching fire from the sparks struck at Portadown.

Learning from last year's confrontation there, the Orange Order had prepared its forces. But it wasn't just the Orange Order. Drumcree was seen by a large proportion of Northern Ireland's people as a test case for whether they, the Protestants, the Unionists, the "Loyalists", were still "the people" of peoples in a Northern Ireland state set up three quarters of a century ago to enshrine and wall off their separateness from the rest of the Irish.

With vast hordes of Orangeists on the point of rallying at Drumcree to try to force the issue, the Chief Constable of the RUC, Sir Hugh Annesley (or was it the Northern Ireland Secretary of State, Sir Patrick Mayhew?) decided to lift the ban and let the Orange march through the Catholic housing estate. They later explained that the army and police could not have contained the likely levels of violence if the confrontation had been allowed to develop.

Worse: unable or unwilling to control or confront the Orange Order the state now sided with the stronger force within Northern Ireland, and put itself at their service to quell Catholic-nationalist attempts to "interfere" with the Orange march. Plastic bullets were fired at Catholics who dared to protest.

If the episode had been scripted by nationalist propagandists, it could scarcely have served their cause better. The political fall-out was massive. The British government was seen to be surrendering the rule of law to the threat of Orange force, and to be siding with the Orangeists in their patently unreasonable and provocative determination to hold what could not be other than a supremacist demonstration.

The mainly Protestant RUC was shown on the television screens of the world batoning and shooting plastic bullets at Catholics. The Orange Order, in its strange Masonic regalia,

was seen strutting among people for whom their rituals recall the memory of ancient subjugations and rub their noses in present dissatisfaction.

Amidst the teeming bowler-hatted, Sunday-suited Orange-men filling the fields around Drumcree, sectarian assassins moved. They killed a young Catholic.

And yet, a month later in mainly Catholic Derry, the other part of the truth uncovered itself. Faced with a scheduled Catholic counter-march against the projected Protestant Apprentice Boys' march, the government once again acted on the side of the stronger force in the situation. It sent troops with guns and barbed wire to stop Protestants parading on that part of their sanctified city walls that overlooks the Catholic Bogside.

In those two episodes, the reality of Northern Ireland is lit up plainly. Only those who do not want to will fail to see: *it is a Bosnia waiting to happen*. If you doubt it, imagine that the confrontations had been allowed to take their course.

Clashes of unarmed crowds would quickly have become battles between the gunmen who are plentiful on both sides. As always in such situations, the reckless, unashamedly militant chauvinists would set the pace and define the situation. People would seek safety from the armed bigots of the other side in militarised enclaves and ghettos even more exclusive than now, protected by the armed and shameless bigots on their own side.

Both sides would compete for control of territory, drive "aliens" out, seek to expand and maximise their areas of control. Apart from Belfast, Antrim and Down are very heavily of one colour, Orange. The Border areas are heavily Catholic. Elsewhere the populations are mixed and interlaced.

If that process were allowed to develop — if, for example, the British state were to cease to be a force in the situation — then it requires small imagination to see what would follow. There would be full-scale "ethnic" war between the two sorts of people locked together in Northern Ireland's Six Counties.

What we saw in July was a sudden spurt in the direction natural to the Northern Ireland situation when conflict intensifies. We also saw the weakness of the British state. The Six Counties has long been in a condition of limited warlordism. Protestant and Catholic gunmen control, or contest with the British state to control, sizeable pockets of territory, from South Armagh to Belfast. In these areas, dictatorial military rule has partly or wholly replaced the rule of the bourgeois-

democratic state. Many Catholics reject that state, and many Protestants no longer trust it. For example, the Provisional IRA cudgels out its own savage "justice" in large parts of Catholic Belfast.

Thus, already, in parts of Northern Ireland, the outlines of a future Bosnia can be seen. By bending in one direction at Drumcree and in the other at Derry, the British state has openly, and not for the first time, accepted such fragmentation and unofficial cantonisation within Northern Ireland. It accepts it in order to manipulate and master it, but in doing so it also, inevitably, enhances it.

This is not good, on any level. Rule by a state under bourgeois-democratic administration is preferable in all parts of Northern Ireland to military-communal rule. That would only cease to be so if military-communal rule — by the Provisional IRA in the Catholic ghettos of Belfast, for example — could be seen as incubating a transition to something better. In fact, it prepares worse — the disintegration of the state into chaos, "ethnic cleansing", and a very bloody repartition. Provisional IRA rule in the Catholic ghettos does not prepare Irish liberation from Britain, but Irish civil war.

Socialists want to see the bourgeois state disrupted and dismantled — but only to be replaced by something better, not, as here, by something which, if it is allowed to happen, will be infinitely worse.

Neither the Provisional IRA nor their Protestant/Unionist equivalents can offer or impose any general solution. They are sectional, communal groups. All they could do, given their head, is fight each other for redivision of the territory of the Six Counties.

That is the fundamental reason why the Provisional IRA war makes no sense *even from an Irish nationalist point of view*, and why the overwhelming majority of nationalist Irish people reject the Provisional IRA/Sinn Féin and their enterprise.

The mad paradox is that, while they denounce the British state in Ireland, the Provisionals' central goal is to compel that state, through international pressure, to coerce ("persuade") the Irish Unionists into a united Ireland. This is, in historical terms, not Republicanism — which is properly concerned with the unity of *the people* of Ireland, not the mechanical unity of a state — but the *reductio ad absurdum* of middle-class Catholic-Irish nationalism.

In their own convoluted and mystified way, the Provisionals thus "recognise" the fundamental truth, that there is *no revolutionary nationalist solution* to the Irish question. At the end of the 20th century the "Irish question" is substantially a question of intra-Irish divisions snarled up by a British imperialist "solution" which created the Six Counties seven and a half decades ago.

The point about the events of July and August, and the suddenness of the flare-up despite all the previous relaxation of tension, is that though the British state is at its core stable, and will not let Northern Ireland collapse into a Bosnia, its operations in Northern Ireland, the way it runs the area, feeds the sectarian fires.

The Orangeists feel threatened; the Catholics are unsatisfied. Capitalism — Irish capitalism and British — decrees an economy of scarcity and unemployment and massive human waste, in which the Catholics are especially the victims. The Provisional IRA channels the consequent restlessness and rebellion into activities that make these problems worse.

Socialists want to transform Ireland, but the working class

must first be transformed from its present condition of murderous division and communal antagonism.

The British and Irish governments, backed by the US and the European Union, propose to recreate a Belfast government, this time with institutionalised Catholic/Protestant power-sharing, and to link that government with the Dublin government through a Council of Ireland. This Council of Ireland would immediately assume limited but major all-Ireland governmental responsibilities for Irish links, North and South, with the European Union.

It may be that moves towards this will result from the "peace-process" talks that will soon resume. But it may not. July and August show how volatile Northern Ireland is.

The lesson for the left needs to be spelled out: the Provisional IRA campaign offers no possibility of progress. It is a big and often defining part of the problem, not a solution. Even the Protestant paramilitaries, who have disbanded the organisation responsible for the sectarian killing in Drumcree, are for now being more constructive than the "Republicans".

The second general lesson is this: reliance on the policing capacity of the British government is a blind alley.

The core problem is to work out a *modus vivendi* between the two peoples on the island of Ireland. The existence of the artificial Six County entity, where Catholics are a massive minority and may in ten or twenty years be the majority, makes rational appraisal and working-out of this problem all but impossible.

Until it is sorted out, until there is a widely accepted political solution, Ireland will remain a Bosnia in the making.

The Northern Ireland labour movement needs to break with communalism and create a new Labour Party out of the existing, united, trade

unions. A precondition for working-class unity, above the bread-and-butter trade-union level, is that such a working-class movement should adopt and make propaganda for a consistently democratic solution to the intra-Irish conflict. The British/Irish state system should be recast into an intra-Irish federal and British-Isles confederal system, guaranteeing the right of the Northern Ireland Protestants to maintain their identity while creating normal and democratic relations with the rest of the Irish.

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# Tony Blair and Queen Victoria

WRITING about Queen Victoria and the future Edward VII, Walter Bagehot once asked how it happened that “a retired widow and her unemployed son” came to be the lynchpins in the British constitutional system. About the Labour Party, we have to ask a similar question: how does a personable, and moderately eloquent public-school barrister who, past 40, has never in his life done anything brave or outstanding and whose ideas are conventional and commonplace, come to be dictator over the labour movement in politics? For that is what he is.

The old living, thinking, responding labour movement is being replaced by a vacuous personality cult which wet-blankets, smothers and bureaucratically stifles anything higher than its own Dead Sea level of awareness and concern.

Ours is a movement built over many decades by millions of working-class people. They had, and have, about as much in common with Blair and his fat-cat coterie as Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth, would have with the Archbishop of Canterbury! Yet this movement seems to have accepted Blair as autocratic ruler!

Beaten down by a decade and a half of Tory government; shackled by trade union laws that outlaw many of the elements of effective trade unionism; convinced that the only way forward is a Labour victory — the labour movement has let itself be bamboozled into accepting the ridiculous idea that it scarcely matters what Labour stands for so long as it wins the next general election.

The dominance of Blair and his sycophants increasingly

takes on the form of a grim parody of old working-class experiences — and of Stalinism.

In the name of democratic accountability to the broader electorate, the Parliamentary Labour Party claimed the right to dictate to the labour movement. It raised itself above the party. Now this wretched little nonentity raises himself above the PLP, like a dictator. And the PLP puts up with it!

Policy is now made and remade by the leader and his aides to win the fickle favour of the bourgeois press. Even the PLP is disenfranchised! The Labour Party's National Executive is just a rubber-stamp.

Blair sees himself as a leader in the Thatcher mould, but he may be in for surprises. The Tory Party is the natural party of government, based on the ruling class and on the haves in society. Thatcher *satisfied* most of her party. Blair in government cannot do other than alienate his. That is one reason why he may not even win the next election. It is why, even if he wins, there will be a labour and trade union, that is a working-class, revolt against his projected Tory-blue Labour government.

Full-scale opposition to Blair's policies will certainly develop under a Labour government. There are stirrings of discontent even now, though the pressure not to rock the boat before the General Election is immense.

The job of socialists now is to prepare for the inevitable effort by the bedrock labour movement to reassert itself. In the first place we tell the truth to the labour movement: the Blairites are preparing a disaster for us!

## Why we publish Workers' Liberty

MARXIST socialism is the conscious expression of unconscious historical processes. It is rooted in the class struggle — which is rooted in the ineradicable realities of capitalist society.

Socialism in its history has gone through many phases of eclipse and of brilliance. Today it is in eclipse, and our enemies tell us it is dead. Socialism cannot die, because the proletariat and the class struggle cannot die so long as capitalism lives.

Socialism can, however, take a longer or a shorter time to revive; it can be clearer, or more blurred and garbled, in its regrowth as a mass force in the working class. Nothing is predetermined here. A very great deal depends on what the socialists do.

Socialists today have a number of linked and urgent tasks. We must settle accounts with the past, and scour socialism of the encrustations and toxins of Stalinism and its mutant strains, including some that had superficial resemblances to Trotskyism. We must disinter and replant the living seeds buried so long in mud and blood. At the same time we must spread basic revolutionary socialist and even here-and-now-reform-socialist ideas in the existing working-class movement. To do this we publish *Workers' Liberty*.

It is a magazine with a number of complementary but not always congruent or easily integrated tasks — theoretical explana-

tion and elaboration, polemical hammering-out of disputed issues, republication of long-lost key texts from the past, reports on and analysis of current class struggle, an elaboration of the lessons of past class struggles and many other things. The central reason why we publish *Workers' Liberty* and why *Workers' Liberty* is irreplaceable to our work, was long ago expressed by Lenin: **without a revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.**

We are engaged in rebuilding that movement. Help us!

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READERS will notice that *Workers' Liberty* has been redesigned and, we hope you will agree, improved. We offer readers an apology for the rough edges in the physical production, and for the quality of the proofreading in *Workers' Liberty* no.33. We were short-handed and overstretched. We will try to do better! The increase to 48 pages will not yet, unfortunately, be a regular feature of *Workers' Liberty*, which is normally 40 pages. One proofreading error had political importance. In the introduction to Max Shachtman's discussion of Trotsky's ideas on the Stalinist USSR, a summary sentence (page 23) appeared garbled as: “Plainly Stalinism was a form to capitalism in backward countries”. It should have read: “Plainly Stalinism was a form of class society paralleling capitalism, not superseding it, in backward countries”.