

Northern Ireland: Anxiety over “peace process” following shootings of soldiers, police officer

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The media in the UK and Ireland has been filled with near apocalyptic warnings of the potential breakdown of the Northern Ireland “peace process”, which established power-sharing structures between Republican and Loyalist parties.

They came in response to the shooting of two British soldiers at their barracks in Antrim on Saturday evening. The soldiers were opened fire on by two masked men who used a pizza delivery to the barracks to make the attack. Another four men, including two pizza delivery workers, were injured. Late Monday, a police officer was shot and killed answering an emergency call in Craigavon, 26 miles southwest of Belfast.

The Real IRA claimed responsibility for the first attack and the Continuity IRA the second. Both groups are opposed to the power-sharing agreement. But while denouncing Sinn Féin and the IRA for “selling-out”, they offer nothing but a continuation of the bankrupt and reactionary perspective of trying to re-ignite sectarian hostilities as the basis for opposing Britain’s continued presence in the north.

Thus the RIRA defended the assault on the pizza delivery workers—one a 19-year-old local youth and the other a Polish immigrant—as a legitimate attack on British “collaborators”. CIRA used its killing of the police officer to threaten, “As long as there is British involvement in Ireland, these attacks will continue”.

That the assaults came as a shock is at one level unsurprising. Not only was the attack on the army barracks intended to be as high profile as possible, no British soldier or police officer has been killed in Ireland for more than a decade.

But that cannot account for the degree of nervousness over the fate of the entire Agreement now being expressed. RIRA has been marginalised since it was held responsible for the Omagh bombing in August 1998 that killed 29 people.

Widespread outrage over Omagh intensified support for the British, Irish and US-backed Good Friday Agreement which, it was claimed, would end such atrocities by incorporating Loyalist and Republican parties into the devolved assembly.

Today the various Republican splinter-groups opposed to the deal are said to number a few hundred core activists, and are subject to widespread surveillance and repression. A number of their leaders are imprisoned, and they are more often than not involved in confrontations with one another, rather than British forces.

Since the beginning of 2008, dissident groups have carried out 18 gun and bomb attacks,

with varying success. There have also been several attempted attacks on police officers. But the latest report from the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC), appointed by the British and Irish governments to report on paramilitary activities, stated that while RIRA had continued efforts to “enhance its organisational capability”, police “on both sides of the border have been successful in disrupting dissident operations and arresting suspects”. Its efforts to recruit had met with “limited success”.

Adding to the isolation of those opposed to the agreement is the partnership established between the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin. The DUP have made clear they will not use the latest attacks to undermine Sinn Féin, while Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams called on the public to help the police track down the perpetrators.

Still Social and Democratic Labour Party representative Dolores Kelly said the attacks had left Ireland “staring into the abyss”, while David Simpson, DUP, described it as a “deliberate and sustained effort...to try and drag Northern Ireland back to the worst days of Ulster’s past”.

The Irish Times opined that the shootings were “as much a danger to the quality of life on this island as the threatened collapse of the global economy. Make no mistake about it, any resumption of violence in Northern Ireland will cause inestimable damage to the peace process, prevent foreign investment and contribute to rising unemployment and falling living standards”.

Even before the shootings, warnings were being made by senior police chiefs of the dangers posed to the “peace process”. Less than 48 hours before the assault on the army barracks, Northern Ireland police chief, Sir Hugh Orde, announced he had requested the deployment of Britain’s undercover Armed Forces Special Reconnaissance Regiment (SRR) against dissident republican groups.

Formed four years ago with the remit of targeting international terrorism, the SRR has been used in Iraq and Afghanistan. It continues the tradition of Britain’s “dirty war” in Ireland, during which it bugged, spied and murdered its way through the north. The unit was also said to be involved in the shooting death of innocent Brazilian electrician, Jean Charles de Menezes, following the 7/7 bombings in London.

The deployment was denounced at the time by Sinn Féin’s Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness. “The history of the north has shown that many of these forces have been as much a danger to the community as any other group”, he said.

British commentators are subsequently crowing that McGuinness has had to eat his words.

At any rate, McGuinness’s complaint that the involvement of the SRR had bypassed the devolved assembly and the Policing Board is disingenuous.

Sinn Féin has fully signed up to the new Police Service of Northern Ireland. More specifically, it is a signatory to the October 2006 St. Andrews Agreement, orchestrated by the British and US governments, Annex E of which allowed for MI5 to take overall charge of national security in the north.

To date, fully 15 percent of MI5’s budget is committed to its activities in Northern Ireland, and in 2007 it opened its largest regional headquarters outside London in Belfast.

Why Orde chose to make such an announcement public is unclear. After all, the idea that British intelligence was not at work in the north until this time is hardly credible. And given that Orde claimed the SRR was made necessary by an increased threat from dissident groups, which had caused the terror threat to be raised from “substantial” to “severe”, why were British soldiers so unwary as to leave their barracks to collect a pizza delivery unarmed?

At the very least, McGuinness’s warning that the announced British crackdown on dissident republicans was “dangerous” has proven correct. Not least because it demonstrated that, 11 years since the Good Friday Agreement, British imperialism remains the real power in the north.

Sections of the British ruling elite are using the killings to demand that Sinn Fein go the extra mile, pledge its support to the British army and promise to fully participate in the type of law and order measures demanded to clamp down on dissent.

But this is bound up with broader concerns over the impact of the developing capitalist crisis on Northern Ireland.

As the World Socialist Web Site has consistently explained, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement had nothing to do with establishing genuine democratic control over the institutions of power in the north. Rather, it represented the drive of British and US imperialism, supported by the Irish government, to create a more stable environment for international capital and the transnational corporations by bringing Sinn Fein into government.

That is why the Irish Times’ first concern was the impact of the killings on international investment. It is also the perspective of all the major loyalist and republican parties, who agree that the north must be transformed into a low-tax investment platform, on a par with that in the south, if it is to be competitive.

It is the fragility of this economic programme under conditions of global recession that has intensified anxieties over the “peace process”.

The Irish Times went on to warn, “These are dangerous times. Public confidence in a better future will have been dented by the economic downturn, while unemployment and lack of opportunity may provide fertile recruiting circumstances for paramilitary elements on both sides”.

The southern Irish economy has been particularly hard hit by the global recession and is widely expected to be forced at some point to follow Iceland in declaring state bankruptcy. The UK economy is not far behind.

No longer able to trade off its “Celtic Tiger” partner, or to rely on its major UK markets, Northern Ireland faces economic meltdown. In December the Belfast Telegraph warned that pledged infrastructure projects are to be abandoned, while the north’s “inordinate dependency on public sector employment”—the UK government accounts for two-thirds of economic output and one-third of employment—made it “particularly vulnerable, when the inevitable cut-backs come”.

The collapse in the property market has seen house prices fall more steeply in the north than elsewhere in the UK, down by more than 34 percent last year. Large numbers of lay-

offs have followed in the construction industry, with the north reporting its largest monthly rise in claimants for almost 30 years. Six of the north's towns are among the top 10 UK district councils reporting the fastest increase in unemployment.

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