

Voting yes to what?

Anarchist Communist Federation

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Since Organise! 48 a considerable amount of troubled water has gone under the bridge in Ireland. Contrary to our expectations (see 'Is the 'peace process' collapsing' Spring 1998) the 'Agreement' was made, the 'people consulted' and the 'Yes' vote achieved according to schedule.

The 'Yes' vote was emphatic, over 71% in an 80.9% turn-out. The strength of the 'Yes' vote must have been a sickening blow for the 'No' camp of United Unionists (sic) and intransigent Republicans. The 'Yes' victory was no surprise however, as it had the support of the main players of Irish and British realpolitik, whose support and whose propaganda machines dwarfed the opposition. But the 'Yes' vote was so particularly high because the alternatives, as put forward by the Democratic and UK Unionists and the likes of Republican Sinn Fein, seemed to represent nothing so much as the status quo.

Not of course that the new set-up constitutes any fundamental break with the old order. This is accepted by Sinn Fein itself, as An Phoblacht/Republican News puts it "We do not have a political settlement and the only way in which we can advance towards that goal is by pursuing maximum political change. If things are to stand still, the Six-County state will remain frozen in time..." (AP/RN 28 May 1998). And this "maximum political change"? Removal of the British Army, disbanding of the RUC, ending of Orange marches in nationalist areas, Irish language rights, employment equality and "effective all-Ireland bodies" (ipid.) And the only way practical way to achieve this "maximum political change"? By voting Sinn Fein!

Sinn Fein's good showing in the 'New Stormont' elections on June 26th, where it received 17.65% of first preference votes and probably 17 seats, will temporarily keep the spirits of the Republican movement high but such a feel good factor will not last forever. The trouble will be when "maximum political change" is pursued through the corridors of power.

Reforming the Orange State

The Agreement is an attempt to do something which leftists have said for years is impossible, namely reform the Orange State. The agreement, if implemented, promises a kinder, gentler Unionist dominated state with new, improved Nationalist representation at all levels. Increased cross-border structures, including a North-South Ministerial Council, a British-Irish Council and a British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference will bring jobs for bureaucrats and pen-pushers both sides of a slowly blurring border. Irish Language road signs may be erected (rather than removed) overnight by the forces of the state and Ulster-Scots road signs will doubtless become popular amongst parts of the community. So the leftists were wrong, the Orange State is capable of reform after all.

Maximum political change

But, seriously folks. Let's look at Sinn Fein's agenda for "maximum political change" in the context of the Agreement.

Troops out? There is nothing in the Agreement to suggest that this is actually on the cards. Rather, it states,

"The British Government will make progress towards the objective of as early return as possible to normal security arrangements in Northern Ireland, consistent with the level of threat and with a published overall strategy" (The Agreement p.21, our emphasis). With the present

furor around IRA de-commissioning this progress may be very, very, slow indeed. There is no question of a staged withdrawal or even a rapid demilitarisation. And what exactly are “normal” security arrangements in Northern Ireland?

Disbanding of the RUC? Other than rhetoric about fairness and impartiality and freedom from “partisan political control”, there exists no suggestion whatsoever that the RUC will even be radically reformed, never mind disbanded! And at the head of any reform...Chris Patton, former Tory MP and Governor of Hong Kong!

The repressive power of the state remains undiminished. The securocrats, as Sinn Fein call them, are secure.

The simple fact is that mainstream Unionism has realised the inevitability of ‘change’ and mainstream Republicanism has accepted that that ‘change’ means opportunities for the partial realisation of its programme and for a taste of real political power. After having fought the Brits to a standstill it has accommodated to wider Imperialist realities. That’s not a moral failing, it’s an inevitability. The destruction of Imperialism, we argue, is only possible through the destruction of capitalism on a world scale.

Sinn Fein and the ‘working class’ Loyalist parties’ (PUP and UDP) involvement in ‘national’ government will expose them for what, despite the socialist rhetoric, they are. Capitalist to the core. Increasingly, working class people will be looking for an alternative.

British Left

The vast majority of the Leninist left has historically supported, critically or uncritically, the National Liberation struggle of the Irish Republican Movement. Unable to have any significant impact whatsoever on politics either side of the sea, sections of the British left looked to the republican movement for inspiration and to fight the good fight by proxy through the IRA. The developments in Ireland have meant that they have had to re-consider their positions. What remains to be seen is whether an authentic revolutionary alternative to Nationalism (Irish, British and Ulster) can be built. That is dependent upon the ability and will of the working class to fight for its own interests.

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