

It's still an Orange state

Gregor Kerr

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“Croppy lie down!” It could have been 1969, it could have been the early 1920s, in fact it was July 1996. The ‘twelfth week’ was upon us and the so-called peace process was exposed in a flurry of Orange bigotry, baton wielding thugs in uniform and hails of plastic bullets. As Trimble and Paisley jostled to see who would emerge as the most loud mouthed bigot, the British government quietly pulled the strings in the background and delivered a loud and clear message to all who cared to listen — “Northern Ireland is an Orange State”, they seemed to say, “it always has been so and will always remain so”.

The ‘Pan Nationalist Alliance’ fell to bits. John Bruton and Dick Spring, supposed defenders of the ‘nationalist community’, looked on in dismay as Gerry Adams called on them to stand up to the British. The SDLP were in a state of shock and disbelief as the mask covering the sectarian State they wished to ‘reform’ was pulled off to reveal it’s blatant un-reformability.

Meanwhile Bill Clinton called on “leaders to lead”, apparently unaware that this is exactly what Paisley and Trimble were doing — preparing to lead ‘their people’ in a triumphant procession to show who is the boss. (Inevitably, of course, media commentators described the escalating crisis as one where the North was “descending into anarchy” — why, oh why, can’t anarchists sue for defamation?)

It was all so depressingly familiar and — dare I say it — equally inevitable. Catholics forced out of their homes, the flames of bigotry fanned by ‘anti-Popery’ speeches (not that we have anything against slugging the Pope!), roads blocked and people, including at least one nurse on her way to a casualty unit, told where they could and (more often) couldn’t go.

In several areas Protestants also suffered intimidation and attacks on churches as gangs of Catholic thugs engaged in sectarian violence under the guise of ‘retaliation’.

Then there was ‘the fair hand of the law’. A police force with two decades experience in blocking access to republican funerals seemingly couldn’t prevent thousands of Orangemen coming and going around Drumcree church. The same force had no problem in battoning and battering the residents of the Garvaghy estate off their own road (for their own protection of course!).

The same force had no problem placing the lower Ormeau Road in Belfast under total curfew for 26 hours. The same force — ably backed by her majesty’s armed forces — had no problem discharging 6002 plastic bullets from Sunday July 7th to Monday morning July 15th (Irish Times 16/07/96), the huge majority of which were fired in nationalist areas!!

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Freedom to March?

We are anarchists. We believe passionately in freedom. We believe in the freedom of every individual to live his/her life as he/she sees fit. But this freedom is not unconditional. My freedom to swing a frying pan ends where your head begins! The limit to be placed on an individual’s freedom is that it doesn’t encroach on the freedom of another. We do not, for example, give fascists the freedom to spew out their filth or organise terror gangs. It is this freedom to encroach on the liberty of others that the Orange Order demanded at Drumcree.

They set out to be provocative, to insult and degrade another section of the population (as well as to keep ‘their own people’ under control by making sure that Protestants continue to line up behind their unionist bosses). In previous years, for example, chants of “five-nil” have gone up as Orangemen passed the Sean Graham Bookies shop where five Catholics were mown down in a vicious sectarian attack by the UFF. Earlier in the year a survey by Coopers and Lybrand showed that 94% of Garvaghy residents opposed the Orange march passing through their area.

The actions of the residents in opposing the march was that of a community getting together to defend their interests. The Orange Order’s claim that the route is “traditional” is almost equivalent to land owners in the Deep South of the USA claiming that slavery is a traditional work practice.

In residential areas where marches are both clearly unwelcome and deliberately provocative and insulting, we uphold the right of local people to oppose their passage. Of course there is absolutely no point in calling on the British government or the RUC to ban such marches. Such calls, in Northern Ireland, would clearly be futile and counter-productive. But the same goes anywhere. In Dublin, for example, we say that the only way for communities to tackle the heroin crisis is through their own actions rather than relying on either the Gardaí or the government.

The Sound of Silence

It would be naive, though, to expect communities like those in the Ormeau or Garvaghy Roads to stand up to and beat the combined forces of the state and Orange Order on their own. That is why one of the most depressing aspects of the July events was the deafening silence of the trade union movement. The unions should be to the fore in condemning discrimination and standing up for the rights of minorities.

Unfortunately, in the interests of not wishing to offend those workers who subscribe politically to unionism and not upsetting the powers that be, the Northern Ireland Committee of the ICTU

has always refused to take a stand against injustice in Northern Ireland. They even refused to condemn internment without trial in 1971. This time was no different.

Even when workers in the Moy Park Chicken factory in Craigavan were ordered off the job by masked men (no, not the Animal Liberation Front!) the union leaders remained silent. Experience shows there is no point in waiting for them to do anything, it is only rank & file action that can bring results. This is not to say that simply calling for such action will immediately bring it about.

If, as well as physically defending their areas, people under attack had been looking to their fellow workers in the unions rather than the Dublin government for help it might have been a start. It would have been a small first step towards seeing the most important division as being between rich and poor, rather than Catholic and Protestant. There is no point in looking to Orange or Green Tories for aid.

Certainly the past few weeks have shown that the 'Pan Nationalist Alliance' offers nothing. Nobody wants a return to war, so what's the alternative? We have to fight for workers' unity, not as an abstract lefty slogan but as a concrete reality. This isn't easy and may have to begin with the most tiny steps. So what? Every journey does!

A start could be made by calling for our unions to take a public stand against families being intimidated out of their homes. No self-respecting trade unionist could oppose such a call. Getting even limited action and demonstrations in support of this position could open up the possibility of raising other issues of sectarianism and discrimination. It may not appear to be much but unless a start is made to win workers from Orange and Green politics history will continue to repeat itself in cycles of sectarian violence and tragedy.

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