

# **Loyalism and the Protestant working class**

**Time to stop beating the Orange Drum**

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**THERE IS NOTHING in Irish politics about which more rubbish is spoken than the Protestant working class. Now that the loyalists have ceased their murder campaign more attention is being paid to them. Not only are a lot of mainstream politicians unsure what to make of loyalism, when they are not downright scared of it; but many on the 'left' are equally bamboozled. Taking a serious look at reality shows up an upsetting fact: sectarian bigotry is still strongly ingrained. That is why the Orange Order, Apprentice Boys, OUP, DUP, UVF, UDA and all the other loyalist organisations can, between them, claim the allegiance of the vast majority of northern Protestants.**

Loyalism is not primarily about loyalty to the British government or to the Queen. It has its own interests. That is why Carson's UVF could threaten rebellion against Britain when Home Rule was discussed. That is why the UDA can talk about breaking the link with Britain and having an independent Ulster.

Long before the partition of Ireland, landlords and industrialists of the north east had been using Orangism as a way to divide the plain people and thereby control them. When the Orange Order was founded in 1795 it was to protect the aristocracy from the revolutionary nationalists of the United Irishmen and to divide working people on religious grounds.

## **'PROTESTANT PRIVILEGE'**

Its function was to fool ordinary Protestants into thinking that they had a common cause with their 'betters'. Its basis was making the 'Croppies' or 'Fenians' (i.e. Catholics) lie down. Initially Protestant privilege had to do with getting the best land. More recently it has been about access to jobs, houses, and a sense of superiority. That this 'privilege' is very minor does not matter a lot. When you have little, the difference between you and the person with even less can assume an unreal importance.

The history of Protestant privilege in the North is not seriously denied by many people anymore. Nor is it seriously denied that this was official policy since the formation of the northern state in 1921. It was never a secret. Unionist prime ministers couldn't stop boasting about it.

"I have always said that I am an Orangeman first, and a politician and a member of this parliament afterwards...all I boast is that we have a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people" (Craigavon); "I recommend those people who are loyalists not to employ Roman Catholics... I want you to realise that you have got your Prime Minister behind you" (Brookeborough). Even the much lauded 'liberal' Terence O'Neill advertised for a "Protestant girl" to clean his house.

## **TERRORISM**

This policy of anti-Catholic bigotry was enforced by terror and murder. Sometimes it was carried out by official bodies (the RUC and the B Specials), sometimes by 'unofficial' murder gangs such as that led by RUC District Inspector Nixon in the 1920s. Today the main players are the Royal Irish Regiment (formerly the UDR), along with the UDA, UVF and Red Hand Commando.

In 1924 Prime Minister Craig introduced legislation to "indemnify all officers of the Crown against all actions or legal proceedings... (in relation to) any act, matter or thing done during the course of the present Troubles, if done in good faith, and done, or purported to be done in the execution of their duty or for the defence of Northern Ireland". In 1969 Terence O'Neill granted

an amnesty to the loyalist thugs (including off-duty RUC and B Specials) who attacked civil rights marchers at Burntollet Bridge. Today very few RUC or RIR members, no matter how bloody their deeds, ever see the inside of a prison cell.

This is now accepted as an established fact by practically everyone. What many do not want to accept is that Protestant privilege is still a reality in the North. Yet the official British government figures show that Catholic males are two and a half times more likely to be unemployed than Protestants. A study released last October by Professor Bob Rowthorn of Cambridge University found that 33% of Catholics aged 25 to 55 – the important wage earning years – are unemployed compared to 15% of Protestants. In December it was revealed that 60% of the long term unemployed were Catholics. While there is a very real increase in poverty among Protestants, it is still true that Catholics get an even worse deal.

Thus when loyalist workers talk about holding on to what they have, there are talking about something concrete. It is not merely about 'identity' or 'culture'. And where they feel they have lost something over the last twenty five years (like direct unionist control over the RUC and unrestricted power in local councils to allocate jobs and houses to 'loyal Protestants'), they want it back.

## **LOYALIST VALUES**

So let us face facts. Orange sectarianism is not without a material base, and it is not some sort of frightened reaction to militant republicanism. Unless we understand the basis for sectarianism we will not be able to uproot it.

When Protestant workers accept loyalist values they are joining an alliance with their bosses. They are saying that the religion they share with their employers is more important than the status of worker they share with men and women of another religion. The Orange Order has been the biggest body within which this alliance has been institutionalised.

This gives workers a sense of importance, a feeling that they are part of the 'superior' group in society. It also gives them a place near the front of the queue for whatever jobs may be going. It gives the rich a sense of security that the workers will be marching alongside them rather than against them.

Orange sectarianism has always played this role. It ties workers to the rich, and to the interests of the rich. At the same time it cuts off the possibility of those same workers linking up their Catholic counterparts. Again and again episodes of working class militancy were destroyed by appeals from Orange bosses to Orange workers to abandon the class conflict and 'defend Ulster'.

## **UNITY IN STRUGGLE**

These episodes of working class unity did not last long, but they did happen. They showed it is possible. They did not happen because of well meaning platitudes from clergy or liberals. They happened in the course of working class struggle.

The only times when the sectarian barriers were pushed aside, when large numbers of working class Protestants turned away from Orangism, was when they were involved in struggle against 'their' bosses and 'their' government. When they fight to better things for themselves and their families they are forced to break from their bosses and make common cause with other workers.

However when they fight only to better themselves as Protestants, they must turn their backs on other workers and make common cause with their bosses.

There have always been many Protestant workers who have not been fooled by sectarian hatemongering into turning against Catholics. These are the ones who have fought hard, and often at great risk, against the bigots on their jobs and in their unions. However they are in the minority.

## **GREEN NONSENSE**

Because of this most republicans write off Protestants as indefinitely stuck in a swamp of bigotry and hatred. This is not only irrational, it also reinforces backward looking Green nationalism. It should be obvious, especially to socialists and trade unionists, that working class people have more in common than they do separating them.

Anyone seriously interested in rooting out sectarian hatred and building working class unity must look at the times when people came together and the reasons their unity was not sustained.

In 1907 Protestant and Catholic dockers and carters (transport workers) fought together in a great strike which closed down much of Belfast. The mood this struggle generated even led to the police coming out on strike. The leading organiser was Jim Larkin, a man who was not exactly a hero to loyalism!

In 1919 40,000 engineering workers from jobs like the Harland & Wolff, Shorts and Mackies struck for a 48-hour week. While most of the strikers were Protestant, the majority on the strike committee were Catholic. Not only was the strike solid but the strikers fought together against British soldiers brought in to scab.

## **FALLS & SHANKILL FIGHT TOGETHER**

In 1932 thousands of unemployed fought together for better conditions on the 'outdoor relief' projects. The unemployed of the Falls and the Shankill rioted together against the police.

In 1944 25,000 shipyard workers became 'disloyal' when they defied the wartime anti-strike laws and struck for higher pay.

In 1982 thousands of Catholic and Protestant nurses, ambulance drivers, cleaners, porters and other health workers stood beside each other on picket lines against cutbacks and for a pay rise.

In almost every year since the early 1980s Catholic and Protestant struck together in the Health Boards, the DSS, the Housing Executive and other jobs against sectarian murder threats.

As well as these well-known incidents there have been hundreds of other smaller examples, all of which show the same thing — that Protestant workers have broken, at least temporarily, from Orange bigotry and linked up with Catholic workers to achieve better conditions for both.

## **SNUFFING OUT SECTARIANISM**

There is no denying that these episodes have been brief. But they demonstrate that unity is possible. Struggles against the bosses are the starting point from which anarchists work to snuff out the fires of sectarian hatred. Only class politics have ever successfully provided an alternative to loyalism.

These episodes have been brief because unity on 'bread & butter' issues has never extended into unity on broader political issues. Whenever the 'national question' was raised workers began to divide on religious lines. And that is why the bosses always raised it.

First it was 'Home Rule' and then 'the border'. Each time Protestant workers took fright and retreated back into loyalism. Republicanism contributed to this by insisting that there must be a united Ireland before class politics could take the stage. Workers unity on day-to-day issues holds no special importance for them. They either can't see, or won't see, that joining the Ireland of DeValera, Cosgrave or Reynolds is not going to fire the average Protestant with enthusiasm!

The trade unions are the only mass organisation of workers that spans the sectarian divide, that has not been broken down on religious lines. However the leadership of the unions has argued hard that to introduce the political issues of imperialism, partition and repression can not be allowed as it will divide the movement. This has meant that when divisions came to the fore these same leaders have had no answers, no way to combat the divisiveness that has been part and parcel of the six county state since its inception.

## **NOTHING TO SAY**

Throughout the troubles the ICTU Northern Ireland Committee has been opposed to anyone who has called for a struggle against the sectarian state. They say that is 'divisive'. The result has been that the official trade union movement has nothing to say when the likes of Paisley and company demand support for the status quo.

It is no surprise that workers who stood shoulder to shoulder a while ago are now viewing each other as enemies. They are not hearing anything that would suggest a different way of seeing things. Almost everyone tells them that their trade union unity has no political implications.

The only way to win Protestant workers away from the bigoted all-class alliance of loyalism is to build a movement which has its base in day-to-day struggles and which also explains why it is in the interest of all working class people to destroy the six county state. Alongside a fight against the 26 county state, a new Ireland- a Workers Republic — becomes a realistic possibility. Anything less adds to the painful division into Orange and Green.

A movement which fights only on economic issues can gather support from significant numbers of Protestants but when it comes into conflict with the Northern state will rip itself asunder and disappear. We need only look at how the Northern Ireland Labour Party, which was a major force in the 1960s, completely vanished in the 1970s when it could not cope with the realities of the civil rights campaign and the later troubles.

## **AN ANARCHIST ANSWER**

On the other hand a movement which opposes the sectarian state but does not base itself on the day-to-day needs of working class people will find it impossible to break out of the confines of the Catholic community. It will fail to make any contact with Protestants, even when they are fighting their own bosses. This has always been the case with republicanism.

Loyalism bases itself on handing out a few marginal privileges to Protestant workers. It is about who suffers slightly less poverty. All talk of a more 'just' redistribution of poverty must be rejected. Anarchists have no desire to take from someone who has little in order to give to

someone else who has even less. We won't be satisfied with anything less than the elimination of poverty.

Our goal is a socialist Ireland, where the freedom of the individual is respected and where the working class hold direct and complete control through their own councils. In the struggle for this loyalist workers can be won away from their bosses, and only then will the cycle of sectarianism be finally broken.

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