

Which Way Ireland?

An interview with Organise! about the Good Friday Agreement and the prospects for anarchism in Ireland

Solidarity Federation

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Organise! — Irish sister organisation to Solidarity Federation — have a membership which spans the sectarian divide, and which includes people from both the north and south. DA asked them to comment on Irish politics, the peace process, and prospects for the future.

about Organise! and Irish history

DA: Could you please briefly outline who Organise! is and give a brief history of your development?

ORGANISE!: Organise! are an Anarcho-Syndicalist propaganda group and the Irish section of the International Workers Association. Our history is closely related to that of our publication 'Organise! — The Voice of Anarcho-Syndicalism', which goes back to August 1986, when the first issue was produced by the now defunct Ballymena and Antrim Anarchist Group. In the Spring of 1992, 'Organise! Irish Anarchist Bulletin' appeared. This bulletin was produced by a more broadly based 'class struggle' anarchist group with members from across the north, including one of the members of the original Ballymena group. Over a period of time, discussion led to the re-adoption of Anarcho-Syndicalism and the name of the publication, which became a magazine in the autumn of 1995.

The survival of a small Anarcho-Syndicalist group over this period has been precarious. In the north, especially in periods of heightened sectarian tension, it often seemed that it was all we could do to hold onto our identity and small membership. However, we are now starting to grow as an organisation.

Members of Organise! are ordinary working class people who are spread across Ireland and who, in the north, come from both 'sides' of the community, who have come together to help create an alternative to the capitalist exploitation, sectarianism and oppression which is destroying the lives of working class people in Ireland.

We have been involved in various campaigns in the past few years, including the Campaign Against Nuclear Testing, the Liverpool Dockers and Families Support Group, Anti-Job Seekers Allowance work and opposition to the 'New Deal', as well as the important work we did in support of the Montupet strikers last year. Members of Organise! are also involved in struggles in their workplaces and communities, areas where we wish to increase our activity and bring the relevance of Anarcho-Syndicalism to bear on people's everyday lives.

In doing this, we continue to support strikers when and wherever we can. We also see the possibility of an opening for Anarcho-Syndicalist politics and methods developing in the increasing move towards wildcat action in workplace struggles. We need to do a lot more groundwork if we are to be in a position to be able to take advantage of these developments and are working in the meantime towards establishing ourselves as an effective alternative to the conservative Trade Union movement. This will be a long and hard process but, as a step in this direction, we are working toward the setting up of a solidarity centre in Belfast. Providing access to resources and information, a space where militant workers can meet to discuss and begin to set their own agendas, with solidarity and mutual aid as its cornerstones, are some of the things we would like to develop with the opening of a Local in Belfast. In a city which is divided along sectarian lines, it would also provide a neutral venue in which workers from different parts of the city could meet and begin to break down barriers. The main obstacle is of course finance, and we have sent out an international appeal to help raise much needed funds.

We are also working with other Anarchists throughout Ireland to promote our ideas and, although differences exist between different Anarchist groups across the country, we are working together to help build a broad libertarian movement in our country. Some effective steps were taken towards this at the recent 'Ideas and Action' conference hosted by the WSM in Dublin. A similar event is to be hosted by Organise! in Belfast next year.

DA: You recently joined the IWA; what made you join?

ORGANISE!: We, along with six other sections (from Portugal, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Russia, Chile, and Nigeria), affiliated to the International Workers Association at the 20th Congress in December 1996. At the time, we saw this as the natural next step for an Anarcho-Syndicalist organisation such as ourselves. The IWA, its aims, statutes and principles represented the ideological 'home' for Organise! on an international basis. As workers, we exist as a class across national boundaries and we must organise across these boundaries if we are to be effective in our struggle against capitalism. Although work at a local level – the building of an effective Anarcho-Syndicalist movement in Ireland, based in the realities of our situation both at work and in our communities – is our main concern, the international bond of solidarity that is the IWA is of great importance to us. We also believe that it is the work on the ground, the building of strong Anarcho-Syndicalist sections across the globe, that will lead to the IWA becoming a more powerful and effective international.

DA: Syndicalism has roots in Ireland which go back a long way. Can you briefly outline some of the major milestones?

ORGANISE!: While Anarchism has little history or tradition in Ireland beyond the last couple of decades, Syndicalism has had a sometimes pivotal influence on the development of the working class movement. Most significantly are the Syndicalist influences which were at work in the early ITGWU (Irish Transport and General Workers' Union), set up at a period in which revolutionary and Anarcho-Syndicalism were to the fore of the revolutionary labour movement. Although there was no self professed 'Syndicalist' organisation, the ITGWU borrowed much of its organisational strategy and ideological vision from the American IWW (Industrial Workers of the World). The union regarded itself as the Irish One Big Union, organised by industry and had a, perhaps somewhat vague, vision of the 'Industrial Commonwealth' as an alternative to capitalism.

Connolly and Larkin's visions and methods were greatly influenced by Syndicalism. Connolly had been active in the IWW during his years in the USA; Larkin spoke at the funeral of IWW organiser Joe Hill.

It is also important to note that many Irish workers became involved in revolutionary or Anarcho-Syndicalist unions outside Ireland. Capt. Jack White, who trained the Irish Citizen Army (the militia formed in 1913 to defend the Irish labour movement and made up of members of the ITGWU), went to Spain with the International Brigades to fight fascism. In Spain, he was much impressed with the work of the CNT and the Anarchist militias, so much so that he became an Anarchist and left the International Brigades to both train members of the militias in the use of arms and raise money for arms for the CNT abroad.

the peace process

DA: While the politicians are now lining up to pat themselves on the back over the peace talks, what about the general mood among the people of the north – are they optimistic, cynical or confused?

ORGANISE!: People are generally hopeful that there can be a better future created for themselves, their children and their grandchildren in the north. This was shown in the exceptionally high turnout for the referenda. There is also a certain amount of uncertainty, many are uneasy about various aspects of the Agreement, and there are of course those who are intent on wrecking any possibility of ‘stability’ (in relation to sectarian politics) in the north. There is also a cynicism about the ability of the sectarian politicians to deliver, about the intentions of gunmen, and those of government on demilitarization. Different considerations weigh differently for different people.

It must be pointed out that while 71% voted yes for the ‘Agreement’, there is precious little agreement in our places of work, as the recent wildcat action in NIR (Northern Ireland Railways) in the north and throughout the health board in the south has shown. The result, in terms of the wishes of the majority of people in the north, must be seen as a desire for change.

DA: How far is it possible for Organise! to have an impact, given that people must be generally cynical about politics, especially in the north?

ORGANISE!: People may well be cynical of the politicians’ ability to deliver some semblance of peace, but it must also be remembered that politics here goes far deeper than casting a vote every few years for many people. The ‘constitutional question’ is still a big consideration, and a lot of the ‘political mindset’ is conservative and communal on both sides. It is the sectarian nature of our politics which, more than cynicism, makes our job all the harder.

How far we have an impact cannot be blamed on other people’s cynicism, it is more related to our small size and limited resources. We need to start the slow process of building a credible alternative. As this develops, and is seen to be gaining at least some results, then we will start to make an impact.

DA: Would you like to guess how the public is likely to view developments in the peace process? How might it affect the communities in the longer term?

ORGANISE!: We cannot really predict what reactions to developments in the peace process will be, simply because we are not sure what those developments will be. Sectarianism has not been eradicated, and the marching season is going to see an escalation in sectarian tensions and clashes. An amount of goodwill may help steer it clear of the more major incidents of the past but this doesn’t really appear to be a realistic aspiration.

In the longer term, we may indeed see the breaking down of some of the sectarian barriers in our society. This may initially be seen through the emergence of a reformist labour party in the north, coupled with co-operation between working class loyalist and republican parties on issues such as education, jobs and housing – nothing too radical though. But really it is too early to say and things are still far too delicate for any speculation to be more than a shot in the dark.

DA: How do Organise! members in the south feel the process is viewed by working class people there?

ORGANISE!: In the south 94.4%, in a turnout of 56%, voted in favour of the ‘Agreement’. This shows a sentiment in the south that there should be ‘peace’ in the north. It is perhaps a

sentiment which was largely driven by media and politicians with little real consideration of the politics or parties involved.

The south is not the nationalist place it once was. As long as the RUC isn't beating shit out of Catholics on the TV, or the Provo's blowing up English children, most people are happy. The peace process is viewed as an extremely positive development. Only the 'extremist' minorities — the republicans and the pro-unionist 'West Brits' — are very concerned with events north of the border. For the majority, apart from the occasional emotional outburst of 'give peace a chance' or 'a nation once again', we have our own problems to be concerned with. As with the working class people of England, Scotland and Wales (or elsewhere), 'its got little to do with us' is the prevailing sentiment — and hope for 'peace'.

DA: Is 'The Agreement' likely to work? How far do you support it? What would you like to see come out of the current process?

ORGANISE!: This Summers 'Marching Season' will be the first big test of the 'Agreement', and one which will make or break it. Whether or not it works depends largely on the political will present to make it work coupled with the degree to which people are prepared to compromise. The 'Agreement' does not go any way towards dealing with sectarianism as this would undermine the respective power bases of the parties who will make up the Assembly. It may well work after a fashion, so long as the 'No' men are further marginalised by events and are not allowed to destabilise the entire process.

The degree of support for the 'Agreement' as a social democratic, or rather a sectarian political initiative has not been uncontroversial for Organise! The 'Agreement' does after all institutionalise sectarianism; it is about choosing the form of government which will have an active role in the oppression of working class people well into the next century. Anarchists from the Workers Solidarity Movement adopted an abstentionist position on the referenda; it is a position which some members of Organise! support. Other members of Organise!, like many working class people, voted yes to the 'Agreement', not because they in any way support sectarianism, or want anything to do with choosing the form of government which oppresses us, but because of a simple desire to see the guns removed from the sectarian politics in the north.

Sectarian politicians agreeing a format in which to argue is better than the prospect of continued or worsening sectarian violence being counted in the lives, maiming and imprisonment of working class people.

Organise! has in the past criticised the British government for not moving on the issue of prisoners, both Loyalist and Republican; it was clear that only with the release of political prisoners could there be any hope of the cease-fires being maintained. That remains our position, no matter how emotive the issue, there could have been no progress whatsoever without at least the beginning of a process of release. We have also pointed to the issue of decommissioning, used as a stick to beat the 'representatives' of, or those with an 'insight into the thinking of', paramilitaries, and have stated that any decommissioning can only be practicable within the context of a complete demilitarization of the situation — that means security force's guns must be included.

These positions have been based on the desire to see guns taken out of sectarian politics — this is the most that can be expected from the 'Agreement'. Social issues, the position of workers and the unemployed at the bottom of society, etc., will not and cannot be tackled through this agreement — but surely at least a vast reduction in sectarian violence must be welcomed. Beyond this, we may also see the development of an atmosphere in which anti-sectarian working class politics may be given some room to develop.

It must be remembered that those opposed to the 'Agreement' had precious little to offer. The likely outcome of a successful No campaign would have seen a continuation of direct Westminster rule with Dublin involvement. This is a set up which neither people nor the political and/or paramilitary players in the north would have been happy with.

'No' campaigners on the Republican/Nationalist side see the Agreement as a sell-out. They are called on people to vote no and, as one poster puts it, 'Smash British rule'. This is a sentiment with which Anarchists (if we couple it with the smashing of Irish rule) should have very little problem, except when we look at it in the harsh reality of the north. This is a call to continue the war, one which quite conveniently fails to address the fact that nearly one million people who live in the north consider themselves British.

As for the Unionist No campaigners, they also talk the language of continued confrontation and aggression. They claim to see the agreement as undermining the union, but what these people really want is a military solution all of their own. Paisley and McCartney will only be happy when the British state moves to 'eradicate' republican terrorism. Of course, any such move would only lead to an escalation of the conflict, not an end. Their views on loyalist terrorism are of course more ambivalent. The DUP claim to be 'embarrassed' by the LVF claiming to be 'Paisleyites' – strange when they supported Billy Wright in his early days, and have shared platforms on various occasions.

There are also those on the left who called for a No vote. These people preach about how the Assembly will not end sectarianism – anyone who ever thought an agreement reached by sectarian politicians could achieve this has precious little grip on reality. We are told that sectarian violence will not disappear, and the CIRA, INLA, LVF and 'Real' IRA are pointed to, often almost with relish, as proof of this. Recently, the LVF declared a cease-fire to allow people the opportunity to vote no. As to whether they return to violence after the referendum, they claim they will respect the decision of the majority of people in northern Ireland but want history to know that they were never a part of the 'sell-out'.

How long the other 'dissident' paramilitaries can continue their campaigns after a 'Yes' vote is far from clear. The longer the cease-fires remain, the less support there is for sectarian warfare, and pressure may also be brought to bear from former 'comrades in arms'.

Of course, if the Assembly was to fall apart at any point, if it proved unworkable, paramilitary violence could well return with a vengeance to fill the political vacuum. This is not something to be looked forward to.

It must also be pointed out that socialism at present is not an alternative to the Agreement, nor is Anarcho-Syndicalism. We are not in the position to carry out a social revolution, we must deal with the situation honestly, while trying to build the type of organisation which can one day offer a REAL alternative to working class people throughout Ireland and Britain.

DA: The Protestant communities appear pretty split – or is it just the political parties? What is the root of the split and how may it develop?

ORGANISE!: The 'Protestant community' has always been much more diverse than many people have given it credit for. This is becoming more apparent as the working class loyalist parties give expression to ideas and aspirations outside the traditional concerns of the Unionist establishment, and distinct from the pseudo-religious rantings of the Free Presbyterian 'Paisleyites'.

There have been many 'splits' in the 'Protestant community'. The 'conservative force' loyalism of the LVF opposed the 'leftward' trends of the PUP and 'Belfast based' UVF leadership to

continue a sectarian murder campaign. The split in the Unionist Party prior to the referendum over the form of the 'Agreement' was, to a large extent, indicative of a 'split' in the 'Protestant community' or, to use a more accurate term, 'grass roots Unionism'.

'No' campaigners on the unionist side ludicrously claimed that the 28.88% no vote represented the 'majority of pro-union people', as the hours after the referendum went by, their assertions increasingly looked like blind desperation. It is estimated that a narrow majority of the unionists who voted, voted yes -around 55% according to one poll.

That is not to say that all the unionist no voters were rabid Paisleyites, there was a great deal of concern about the issue of prisoner release, 'terrorists' entering government, law and order and 'democracy', the undermining of the RUC, etc. As to the idea of an Assembly restoring 'democracy' to the north, there is precious little opposition to this. The majority of unionist no voters felt they could not vote Yes to the package in its entirety. The danger that the 'No' parties, the DUP and the UKUP, could present in the future is to successfully discredit the entire 'Agreement' in the hope of chipping away at the confidence of those who had expressed a will for change. Of course they are past masters at this sort of thing – and the rabble rousing which goes hand in hand with it.

The difference now lies in the commitment of a great many unionists to making things work and the emergence of the working class loyalist parties. They do not appear in a hurry to allow some dissident Unionist Party members, the DUP, or McCartney's UKUP to plunge them back into a conflict in which they have the experience of going to jail, of killing and being killed, while middle class unionists shit-stir, remaining cosily out of harms way. The loyalists do not look likely to act as stooges for what it is to be hoped are the representatives of 'has been' unionism.

DA: The IRA and various strands of republicanism have apparently moved a long way in the talks process – why? What do they expect to gain?

ORGANISE!: There are of course those on the republican side, and many on the left, who see Sinn Fein's position as one of 'sell out'. To those who cannot contemplate compromise there may be something in this, but not much. Sinn Fein's recent political career started during the Hunger Strikes, which saw them adopting an electoral strategy. In the north, they failed to make any real inroads into the SDLP vote, while in the south they were effectively marginalised as a 'single issue' Brits out party. At the same time, we saw the defeat of various 'third world' national liberation movements and the collapse of the Berlin wall heralding the end of 'communism' in the east. This created a different international scene to that of '68 – '72, when the Provo's arose.

The subsequent development of Sinn Fein, and its pan-nationalist strategy, went hand in hand with a growing recognition that the 'long war' was not working. The armed campaign was not going to get any better. It must also be remembered that the strategy of the 'long war of attrition', which was designed to sap the British government's will to stay was to have negotiations as its natural outcome. There could be no military 'solution'. It is also true that they could not be defeated militarily by the British state, at least not without hugely escalating the conflict. The only option presented in the face of this was negotiations and ultimately a place in the 'talks process', which has led us to where we are today.

They have not moved that far, they have simply dropped all the pseudo-radicalism and socialist pretensions. No more talk of neo-colonialism, economic imperialism or American imperialism, no more vilification of the Dublin establishment. Sinn Fein are on the verge of 'respectability' and international statesmanship, in bed with the multinationals and southern politicians. Sinn

Fein are still an Irish Nationalist party, only its means have changed, and it has thrown out some of the old socialist baggage in order to better pursue its political intrigues.

It is very important to remember that Sinn Fein's role in the peace process is completely leadership driven — they run the show lock, stock and barrel, and are almost worshipped by the rank and file. A huge cult of personality has arisen around the travelling salesmen of the 'Agreement', such as Adams. Ironically, or perhaps inevitably, this is in stark contrast to one of the arguments for the development of Sinn Fein in the early '80s, i.e., the need to overcome 'spectator politics', whereby the average republican's involvement was to hear of IRA activity through the media and cheer.

As to what they expect to gain, they have been promised demilitarization at some point in the future, release of prisoners, some form of policing reform, cross border bodies dealing with such things as 'welfare' fraud and fisheries, and that most important of considerations for politicians; power in the new Assembly, along with a commitment from the British government to withdraw when the majority want it. All of these concessions are dependant on stability and unionist acquiescence. One would imagine they hoped for more, but their lack of real success in the peace process points out the abject failure of armed struggle and the simple reality of a well-armed unionist majority in the north.

While many still see the problem solely in terms of British occupation and jurisdiction, others recognise that they cannot 'force' these people into a united Ireland, that it is unlikely that Sinn Fein will ever convince them that a united Ireland is in their interests, and they want to see the British government itself become the persuaders of unionism.

There is a belief that as the nationalist vote and Sinn Fein's share of it gradually increases, and as cross border links are strengthened, we will find ourselves with a nationalist majority and only a few adjustments will be necessary in order to unite Ireland. Realistically, if they ever want to achieve a united Ireland within the framework of the 'Agreement', it will be about 'demographics', about substituting the 'long wait' for the 'long war', or the papes outbreeding the prods — not particularly progressive. Nor realistic

DA: What is in the peace process for the British and Irish governments?

ORGANISE!: Stability is their main concern, that and the possibility of investment, which will be of benefit to both economies. The Irish government would also be quite happy for prospective German or American tourists not to hear the word Ireland linked with the word violence. The leadership of Fianna Fail also have the nationalistic sentiments of their grass roots to contend with, so on occasion it suits them to give the appearance of wrapping themselves in a (light) green flag.

On the British side, it must be noted that it is hardly coincidental that the opening of secret communications with the republican movement in 1990 followed the onset of the Provo's bombing offensive in England. This undoubtedly pushed 'Northern Ireland' much higher up the British government's agenda.

The appeal of playing 'saviour' (one which seems particularly close to Tony Blair's heart) and international statesman should not be underestimated. This can distract attention from domestic politics and win votes.

conclusion – the future

DA: Where do you see Organise! being in terms of developing an Anarcho-Syndicalist movement in Ireland in 2 years, in 5 years, and beyond?

ORGANISE!: 'Our' politicians may well have come to some sort of 'Agreement' on Good Friday, one which may even lead to a very welcome reduction in paramilitary violence, but for the North's working class, 'unity' seems as elusive as ever. The goal of a united Ireland or maintaining the union with Britain are of course nothing to do with the sort of unity we are talking about in Organise!

Our communities are still sectarian ghettos and, with perhaps the most segregated education system in the world, how can we ever hope to break down barriers of mistrust, bitterness and suspicion?

The one hope for our future, for the future development of Anarcho-Syndicalism in Ireland, surely lies in the fostering and development of 'workers unity'. We must draw lessons and inspiration from the united struggles of the Montupet strikers, of DSS workers opposing LVF and INLA death threats, of the railway workers of NIR and of southern healthworkers using 'wildcat' action to make an effective stand for our rights. This is not something which can be demanded or called upon by placard waving lefties, it is something which must be built. It is built in very concrete ways around the common problems workers face at their workplaces and in their communities. It is something which occurs naturally when workers as workers are faced with a new attack from their bosses, it is built around the response to 'bread and butter' issues.

Such a task is never easy – why do you think it is called class struggle? It is because it is exactly that, a struggle which must be fought long and hard for and must be won.

We have no rigid 2 or 5 year plans, but we do have short and medium term goals which we are striving to achieve. These are aimed at making our ideas and activity relevant to the realities of working class life in Ireland. More than anything else, it is about putting in the effort and hard work which, when people are more ready for real change, will stand us in good stead as a credible, revolutionary alternative to the bosses, and the nationalist and sectarian crap workers here have had to endure for too long.

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