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Neither Orange nor Green

Thinking about Anarchism

Workers Solidarity Movement

1995

While welcoming the ceasefire we don't expect the "peace process" to lead to much. Sinn Féin's politics offer little more to Northern workers, as a class, than the politics of the fringe loyalist groups. Both aspire to getting a better deal for the poor and oppressed in their communities but neither are capable of delivering, as they are limited to rhetorical appeals to the workers of the other side to "see sense". Neither can offer a way forward because neither can unite workers across the sectarian divide in a common struggle.

Anarchism, at the moment, is a very much smaller force in Ireland than even the fringe loyalist groups, but it does offer a way forward. We argue for working class self-activity that appeals not to politicians or priests as allies but to workers everywhere, in Ireland, in Britain and internationally. But this unity cannot be based on just 'bread and butter issues'. In the past Catholic and Protestant workers have united in common fights to get more from the bosses. The largest and better known examples of this are

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- 1919 Engineering strike when the mostly Protestant workforce of Harland and Wolff elected a strike committee that happened to be mostly Catholic.
- 1932 Outdoor Relief strike when the unemployed of the Falls and the Shankill rioted in support of each other, and against the police.

Both these were broken by the unionist bosses convincing Protestant workers that it was all a 'Fenian' trick and that their real interests lay in loyalism. Look at the poverty figures for the Shankill road today and you can see who was really tricking who. But the bosses' trick worked and economic unity crumbled, to be replaced by a vicious pogrom and the expulsion of Catholics and left-wing Protestants from the shipyards in 1919 and sectarian rioting in 1933.

For this reason, the idea we can wish the division of the working class in the north away by simply talking about wages and living conditions is a fantasy. More recently there has been unity in support of the nurses' pay claim, against health service cuts and against sectarian intimidation in Housing Executive and Dept. of Social Security offices. All of these instances are heartening. Unfortunately little permanent unity has been built upon these successes because of a failure to confront 'communal politics'.

Protestant workers have to reject loyalism and unionism as ruling class ideologies. They have to see their allies as being workers who happen to be Catholic, north and south, and their enemies as the loyalist bosses and the British state. This is no easy break to make but the big benefit of the ceasefire is that it is now easier than it was a year ago.

Catholic workers have a similar break to make. The politics of both the SDLP and Sinn Féin are essentially about extending the southern state northwards. This would have the benefit of ending rule by sectarian bigots (although the southern Gardaí are no more keen on the working class than their northern

counterparts) but that's about it. Many workers in the South have spent a good part of the last decade fighting the power of the Catholic church, from its influence on the legal system to its covering up of child abusing priests and enslavement of unmarried mothers in the Magdalen laundries.

Apart from that, the recent Dunnes Stores strike demonstrates that the gobshite Southern bosses are every bit as mean as their northern equivalents. It also demonstrates they can be beaten, if workers stand together.

Workers' unity against the bosses is required but the form that unity takes is also vital. The unity must be political as well as economic. The RUC, the border, clerical control of schools and hospitals, and laws restricting divorce, gay sex and access to abortion all need to be opposed.

We cannot rely on a few "good men" to sort out the situation for us. That is the mistake most of the socialist movement made this century and is the reason why we had 'socialist' dictatorships like the USSR and China on the one hand, and 'socialist' sell-outs like the Labour Party or Democratic Left on the other. There is, however, a different current in socialism, based not on good leaders but on the self-organisation of the working class.

This self-organisation is what anarchism is all about. We don't believe the way forward lies in finding the right leader, whether it's Gerry Adams, Tony Blair or Lenin. Instead we see the way forward lying with ordinary people; taking control of our lives into our own hands, coming together and starting to fight back. The role of anarchists is not to assume the leadership of such a process but to argue for self-activity, encourage it and seek to encourage those fighting back to unite in an overall struggle against capitalism and for a new society.

And that's where you come in. Unlike other left papers, we won't end every article by telling you the only way forward is to join the party. What we do say is find out more about anarchism and look at ways of encouraging self-activity in the struggles you are involved in. If you decide you like what we

say then please do get in touch and help us in saying (and doing) it. Above all recognise that the answer is not getting 'our' leaders into talks but in taking back control ourselves.