



Northern Ireland Conference 2018

Tackling the Crisis, the Power of a United Working Class

As we gather here for our Northern Conference in March 2018 we have almost reached the 20th anniversary of the signing of Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. There has been no functioning Executive or Assembly in Northern Ireland for well over a year. MLAs have continued to collect their salaries, their pension contributions are now secure, yet vital services are threatened because it is impossible to make ministerial decisions in the absence of ministers and protracted negotiations between Sinn Fein and the DUP find ever novel and inventive reasons as to why a devolved administration cannot be restored.

In their Declaration of Support for the Agreement reached at the Multi-Party negotiations in Belfast on 10th April 1998 the participants recorded their belief that the Agreement negotiated offered “a truly historic opportunity for a new beginning”.

This reflected a popular belief at the time. 71 percent of voters in Northern Ireland, 95 percent of voters in the South and 80 percent of the voters throughout the island endorsed that view. Some perceived the Agreement as the consolidation of old certainties – whether a step towards eventual unification or copper fastening partition – but for many others it was a risk for peace and a better life to come.

The Agreement offered new possibilities. It was undoubtedly a momentous advance. After thirty years of miserable sectarian terror the participants in the major sectarian blocs began to establish the basis for a settlement within which nationalists and unionists could reach some form of accommodation without relinquishing, in practice, their respective long-term constitutional ambitions. Of course, not everyone agreed. Nationalist irredentism and unionist extremism combined in opposition to the Agreement. The people, however, said “yes” to the Agreement.

It might be useful to remind ourselves of the wording of the Agreement itself:

“The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all.”

It was a time of hope. The Agreement offered the prospect of peace, agreed democratic political structures, cultural and religious tolerance, equality and civil and political rights. It placed power in the hands of a devolved administration, provided local people with the chance to elect representatives to an Assembly in Northern Ireland which was inclusive in its membership and capable of exercising executive and legislative authority.

The Agreement provided for the establishment of a consultative Civic Forum comprising representatives of the business, trade union and voluntary sectors to act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues.

The parties to the talks affirmed their commitment to the mutual respect, the civil rights and the religious liberties of everyone in Northern Ireland. A new Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, independent of Government was established together with a new statutory Equality Commission. The Irish Government also undertook to take comparable steps to strengthen the protection of human rights in its jurisdiction. The parties also expressed the belief that it was essential to acknowledge and address the suffering of the victims of violence.

The Agreement also provided assurances on economic, social and cultural issues. It spoke of a new regional and economic development strategy for Northern Ireland which would address the problems of a divided society and “social cohesion” in urban, rural and border areas and which would provide for economic planning. It proposed progress in measures on employment equality and combating unemployment.

The Agreement provided for procedures for the validation, implementation and review of the institutions and their operations. Two years later and the arrangements were suspended. Throughout its short history devolved government under the Agreement has operated in fits and starts and now, again, it doesn't function at all.

In May 1998 the Central Executive Committee of the Workers Party met to consider the Agreement. This was in the context of a long campaign by the Party for devolved government. The Party recognised the limitations of the Agreement and expressly noted that it failed to reflect many of the concerns raised by the Workers' Party over the previous 30 years. However, the Party welcomed the Agreement as a realisation of the hopes of the people of Northern Ireland and as an opportunity to advance the long-standing and consistent Workers' Party demand for devolution and the Party's programme of Anti-Sectarianism, Peace, Work, Democracy and Class Politics.

Accordingly, in the interests of securing a permanent peace and continuing democratisation and reform in Northern Ireland, together with the possibilities such an environment might create to unite workers around a common programme for socialist politics, the Workers' Party called for the mobilisation of democratic and progressive opinion in support of a "Yes" vote.

The primary limitation to which the Party referred and which has consistently and prophetically come home to roost was the institutionalisation of sectarianism within the spirit, content and structures of the Agreement. At their first meeting, members of the Assembly were required to register a "designation of identity – nationalist, unionist or other". Quite apart from the unseemly debacle in which members of the Assembly sought to re-designate, exposing the ludicrous nature of the requirement, it further underscored the fact that in terms of the governance of Northern Ireland the status of "other" counted for naught. The Agreement, its institutions, structures and architecture together with the future of the working class remained firmly in the hands of the all-class unionist and nationalist blocs.

The problems and difficulties experienced in the implementation of the Agreement stem from this central weakness. In attempting to address the divisions in Northern Ireland society the Agreement placed division at the heart of the Agreement, based and grounded its structures on sectarian division and failed to provide a mechanism for dealing with the deadly disease of sectarianism. Instead of tackling the issue of sectarian division the very institutions of government are based on that division.

An Agreement constructed on the faulty foundations of sectarian division; an institutional framework which incorporates sectarianism at its core and an Assembly and Executive which effectively manages sectarianism, rather than seeking to eradicate it, will not and cannot deliver for the working class and the process becomes a recipe for competing and conflicting communal interests, continuing division and open sectarian conflict.

The vast majority of the members of the Assembly are elected to that body on the basis of a sectarian headcount and are dependent on the continuation of sectarian politics. It is not in their interests to fundamentally challenge the nature of sectarianism, much less effect a transformation of sectarian politics. The pious hand-wringing of the sectarian politicians over street violence means little when the public perception of those same politicians and their much publicised petty squabbling and point scoring against the perceived traditional enemy consolidates and endorses the dubious and discreditable concept of the so-called “two communities”.

For as long as devolved government is regarded as a zero sum game in which whatever is gained by one side is irredeemably lost by the other, the battle continues in a different guise. Unreconstructed sectarian beliefs, practices and instincts persist and prevail whether reflected in tribal street violence or sterile debates on contentious issues fanned and inflamed by poisonous rhetoric.

There has been no effort to create and develop an understanding of citizenship, to cultivate and promote that which we have in common rather than that which divides. The concept of the Civic Forum which promised much and which had the potential to involve the broader community in the process has been effectively side-lined.

The refusal of the unionist and nationalists to keep the focus on the big picture – the creation of a new Northern Ireland - and their decision to pander to the lowest common denominator within their own constituencies robbed the Agreement of what was advanced as its essential political underpinnings which marked it out as a new departure, the so-called historic compromise.

It is a matter of great concern to us that there has been a palpable erosion of popular enthusiasm and support for devolution. It is important to make one point crystal clear. The Workers’ Party, despite its assessment of the current political crisis and its causes, rejects any suggestion of a return to direct rule. We fought hard for devolution and devolved government remains the best hope for peace and progress in Northern Ireland.

The Agreement also declared that a Bill of Rights should form part of a lasting settlement. The demand for a Bill of Rights was also a long-standing demand of the Workers Party. Almost 50 years after the inception of NICRA and 20 years after the Agreement despite all the talk of a Bill of Rights it remains just that, talk.

It is not possible in the course of this contribution to rehearse the detailed proposals for a Bill of Rights put forward by this Party over the decades.

The Workers' Party's attachment to the concept of a Bill of Rights is not based on sentiment or on some abstract philosophical position. We believe that the purpose of a Bill of Rights is to establish and guarantee the relationship between citizens and the state. We believe that a Bill of Rights must perform as the guarantor of the civil liberties of all citizens and their political rights. Such a Bill must enshrine fundamental principles constituting a clear statement about the nature of any political institutions established and operated in Northern Ireland.

To that end a Bill of Rights must provide a positive statement of the rights which each citizen can expect and demand of the state and it must provide the means whereby those rights will be protected and enforced if they are infringed.

The Workers' Party believes that a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland should contain a statement that everyone in Northern Ireland is equal before the law and has equal rights. The Workers' Party does not accept the Government's concern that the expansion of protected groups would weaken the effect of existing protections by allegedly diluting the focus on the section 75 "closed list" of protected groups. We support the expansion of protected categories and the recommendation that the duty of public authorities to have regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity should be extended to other groups, the disabled and older people.

There have been attempts, more recently, to incorporate the concept of "both main communities" into the discourse and into the content of a Bill of Rights. The Workers Party explicitly rejects such attempts. This language consolidates and promotes sectarian division and to place such a concept at the heart of Bill of Rights diminishes the concept of citizenship on which rights should be based and further embeds and institutionalises sectarian division.

Sectarianism runs deep though public and private life in Northern Ireland. It is institutionalised in the apparatus of government. It can only be tackled by a comprehensive campaign against sectarianism on all fronts. A Bill of Rights which is based on a concept of equal citizenship must emphasise the struggle to end sectarianism.

The Workers' Party believes that there is one community in Northern Ireland, fractured and divided by sectarianism. Our ideology is founded on the politics of class. We subscribe to the creation of a working class, united and indivisible, which has sufficient power and political class consciousness to transform the society in which we live.

Every step or action that encourages, incites or promotes division is an obstacle to building a united working class and a gain for the politics of division. The politics and culture of division lacks a programme for social and political transformation. It reinforces the existing social and economic order, especially in its class relations.

Northern Ireland has the experience of power remaining in the hands of one political group for the greater part of the life of the state. This experience and the subsequent period of direct rule witnessed the abuse of political power and the violation of civil and political rights. It is not sufficient for the people of Northern Ireland to remain dependent on the goodwill of the government of the day. Fundamental civil rights should be clearly formulated, unambiguous and should not be conditional upon the whim of the State.

The Workers' Party believes in a society where citizens are free to practise their religious beliefs subject to respect for the rights of others, to change their religious affiliation or to choose not to hold any religious belief. No church or religious belief should be endorsed or conferred with any special rights or privileged position by the state. Politicians, elected to public office, should not use that office to endorse or express religious views or preferences in the course of their public duties. The Workers' Party demands complete separation between church and state and by that we mean there is no place for a special position of any church, denomination or religious belief in the public life or institutions of the state. This must be stated explicitly in a Bill of Rights.

The Workers' Party is committed to the primacy of a secular democratic society based on principles of equality and justice and supports the need to defend the state against all those who seek privileges and special treatment on the grounds of their religious belief, whatever that belief.

The Workers' Party believes that it is the duty of the state to create public institutions and spaces which are religiously neutral and this includes schools, hospitals and places of work. Faith based schools, of whatever religion, serve to divide young people and foster difference. Children should be educated through and in a properly integrated system of education. The state should abolish religious instruction in schools and ensure that school courses are taught free from the influence of particular religious beliefs.

A Bill of Rights must also address the rights of women and, in particular, family planning and reproductive rights and the right of women to full and equal participation in political decision-making and public life. It must address the rights of workers and encompass core international standards of trade union rights. Workers must have the right to organise, to freely establish their own governance and rules of procedure, to freely organise their administration, activities and programmes of work, to organise in

workplaces and engage in collective bargaining on behalf of trade union members, to strike in defence of their own interests and in solidarity with other workers.

Today we will examine a number of issues confronting working people and their families in Northern Ireland. We will consider the crisis in our political system together with the effects of the crisis of capitalism and its implications for the working class across a range of issues. We will consider solutions and the prospects for change.

We must always remember, however, that any developments under our current economic system will be confronted by the fundamental contradictions of capitalism relating to value, the accumulation of capital and cyclical crises of overproduction. Under the present system production is carried on for profit, not for use. An alternative economic and political strategy is necessary which embraces the struggle for state power and the revolutionary transition to socialism as new, higher and more productive society.

Private capital tends to become concentrated in few hands. As a result there is an oligarchy of private capital that wields enormous power which cannot be effectively checked even by a democratically organized political society. This is true since the members of legislative bodies are selected by political parties, largely financed or otherwise influenced by private capitalists. We cannot rely on any of the parties in Stormont to protect the interests of working people.

Capital has sought to place the burden of the economic crisis on the working class through its programme of austerity. The working class has experienced, and continues to experience, a deterioration in working conditions in which wages have been forced down in real terms, pension benefits have been decimated, labour has been casualised through compulsory, part-time, temporary and agency working, “social dumping” and the massive increase in precarious work, and health, education and social welfare services are consistently attacked.

There is no crisis too great, no crisis which cannot be tackled, by an active, organised and united working class. A working class, united and conscious of its power as a class, is necessary for change, for the revolutionary transformation of society, the abolition of capitalism and the building of a democratic, secular, socialist society in which power is firmly in the hands of the workers and where the wealth of society is used for the benefit of the many, not the profit of the few.