



SECTARIANISM

Workers Party NI Conference 24 March 2018

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to address the conference on an issue that I am particularly passionate about and one which has shaped my political views more than any other - sectarianism.

I, like many here, lived through the 70's the 80s and the early 90s - the worst of the troubles. And I witnessed the downward sectarian spiral this society went through in those days. Doorstep assassinations, sectarian murders at work, intimidation, sectarian rioting, offensive and obscene graffiti on gable walls. Sectarian rhetoric from pulpits and soap boxes, inflammatory speeches from political leaders, threats and worse from paramilitaries, school kids copying and acting out what they saw and heard in the streets. That was the day and daily diet of sectarianism.

And, of course, when the sectarian politicians had finished their rabble rousing and the paramilitary gangsters had crawled back under whatever rock they came from and even before the paint was even dry the latest sectarian slogan - the blood on the streets and the bodies in the morgue came from the working class. Ordinary men, women and children who were slaughtered and sacrificed in the sordid sectarian conflict we now call *The Troubles*.

And that is when I began to oppose sectarianism in all its forms. I realised that *Sectarianism Kills Workers*. I realised that the working class were treated as expendable cannon fodder - or collateral damage, as its now call it - they were treated as expendable cannon fodder and sectarianism was being used to justify and pursue the deadly agendas of competing forms of nationalism: British and Irish

Sectarianism Kills Workers. Nothing could be more obvious nothing could be starker that that horrific reality. And many, many people paid with their lives and their families and loved ones still bear that burden to this day.

But that was then.

We are told that things are different now. The 'war' is over.

The Good Friday Agreement has been signed and old scores and difference have been set aside as we all pursue a peaceful and political agenda.

The reality is somewhat different.

I would argue that sectarianism is more widespread, more ingrained, more accepted now, than at any time over the past 50 years. That's not a claim to be made lightly.

We now live with a culture in which sectarianism is formally institutionalised. A culture in which manifestations of sectarianism are no longer seen as sectarian. We live in a culture in which it is deemed acceptable to think, speak and act in a sectarian manner but without rebuke, reproach or criticism - that is the extent to which it has become embedded in our psyche and in our culture. That's what sustains the myth of two communities that is what drives and maintains artificial divisions.

Sectarianism remains a defining reality of society in Northern Ireland, and the biggest single obstacle to the development of class politics.

It shapes every aspect of life in Northern Ireland - housing, education, employment, sport and leisure and, of course, politics.

Sectarianism manifests itself in countless ways, most obviously in the physical separation of communities, whether it be through the misnamed peace walls or the marking out of territory through flags, paint, and sectarian graffiti.

There is an almost total failure to acknowledge the extent of sectarianism and the need to challenge it among the political class and many of our people. Confronting and defeating sectarianism remains a key task in the struggle to build the socialist alternative.

The numbers are stark.

- 90% of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's estates are defined as "single-identity",
- That means 80% of the inhabitants are identified as either Catholic or Protestant.
- A larger proportion of children (93%) are educated in schools that are overwhelmingly Catholic or Protestant
- Only 7% of children are in integrated education.

These figures come despite a pledge in the Belfast Agreement of 1998 “*to facilitate and encourage integrated education and mixed housing.*”

The financial cost of sectarianism was estimated in 2007 at up to £1.5 billion per annum in public spending.

The number of sectarian crimes recorded by the PSNI grew between 2012/13 and 2013/14: there were almost three a day.

Such numbers, however, tell only part of the damage done to our society by the cancer of sectarianism.

Sectarianism can only be tackled through a comprehensive assault not only on its manifestations but also on the material conditions and assumptions that support it.

This requires not only state intervention and legal measures, such as a Bill of Rights and laws specifically targeting sectarianism, but also active campaigning by people’s organisations such as trade unions and community groups.

Sectarian attitudes must be changed, and that cannot be done by laws alone.

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Let me repeat that. Fighting sectarianism is the first duty of socialists and progressives within Northern Ireland;

Class consciousness cannot grow where workers remain fundamentally divided. We must work on all fronts and in alliance with others to create a sense of common citizenship and common interest.

At all points we must stress the common interests of the working class. The construction of a common identity, and especially a class identity, lies at the heart of the struggle against sectarianism.

And yet... and yet, if there was an election tomorrow we know that most people in Northern Ireland would vote for parties which are systemically, irreversibly and unapologetically sectarian - whether they wish to deny that or not

Some of the hard questions that must be asked about this tribal debacle are the ones that Sinn Fein and DUP voters, in particular, must ask of themselves.

While jobs are being lost, prices rising, homes being repossessed, child poverty increasing and thousands of people across the city facing a daily “eat or heat” dilemma, these parties use flags and emblems, language and culture,

marches and rights as a smokescreen for their failure to even address these issues.

Sinn Fein and DUP supporters must now ask *themselves* “Do I really want to vote for a party that is happy to ignore social and economic realities to secure their own tribal positions”?

And there’s the rub. The sectarian problems of Northern Ireland are not due to the politicians nor a small minority. They are due to the persistence of a sectarian mindset among the majority of people. Until people ask themselves the hard questions, until they are prepared to look for an alternative to both unionism and nationalism, things will not change.

There’s no point deploring the excesses of a political and social system of virtual religious apartheid if you embrace the system yourself. This is why the sectarian sham fighting of the parties works.

The problems of Northern Ireland society haven’t gone away you know. The only people that benefit are the middle classes who make a nice living, with their kids going to grammar schools and university and then getting professional jobs while working class children are sacrificed from the age of 11 onwards. Neither unionism nor nationalism can address the problems of the working class.

But, paradoxically, while the trade union movement is relative strong, class consciousness is very low. The sectarian mindset dominates virtually unchallenged across most of Northern Ireland.

This is the reality which socialists and progressives must face and overcome through raising genuinely secular, anti-sectarian and progressive politics

At the time of the Good Friday Agreement we recognised its limitations and expressly noted that it failed to reflect many of the concerns raised by our Party over the previous 30 years.

However, we 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 programme of Anti-Sectarianism, Peace, Work Democracy and Class Politics.

The primary limitation which the Party identified was the institutionalisation of sectarianism within the spirit, content and structures of the Agreement.

Since that time, the repeated failures, refusals and crises have stemmed from and are exacerbated by 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 difference and failed to provide a mechanism for dealing with this deadly disease.

Instead of tackling the issue of sectarian division the very institutions of government are based on that division.

It remains a political reality, despite the rhetoric to the contrary, that the political institutions are based on and operate within an agreed framework of sectarian division; an institutional framework which incorporates sectarianism at its core and an Assembly and Executive which effectively manage sectarianism, rather than seeking to eradicate it.

That, Chairperson, is my contribution to this discussion.

I have not even touched on integrated education and the effrontery that is so called 'Shared Education'. I have spent no time on issues such as shared housing, peace walls or a single teacher training college. I have not dealt with sectarianism as a criminal offence... but I hope others will do so in the discussion which follows.

I said at the start that sectarianism is more widespread, more ingrained and more accepted now, than at any time over the past 50 years.

Unfortunately, that is the case. The evidence is all round us. It hides now not in the shadows, not muttered under people's breath, not behind closed doors but in plain sight.

Our task remains as it has always been: to challenge it, to overcome it and to replace it with a socialist, secular and class-based society.

We will never give up on that struggle.