

Northern Ireland: The Left, Sectarian Resurgence and the National Question Today

Brian Kelly

The dramatic resurgence of sectarianism on the streets of Belfast and elsewhere across the north of Ireland over the past year has taken establishment commentators by surprise. But in one sense, the new round of polarisation that has developed on the heels of loyalist ‘flag protests’ shouldn’t come as a shock at all. The Belfast Agreement never proposed to tackle deeply-rooted sectarian divisions head-on. Its success rested instead on a kind of enforced amnesia, in which society would move forward only so long as it was willing to evade tough questions about the past. Tens of millions of pounds have been poured into ‘re-branding’ Belfast as a stable, post-conflict city ‘open for business’, but beneath the surface sectarian tensions have lingered all along, emerging forcefully into the open during the loyalist picket of Holy Cross primary school in Ardoyne in 2001 and in the UVF siege of Short Strand a decade later, but manifested also in a long string of sectarian murders and pipe-bombings ignored by a mainstream media that sees itself as an adjunct of the tourist industry.

A certain amount of forgetfulness suited each of the three main parties to the conflict. The British government - which imposed partition on Ireland at gunpoint in 1922 and which throughout the recent conflict ran a well-resourced counterinsurgency that rested, in part, on backing vicious sectarian murder gangs¹ - re-positioned itself as a neigh-

bourly neutral party exasperated by the primitive tribalism besetting its Ulster backwater. Unionist politicians, whose sectarian management of a repressive one-party state brought on the conflict, and who were up to their necks in the brutality required to shore it up all through the Troubles, re-packaged themselves as devout democrats with clean hands. The Provisional IRA, born in the defence of nationalist ghettos during the trauma of large-scale pogroms in August 1969, developed into a guerrilla army that justified a sometimes heroic, sometimes brutal, and occasionally sectarian armed campaign on the basis of nationalist rejection of a failed Northern Ireland state-one that its political representatives now administer and enthusiastically defend.

While the surge in open sectarianism over recent months points to deep and fundamental problems, these should not be overstated. Clearly, there is a small but growing section within loyalism that strains for a return to war, and which uses every opportunity to attempt to ratchet up sectarian tensions, abetted by the main unionist parties. And there are smaller, more isolated forces grouped around republican ‘dissidents’ who are detached enough from reality to believe that a new military campaign carried out under far less favourable circumstances than the Provos enjoyed can somehow end differently. Despite this we are a long way from the collapse of the Belfast Agreement, and even fur-

¹Systematic collusion between British security forces and loyalist paramilitaries has been established beyond doubt. The report by Tory-appointed investigator Desmond Da Silva into Belfast solicitor Patrick Finucane’s murder at the hands of the UVF, regarded as a “sham” and a “whitewash” by the Finucane family, admitted that there could be “no doubt that agents of the [British] state were involved in carrying out serious violations of human rights up to and including murder.” For Geraldine Finucane’s reaction to the Da Silva report, see <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/video/2012/dec/12/pat-finucanes-widow-de-silva-report-video>. Ann Cadwalladers recent *Lethal Allies: Britain’s Secret War in Ireland* documents 120 murders in mid-Ulster between 1972 and 1976 which RUC and other security personnel either planned or were involved in alongside loyalist paramilitaries. See also ‘British Army Covered Up UDR Links to UVF,’ *The Detail* (31 July 2011): <http://www.thedetail.tv/issues/20/udr-girdwood-story/british-army-covered-up-udr-units-links-to-uvf>.

ther from the return of serious armed conflict.

For all its deficiencies-perhaps because of them-the new order is propped up by British and Irish governments who have invested heavily in the political stability it holds in place, and by successive US administrations who are feted like royalty for their smallest exertions here at a time when favourable headlines are hard to come by for a superpower that has, in recent years, cut such a wide swathe of pain and misery across the globe. More significant than this external backing, however, is the lack of an appetite locally for a return to violence. An imperfect peace holds because despite the attempts by some to drag us back to war, the vast majority of working-class people in both main communities are determined not to let things slide backward. Whatever the disappointments with the new order-and there are many on all sides, some quite valid-there is little enthusiasm for a return to the dark days of the past.

The SWP and others in the scattered ranks of the organized Left in Northern Ireland were critical of the Belfast Agreement, opposing it on the grounds that far from undermining the structures of sectarianism or helping to break down the historic divide between Protestant and Catholic workers, it would instead “institutionalise” existing divisions, embedding them permanently in the day-to-day operation of Stormont. In an Assembly where elected officials had to declare themselves Unionist or Nationalist, politics would inevitably take the form of communal horse-trading: sectarian divisions would inevitably squeeze out any possibility of developing class politics, reinforcing the traditional divide at every turn. If there was a silver lining in the new arrangements it was the space that an end to armed conflict opened up for the assertion of class politics outside the Assembly and the official institutions, and the potential this held out for the revival of an organised Left that had been consigned to the margins for so long.

But there were impediments to breaking out of that isolation as well. Two of the main obstacles to the establishment of durable class politics were mostly outside the control of the Left. A series of manufactured crises at Stormont-many of them part of the process of ‘housetraining’ Sinn Féin, as David Trimble once put it-meant that every effort at bringing class politics to the fore occurred against the backdrop of high-profile sectarian theatrics. The recurring set-piece communal skirmishes at Stormont had an effect on the mood in workplaces and working-class communities as well, making it difficult to strike out onto new ground. The nightmares of the past weighed heavily on the present, and there were powerful interests with a stake in ensuring the continuity of old divisions.

The wider setting of the early post-Agreement period presented a different kind of challenge: the paramilitary ceasefires of the late 1990s and the early bedding down of the Belfast Agreement occurred against the backdrop of seemingly impressive economic growth, reinforced by substantial European subvention for community and interface ‘peace’ projects. According to official statistics the Northern Ireland economy grew by 70 percent in the decade after 1998,² driving a sense of optimism and prosperity that registered even in working-class loyalist and republican so-called ‘heartlands’. The boom years coincided with an aggressive turn to privatisation and growing attacks on public sector workers, fuelled a steep rise in inequality and left large pockets of poverty across the North virtually untouched, but in a context where the claim that peace would deliver tangible economic benefits seemed plausible to many, the Left’s argument that the key divide in northern society was the one between workers on both side of the divide and local and multinational capitalists found little traction.

We inhabit a very different social landscape today. The burst of the property bubble and the collapse of the world economy

² ‘Divided Belfast Laments 15 Years of Peace Bringing No Prosperity,’ *Bloomberg Online* (2 May 2013). <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-05-01/divided-belfast-laments-15-years-of-peace-bringing-no-prosperity.html>

has had a devastating impact on workers in the North, and as the shine has gone off the neoliberal promise the landscape that comes into view is an eerily familiar one, with many of those on the bottom in the ‘new’ Northern Ireland facing conditions not much different from those that laid the basis for three decades of violence. If we add to this the determination of Tories at home and across the water to force through a vicious austerity program then it is almost inevitable that working-class desperation will find expression in politics here. A thirty-year old from the nationalist Whiterock Road, in the North’s single most deprived electoral ward, caught the prevailing mood when he told reporters last spring that “This is the toughest time I can remember for work. Things haven’t changed [since the Agreement]. It’s still hard for people, maybe harder.” His 47 year-old counterpart in loyalist Sandy Row told the same journalist that “People wanted peace but they didn’t realize it would take more than that to deliver jobs. Nobody expected the big recession to happen. Nobody was prepared.”³

The deterioration of conditions in working-class communities over the past five years is stark: after falling to a 30-year low after 1998, unemployment has jumped to pre-Agreement levels, with official rates over 30 percent in some neighbourhoods. Northern Ireland has a higher proportion of empty retail shops than anywhere in the UK, with a 21 percent vacancy rate - twice the UK average. 27 percent of the population is defined as economically inactive - without a job and not looking for one - and joblessness is increasing at the fastest pace in the anywhere in the UK. London aims to force through cuts of 130 billion pounds in the coming year, and there is no light at the end of the tunnel. “There are no big solutions coming through, no silver bullets,” an economist at Danske Bank admits.⁴

Growing disillusionment with the neoliberal order ushered in by the Belfast Agree-

ment offers a new context in which socialists are presented with real opportunities to make themselves relevant and offer a challenge to the reactionary legacy of sectarian politics. But as the steady descent into communal polarisation and street violence over the past year suggests, the change in outlook also presents urgent challenges. If the Left has lacked the power to curb communal posturing at Stormont or dictate the economic circumstances in which we operate, the same cannot be said about its strategic approach to fighting sectarianism: here the marginalisation is partly self-inflicted.

There have been bright sparks that provide a glimpse of what is possible over the past decade - widely supported strikes by fire-fighters and postal workers resisting cuts and privatisation; a hard-fought, but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to save jobs at Ford Visteon - but these episodic struggles have not been enough to lay the basis for a durable current of class-based, anti-sectarian politics. The weakness of the labour movement and the organized Left can be partially explained by the difficulties in mounting an effective challenge to austerity, but it is also down to a long-standing weakness in challenging sectarianism. At the root of this is a deep confusion on the Left about two closely related issues: its approach to combating sectarianism in the North and its attitude toward the national question.

It is far from the case that working people in either main community in the North spend much of their energy these days pondering Ireland’s claim to independence: even at the height of its campaign, the Provisional movement struggled to sustain broad support in nationalist working-class districts. Most volunteers joined the IRA not out of any abstract commitment to national sovereignty but as a basic reaction against the violence visited on their communities by a London-backed sectarian state. “Those fellows from Belfast were never really republicans,” one derisive

³Quoted in the article above.

⁴For more on the deterioration of the Northern Ireland economy, see ‘Neoliberal Belfast: Disaster Ahead,’ in *IMR* 2 (Summer 2012).

observer suggested. "They were only fighting for their streets." An overstatement perhaps, but it captured an important truth.⁵

The situation today is in some ways even more contradictory: recent polls suggest that, confronted with a severe economic crisis north and south, a majority of northern nationalists are unwilling to take the leap from a northern state still offering limited medical and welfare provision into an extended southern state (that is, a united capitalist Ireland) with even worse conditions on offer. But in the increasingly unstable atmosphere of post-crash Northern Ireland, it would be a mistake to assume that nationalist resentment cannot manifest itself in renewed agitation around partition, even if this takes the form of demands for equal treatment and protection from sectarian harassment within the confines of the northern state.

Historically the Left has erred in one or another direction in its approach to fighting sectarianism, and in its wider position on the national question. Left nationalists and republicans - including sections of the Provisional movement in the years before the Belfast Agreement - have argued that Protestant workers enjoyed privileges over their Catholic counterparts that bound them to the Orange State, and that they could be won to a wider vision of class politics only after the border had been dissolved and Irish national unity established. All attempts at uniting workers across the divide in the here and now were bound to be short-lived so long as Britain propped up a sectarian state in the North. An end to partition was, in this view, a *precondition* to working-class unity. This 'stages' approach is influential among the more political end of 'dissident' republicanism today:

⁵As Eamonn McCann commented in relation to this: "Fighting for your street, of course, is not necessarily an ignoble thing to do. In certain circumstances - Belfast 1969 - it can be no more than neighbourly duty. But the impulse to defend one's locality doesn't automatically harden into a clear set of ideas. What had pitched whole Catholic working-class communities outside the constitutional arena was not mass conversion to an -ism or a particular conception of history but immediate, material considerations. Most who joined or came to support the IRA did so not out of a sacred duty to "free Ireland" or in pursuit of a historic mission to vindicate the Republic but because they wanted the bigot's boot off their necks and the British Army off their backs." McCann, 'Review of Ed Moloney's Secret History of the Real IRA', *The Nation*

its effect is to downplay the importance of or write off completely the day-to-day struggles of northern workers over pay and conditions as partial and inconsequential, and to dismiss the possibility that Protestant workers can be won in any numbers to break from loyalism.

Superficially, the argument enjoys a kind of negative confirmation in the complicated and sometimes dispiriting trajectory of working-class struggle in the North. The impressive 1919 engineers' strike in Belfast - which saw Protestant and Catholic workers united in street-fighting against British Army strikebreakers - was followed within a year by the violent expulsion of Catholics (and smaller numbers of 'rotten Prods') from mixed workplaces, and loyalist - inspired pogroms against nationalist districts; the remarkable unity that took shape in the 1932 Outdoor Relief Riots - uniting the Falls and the Shankill for a few glorious days and nights - dissipated in the face of sectarian scaremongering, and by 1935 workplace expulsions were again the order of the day. Protestant working-class support for Paisleyism, manifested in opposition to the civil rights movement and again in the 1974 Ulster Worker's Council strike, confirms for supporters of this view a notion of Protestant workers as irredeemably reactionary, and of class politics as inadequate for transforming society.

The 'stages' approach endorsed by left republicans has its mirror image in the more influential position that partition has no bearing on the class struggle in the North, and that working-class organizations have to confine themselves to bread-and-butter issues exclusively or risk being torn apart by internal dissent. Among officials prominent in the Northern Ireland Congress of Trade Unions

and among remnants of the reformist Left there is a long-established custom of dodging the issue of partition. In part this developed out of an understandable desire to steer clear of conservative green nationalism. Eamonn McCann recalls the same urge in the early period of civil rights organising: in a situation where “United Irelandism had for so long been the ‘property’ of crawl-thumping Nationalists... the very mention of it smacked of jingoism.” More than that, organisers “wanted insofar as it was possible not to alienate Protestant workers who, almost to a man and woman, were fiercely opposed to the end of partition.” And therefore

... about one thing we were united: partition was irrelevant. The old idea that nothing could be done until Ireland was united was turned in its head...

The problem, as we were to discover to our own cost, and to the cost of building a worker’s party, was that partition was an issue, a damnably difficult issue to face, but an issue whether we liked it or not.⁶

Most of the organised Left have been reluctant to draw these conclusions, or to begin to map out the ways in which the question of partition - and the sectarian divisions that it upholds - can be raised in class terms. In important ways the leadership of NICTU and a generation of activists on the reformist Left share the pessimism of left republicans about the possibility of winning Protestant workers to a break from loyalism, and hope, it seems, that the Belfast Agreement has rendered the border question irrelevant. Their approach is merely an inverted version of the stages approach: where republicans insist that partition must be ended before the class struggle can commence, for the reformist Left and a trade union bureaucracy inclined toward caution and timidity, it is only by gradual cooperation on bread and butter issues and delib-

erate evasion of controversies around sectarianism that the foundations for working-class unity can be laid.

It does not take any deep knowledge of the history of the northern labour movement to grasp the bankruptcy of this approach. Only the most fragile and superficial unity can be built by purposely avoiding the contentious political questions that dominate northern society - the kind that crumbles to dust the moment sectarianism raises its head. The key lesson of the 1919 strike and the Outdoor Relief agitation, cynically misread by left republicans as confirmation of the innately reactionary character of Protestant workers, points instead to the necessity of combining sustained, energetic work around shared economic grievances with an open, principled discussion of the poisonous role of sectarianism, and the function of partition in supporting it.

From a policy of abstaining from controversy around sectarianism, sections of the labour movement and the Left have moved some distance further to develop a positive rationale for refusing to tackle the problem of loyalism. The formerly exotic notion that Protestants and Catholics in the North constituted two separate ‘nations’, each with distinct and equally legitimate traditions that had to be protected under any new arrangements, was first theorised by a Stalinist sect, the Irish (later British and Irish) Communist Organization, in the early 1970s. The practical implications of their approach were clear from the outset:

While state forces attacked the opponents of the Unionist regime, and the nationalist population in general, the advocates of ‘two nations’ theory were so concerned with distancing themselves from supposed Catholic nationalist desires to oppress the Protestants, that they were unable to oppose actual repression! Thus it was, that one month after the introduction of internment in August

⁶McCann, ‘Ten Years after Derry’ *Socialist Review* (Oct 1978); 21.

1971, a leaflet was published by the 'Worker's Association for the Democratic Settlement of the National Conflict in Ireland,' which omitted to mention internment or repression. Nor was there any mention of the British Army or of imperialism.⁷

Today this once bizarre, imaginatively contrived approach to the past is widely influential, though in somewhat altered form. The 'two traditions' framework underpins the logic of the Belfast Agreement and the system of benign apartheid it upholds.⁸ It informs much of the media discourse, north and south, about the cause of the Troubles. The same set of assumptions-emphasizing immutable 'national differences' between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland and conspicuously omitting or sanitising the role of British imperialism in fomenting sectarian tensions-is influential among so-called revisionist historians,⁹ serving as the cornerstone for a generation of scholarship that seeks on one hand to denigrate the history of anti-imperialist struggle and on the other to concoct a favourable record of enlightened British statesmanship in Ireland. The same sensibility pervades nearly everything RTE lays its hands on and saturates northern coverage in the southern print media.

The distortion required to uphold the notion of 'two nations' in relation to the history of the North is revealing. Here more than anywhere else, after all, the possibility of an alliance between Protestant dissenters and dispossessed native Catholics against the

British-backed ruling elite came closest to fruition in the form of the United Irishmen during the 1798 Rebellion. Here one can trace the ultimately successful attempts on the part of the establishment - including, prominently, the British military command - to undermine that possibility by a calculated resort to sectarianism. "I have arranged... to increase the animosity between the Orangemen and the United Irishmen," the commander for mid-Ulster assured his superiors. "Upon that animosity depends the safety of the centre counties of the North."¹⁰

The deep divisions that later marked relations between Protestants and Catholics in the North were not inevitable then, nor were they a simple reflection of timeless national or ethnic differences - as 'two nations' theory would have it; instead sectarianism was a *historical outcome*, and one deliberately promoted by a colonial ruling class, backed by British imperialism. Loyalism - the Orange tradition - then and now was not an expression of some essential Protestant cultural identity, but a specific constellation of ideas whose essential function was to bind a section of Irish Protestants to imperialism, and to deploy them - often against their own class interests - as a "native, unpaid garrison"¹¹ in enforcing a vicious system of social and economic hierarchy in Ireland.

That Orangeism has evolved and changed over time - in the move from a rural to an urban industrial base, for example - or that in times of severe economic crisis there have been breakaways and splinter factions that express plebeian resentment against 'big house'

⁷Brian Trench, 'The Two Nations Fallacy,' *International Socialism* 51 (April-June 1972). Trench observes that in the run-up to partition, supporters of the Unionist cause among British conservatives deployed the 'two nations' perspective as a means of 'opposing independence for any part of Ireland.' More significantly, 'Ulster Protestants have never claimed to be a nationality. Thus we apparently have the phenomenon of a national movement without a national consciousness.'

⁸Davidson, 'The Trouble with 'Ethnicity',' *International Socialism Journal* 84 (Autumn 1999).

⁹An unfortunate misnomer: all historians are revisionists in that they seek to reinterpret the past. What distinguishes much of the work described this way in Ireland over the past twenty years is its clear bias against the anti-imperial struggle. This is at the root of the debate over the late Peter Hart's scholarship, for example.

¹⁰Brigadier-General C. E. Knox to General Lake, quoted in Liam De Paor, *Divided Ulster*, 27.

¹¹'Loyal Address of the Inhabitants of Belfast to Lord Lieutenant,' 20 April 1848, quoted in Christine Kinnealy, 'The Orange Order and Britishness,' in Stephen Caunce, ed. *Relocating Britishness*, 223.

Unionism does not alter this general assessment in the slightest. Marxists are rightly critical of the nationalist and republican traditions in Ireland - for their deep attachment to conservative Catholicism after the mid-nineteenth century; their elevation of military conspiracy over mass mobilization; and above all their long history of subordinating the interests of Irish workers and the poor to 'national interests' that invariably serve the wealthy at the top of society. But our criticism of loyalism begins with the observation - based on its own extensive record over more than two centuries - that it is *intrinsically sectarian*; that historically it has been *the main impediment to working-class unity* in the North. To borrow a phrase from loyalism: "Here it stands, it can do no other."

It is one thing for global capital and its local hangers-on to latch on to a 'two traditions' framework to underwrite a system of benign apartheid, or to engage in sanitizing loyalism, but another thing entirely for the leadership of the trade union movement and left-wing activists who claim to be out for a revolutionary transformation of society to do the same. The official labour movement's approach has been, in essence, to conflate loyalism and the Protestant working class, as if they are one and the same. For much of the last twenty years ICTU and sections of the labour Left have conducted their 'outreach' to Protestant workers through relationships with prominent loyalists, and in particular with elements of so-called "progressive loyalism". In a speech to the UVF-aligned Progressive Unionist Party in 2007, ICTU Assistant General Secretary Peter Bunting argued it was "essential that the PUP perseveres on the political scene... You represent a tradition in Northern Ireland's politics that is not as often celebrated as more divisive traditions. Yours is the voice of a distinction that is not divisive."¹²

¹²Bunting Address to PUP Conference, 13 October 2007, in Aaron Edwards, 'The Progressive Unionist Party of Northern Ireland: A Left-Wing Voice in an Ethnically Divided Society,' *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (2010): 1.

¹³'Our Position on Ireland,' *Bulletin* (Nov-Dec 1979: originally published in 1974) <http://www.oocities.org/socialistparty/Archive/1974PonIreland.htm>

Looking back from this side of the flag protests, the most generous thing that can be said about Bunting's comments is that they were based on a profound miscalculation. But they are part of a long tradition of assuming that the route to the Protestant working class is through conduits among the most reactionary elements in that community. A variant of this approach - a profound reluctance to challenge loyalism politically for fear of alienating Protestant workers - can be seen in the Socialist Party's deeply confused position on the recent polarization. Partly their convoluted approach to recent events flows from the SP's unwillingness over many years to take a clear position on partition or even, at the height of the Troubles, on issues around state repression. In the late 1970s - at precisely the time Ann Cadwallader has shown that security forces were deeply involved in sectarian murder alongside loyalists - the SP formally opposed the call for the withdrawal of British troops on the grounds that their presence was (wait for it) "a guarantee against civil war." But the pattern of their equivocation on a whole range of issues suggests that a more fundamental concern in adopting forthright positions opposing state violence was that the party did not want to risk offending Protestant workers influenced by loyalism.¹³



Billy Hutchinson of the PUP

Although they originally rejected the 'two nations' framework, the SP's position in the

flags crisis and in the series of loyalist provocations that preceded it is indistinguishable from that advanced by BICO and others in the 1970s. At every juncture over the past 14 months or so - even when it has been crystal clear that the most bigoted elements in loyalism have been driving the polarization - the SP's commentary has never veered from a 'plague-on-both-your-houses' approach: if anything their coverage has placed the onus of blame on nationalists, whose "lead" loyalism only "follow[ed]." At a time when Unionists politicians have been hammering away at the notion that the "Catholics are getting everything" and that there is some special economic grievance exclusive to the Protestant community, their coverage has never once seen fit to point out that, actually, nationalists continue to suffer the highest levels of social deprivation, or even that poverty is inflicting deep suffering on both communities. Instead they refer, without comment, to a "*feeling*" that "exists that the 'peace process' has been a long series of concessions to nationalism and that a steady erosion of the Protestant community's cultural identity is under way," and to "a *perception* that the Catholic community has materially benefitted from the 'peace process'."¹⁴

This is not the way principled socialists-tribunes of the oppressed - intervene to stem a sectarian resurgence: it is open capitulation to the most backward forces in society, and no amount of fine phrases about the "urgent need now for workers to address sectarian tensions" or the "need for a mass worker's party" can cover over such a staggering abdication of principle. The same absence of backbone can be seen in their approach to Orange marches. "Despite being a right-wing reactionary organization," the SP writes, "the Orange Order has the right to parade," including

through areas where residents oppose them. "Local residents must allow the possibility of parades when seeking negotiations."¹⁵ In this way only can the "competing rights" of residents desiring to live free from sectarian coat-tailing and Orangemen who insist on marching through nationalist districts be reconciled. What this means, effectively, is that a party which aims to *lead* the fight against sectarianism *lags* behind the vast majority of people across the North, from both communities, who believe that parades should not go ahead where they're not wanted: indeed more than 60 percent of Protestants agree with this.¹⁶

There is another way forward, an alternative to both the official labour movement's timidity in tackling sectarianism and to the bowing down before loyalist reaction that has a long and depressing pedigree on the Left. In the society we operate in, socialists with any serious hope to lead workers in the kinds of struggles that can challenge the system must be able to combine two key elements that can seem, superficially, to contradict one another. On the one hand, we must show a serious and sustained commitment to fighting around the issues that are ravaging the lives of Protestant workers - and their Catholic workmates and neighbours - across the North. In this we are willing to fight alongside anyone who is up for it: in any broad movement with real roots in working-class communities there will be activists involved who come into the fight with varying positions on the contentious issues of the day - on flags and parades, on the Union and partition, on our attitude to the police and the state, to British military intervention around the world - and we want to build a broad movement that makes space for those differences to be worked out in the course of common struggle. The SWP have done this consistently over a number of years in People

¹⁴'Flags Controversy: A Socialist View,' Socialist Party (1 Jan 2013): <http://socialistparty.net/news/flags-controversy-a-socialist-view/>.

¹⁵'Parades: A New Front Line Opens,' Socialist Party (8 Sept 2012): <http://socialistparty.net/news/parades-a-new-front-line-opens/>

¹⁶'Northern Irish People to Orange Order: You Can't Walk Where You Want,' *Belfast Telegraph* (16 Sept 2013): <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/northern-ireland/northern-irish-people-to-orange-order-you-cant-walk-where-you-want-29581681.html>

Before Profit and other initiatives, but the opportunities for expanding this in the present crisis are there to be taken, whether that develops through PBP or other, more substantial formations that the new crisis throws up.

Alongside and within that broad movement, however, we want to build a party of consistent, anti-sectarian fighters who can give a lead not only on the bread-and-butter issues, but on the political questions of the day: and at the heart of the challenge any party worth its salt faces in the North is winning the most committed activists in Protestant working-class communities to break from loyalism. Let's be clear: Protestant workers have good reason to be angry about the physical and social deterioration of their communities; and they are right to perceive that the foundations for the prosperity that the shipyards and the engineering works once provided have been pulled out from under them, with devastating consequences.

The problem lies not in the perception that life has gotten more difficult in recent years, but in the familiar attempt by sectar-

ian bigots in high office at Stormont and on the streets to attribute those difficulties to uppity Taigs. Manufacturing in the North has been ravaged over a period of a half century by the same forces of global capitalism that have brought devastation to much of the industrial world; the new neoliberal order embraced by the whole of the Assembly promises either the dole queue, emigration or long hours of low-paid labour for the entire generation that has come of age in the post-conflict era. Neither big house Unionism, nor a resurgence of loyalism, can offer a solution to the deep social crisis that we face. Only a united movement that draws together workers from both main communities, and from the heavily-exploited population of recent immigrants, can begin to turn the tide and in the process throw up a vision of a new society - a 32-county worker's republic built on the overthrow of both rotten states on this island, and in which in which sectarianism becomes, over time, a relic of our distant past. It's the only future worth fighting for.