

FOR AN ALL-ISLANDS, REPUBLICAN COALITION

Part 2. WINNERS, LOSERS AND LEARNERS

Allan Armstrong reviews

The State of Northern Ireland and the Democratic Deficit: Between Sectarianism & Neo-Liberalism by Paul Stewart, Tommy McKearney, Georoid O'Machail, Patricia Campbell and Brian Garvey¹



The late Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley front the UK's post GFA order

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a) Introduction

Paul Stewart, Tommy McKearney, Gearoid O'Machail, Patricia Campbell and Brian Garvey have long records of participation in the struggle for Ireland's emancipation, liberation and self-determination. Although coming from different Republican and Socialist backgrounds, the authors of are currently involved in the Independent Workers Union (IWU).²

The IWU is independent of the bureaucratic Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU). The Irish Labour Party, often supported by the ICTU in the 26 Counties, is even more accommodating to its ruling class than the British Labour Party, having been in several coalitions with Fine Gael or Fianna Fail. So, the IWU has engaged with Socialists in and outside Ireland seeking to break with Labour and Social Democratic parties. This has included inviting Socialists to Ireland and attending our events in Scotland³.

Another feature of the IWU has been its attempts to promote a twenty-first century trade unionism going beyond James Connolly's and Jim Larkin's historical support for the Irish Transport & General Workers' Union as a stepping-stone to creating 'One Big {industrial}

Union'. The IWU has organised Social Justice Unionism, which links workplaces and the community.

b) Neo-sectarianism and neo-liberalism are joined at the hip

The central thesis of *The State of Northern Ireland and the Democratic Deficit: Between Sectarianism & Neo-Liberalism (TSoNIatDD)* this book is that the post Good Friday Agreement (GFA) (1998), and its successor, the St. Andrews Agreement (2006), have taken the form of a deal revealing a “democratic deficit.”⁴ The authors argue that far from overcoming the sectarianism associated with the old pre-1972 Stormont state, it has taken on a new form in the NIE and the Northern Ireland Assembly (NIA) – Stormont Mark 2. The authors term this “neo-sectarianism.”⁵ They show how “democratic deficits present themselves at the level of employment and the workplace, the community and wider social relationships.”⁶ Major sections of the book demonstrate this with regard to welfare,⁷ mental health,⁸ and the ‘third sector’.⁹

The GFA was reluctantly forced upon the UK state by Republican insurrection. Previously the UK and the British unionist parties (including Labour) were upholders of Ulster Unionist supremacy and all the oppression and discrimination that entailed. But as a result of the resistance, which the Orange statelet faced from 1969, the UK state eventually resorted to the GFA in an attempt widen its base of support in the alienated Nationalist community. It has placed itself in position of arbiter between two constitutionally recognised political blocs - the Unionists/Loyalists and the Nationalists/Republicans. Partition has largely moved from the Border to Stormont and its associated institutions, to the very visible “proliferation of so-called Peace Walls (four in 1998 compared to more than fifty in 2013)”¹⁰ And those who do not fit neatly into the official Unionist/Loyalist or Nationalist/Republican blocs are excluded, a new form of Partition.

The authors’ analysis of neo-sectarianism is linked to their other key argument. Neo-liberalism has formed the economic underpinning of

the GFA and its successors. To this could be added - and the 'Devolution-all-round' deal for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales too. This wider neo-liberal strategy was adopted to promote profit maximisation throughout these islands for the benefit of corporations headquartered in the UK, USA and EU. But the Treaty supporting the GFA only covered Ireland, with a primary focus on Northern Ireland. And far from promoting a sectarian-blind politics, the GFA and its successors have very comfortably taken forms which reinforce sectarianism (and racism and sexism). The authors' case with regard to Northern Ireland is made very convincingly.

However, a renewed reactionary unionism first publicly revealed itself in Northern Ireland during the Loyalist, Progressive Unionist Party (PUP)-backed Belfast Flag Riots in 2011.¹¹ Since then other events - Brexit, the rise of authoritarian populism (UKIP and the Brexit Party) and the election of consecutively further Right Tory governments - have reinforced this reactionary unionism in the wider UK state. Since the book was written, the Unionist/Loyalist response to the Brexit EU Protocol now threatens the return of a harder Border.

When it comes to the largely working class-based Loyalist PUP, the classification 'neo-liberalism' does not fit. So there needs to be some qualification of the undoubted link between neo-sectarianism and neo-liberalism. The PUP shares more with other authoritarian populist and hard Right parties in Europe (e.g. Victor Orban's Fidesz in Hungary, Marine Le Pen's National Front/Rally in France, and Georgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy). They advocate a form of economic ethnic Keynesianism. They claim to support what they see as the indigenous working class by excluding both long-standing national minorities and recent migrants from jobs, housing and welfare provision, as far as is possible.

Thus, the authoritarian populist, reactionary unionists in Northern Ireland are even less likely to challenge sectarianism than the neo-liberals. Many of them look forward to the ending of the GFA's official 'parity of esteem', and to the return of some of the earlier forms of sectarianism.

c) The importance of the democratic deficit

The authors' analysis of neo-sectarianism leads them to challenge one of the central tenets of Irish (and British) Socialists, who prioritise economic (and social) struggles. Given the formidable obstacles put in place by the GFA's neo-sectarianism (and its unionist/imperial subordination to the UK state and British capital), the authors argue the need for Republican Socialists "to concentrate on the democratic deficit."¹²

Traditionally it has been left to Labour Party-supporting trade unionists to argue for the need to go beyond economics to politics. This has led to calls to vote Labour in order to get a government to enact laws to protect workers' interests. Non-Labour Socialists in Great Britain, who provide no immediate political alternative of their own, have often ended up tail-ending Labour over constitutional issues. They have resorted to forming internal or external factions to try and influence Labour's economic and social policies, and often dress themselves up in Left social democratic clothing. When it comes to political or immediate constitutional issues, they usually fall in behind the solutions offered by conservative or liberal unionists or by constitutional nationalists. Otherwise, they resort to 'abstract propagandism' and advocate abstention from immediate political campaigns.

But in Ireland, 'South' and 'North', the greater weakness or absence of a Labour Party, and the opportunities provided by more proportional electoral systems for the Dail and Stormont, have contributed to the emergence of significant non-Labour Socialist organisations. These include the Socialist Party of Ireland (SPI) (old Militant), People before Profit (PbP)) (old Irish Socialist Workers Party. now Socialist Workers Network - SWN) and mire recently RISE - Revolutionary, Internationalist, Socialist and Environmentalist (a component part of PbP - which came out of a split from the SPI).

Yet despite, or probably because of the weakness of the Irish Labour Party, and the demise of the old Northern Irish Labour Party, these

Socialist organisations have also tried to adopt Left social democratic politics. This shared interest with Socialists in Great Britain was demonstrated, when uncharacteristically for the British Labour Party, it had the Left social democrat leader, Jeremy Corbyn from 2015-19.¹³ The British SWP, the Socialist Party of England and Wales (SP(E&W) with its Scotland branch office(SPS), and the Communist Party of Britain (CPB) all gave Corbyn and Labour their political support in the 2017 and 2019 Westminster general elections. Even the SPI (standing as Cross Community Labour Alternative) and PbP in Northern Ireland tried to present themselves in Corbynista colours.

Republican Socialists need to provide a very different immediate political programme to Labour and other social democrats, when we address and participate in economic, social (and cultural) struggles. This is consistent with the authors' call to "concentrate on the democratic deficit". This means that Republican Socialists should develop an independent politics which takes on board the anti-democratic nature of the UK state, particularly its devolved Northern Irish statelet. We need to challenge this set-up and not just its existing governmental office holders. Thus, the authors' foregrounding of the "democratic deficit" provides us with a different political focus, which goes beyond Labour's acceptance of the UK's existing undemocratic constitutional order. And, in many ways, the British Labour Party internalises the state's unionist and top-down bureaucratic nature. Opposing this can more effectively challenge neo-liberalism, and that goes for authoritarian populism too.

The anti-democratic nature of the UK state, its Northern Irish statelet and the GFA are more obvious to many than they are elsewhere in these islands. This can be seen by the willingness of significant numbers, especially amongst the working class, to vote for dissident Republican local councillors and MLA candidates in Northern Ireland. A greater number of workers vote for Socialists, 'South' and 'North', shown by the election of their candidates as local councillors, TDs, MLAs and MEPs. Whilst not necessarily amounting to militant opposition to the post-GFA settlement (which also politically

reinforces Partition), this gives Irish Socialists a considerably stronger political presence than elsewhere in these islands.

This review will argue though, that dissident Republican and Irish Socialist opposition to the current state of affairs usually leads to differing but one-sided approaches to the post-GFA, partitionist order found in Ireland, and to isolating the struggles in Ireland from elsewhere in these islands. But challenging these arguments means neither ignoring their advocates, nor a resort to sectarian point-scoring. We need active engagement around agreed issues. But we also need to encourage genuinely democratic discussion and debate, something very much missing on the wider Left. The authors make a significant contribution to achieving this.

d) ‘New’ Sinn Fein, the retreat to constitutional nationalism and the resort to sectarian clientelism

Tommy McKearney has already outlined the role of ‘New’ Sinn Fein in upholding the GFA deal in his earlier *The Provisional IRA: From Insurrection to Parliament (TPIRA:FIIP.)*¹⁴ The Republican Movement was successful in breaking the pre-1972 sectarian Stormont order and its support by the UK state. But who remained in overall charge after the GFA in 1998 was made abundantly clear by the UK government and the Ulster unionist parties. They constantly demanded that the IRA decommission its weapons and that the organisation be disbanded. At no point was decommissioning of British weapons or the wind-down of Northern Ireland’s British Army regiments ever on their agenda.

The now official (i.e. UK constitutionally recognised) ‘New’ Sinn Fein has moved from revolutionary nationalist politics, which actively challenged the UK state, to constitutional nationalist politics, which helps to uphold the UK state in Northern Ireland. But in making this political move, Sinn Fein argue that the GFA can provide an avenue to Irish reunification. The authors’ critique of Sinn Fein can be extended. Sinn Fein’s belief in the GFA road, within the existing

constitutional set-up, places them in a similar position to the constitutional nationalist SNP, which argues that the UK constitution can provide an avenue to Scottish independence; or the Left unionists in the British Labour Party who argue that the UK constitution provides an avenue for their ‘British road to socialism’.

Sinn Fein has helped to develop a politics which prioritises the interests of an expanded Catholic middle class. It has taken on this role, which was previously seen as the preserve of the Social Democratic & Labour Party (SDLP). Sinn Fein has made use of Northern Ireland’s post-GFA devolved institutions to promote what the authors term a “clientelism favouring those closest to the party.”¹⁵ This gives Sinn Fein-supporting Catholic business owners access to state patronage and contracts. The authors give Research Services Ireland¹⁶ and the Casement Park Gaelic Athletic Association stadium in West Belfast¹⁷ as examples of Sinn Fein corruption or lack of public accountability.

Of course, the DUP, Sinn Fein’s other partner in the NIE when it is running, is also very much implicated in this. The authors give the examples of Charter NI¹⁸ and Red Sky construction.¹⁹ The much more public ‘Cash for Ash’ scandal, under the DUP’s Stormont First Minister, Arlene Foster, and the DUP’s continued refusal to give recognition to the Irish language, did finally push the late Martin McGuinness, then Sinn Fein Deputy First Minister, to take his party out of the NIE in January 2017. However, the authors argue that McGuinness had been very reluctant to go down this road,²⁰ despite its popularity amongst many Irish Nationalists, revealed in Sinn Fein’s ensuing Stormont election successes that March.²¹

Furthermore, the collapse of the NIE, and hence the NIA, has shown that the UK state has strong enough control of Northern Ireland’s devolved administrative bodies that it is able to keep things running, imposing its own policies, without any resort to Stormont, or either of the Westminster houses. They are helped in this, behind-the-scenes, by DUP and Sinn Fein special advisors (spads).²² The spads provide a careerist option which buttresses their commitment to the GFA deal.

Meanwhile, the suspension of Stormont notwithstanding, there is still DUP and Sinn Fein bi-sectarian wheeler-dealing, again behind-the-scenes, both in the Stormont and the Northern Ireland local authority offices, in order to get their favoured projects in place.

Therefore, whilst the Catholic middle class have been provided with a 'Peace Dividend' and have benefitted from the GFA, the working class are offered apologetics instead. The authors point to one such attitude. After the GFA, "At least everyone can go about their lawful business".²³ For the working class, their "lawful business" amounts to desperately trying to cope with precarious jobs, unemployment and slashed welfare and other public service provision, which the GFA has accepted.

Thus, the GFA's much heralded 'Peace Dividend' has largely bypassed the overwhelming majority of the working class in both the Nationalist and Unionist communities. As UK state subventions to Northern Ireland have been continually cut back since the 2008 Crash, this has led to an even greater emphasis on sectarian competition between the Unionists/Loyalists and Nationalists/Republicans for funding. This further divides the working class.

But sectarianism is intrinsic to the officially recognised GFA divide between the Unionist/Loyalist and Nationalist/Republican blocs. Hence, it is promoted by their state-recognised representatives, primarily the DUP and Sinn Fein. They try to lessen the cuts' impact on their own communities, arguing over which should bear their brunt by appealing to the UK government or the state's local agents for more favourable treatment. This also buttresses the UK as a 'neutral' arbiter.

The DUP can always outbid Sinn Fein in the sectarian rhetoric, making Sinn Fein appear more reasonable compared to the likes of the DUP's Sammy Wilson and Gregory Campbell. Sinn Fein's sectarian appeal is used more sparingly. It usually takes a more dog-whistle form, particularly in its appeals to demographic trends during election campaigns, i.e. pointing out the growth of the Catholic

component of the electorate relative to the Protestants' decline, in order to maximise their Catholic vote.²⁴

e) **Challenging new GFA theories**

The authors understand that, in developing their case, they have to challenge some new theories which have been proposed to address the GFA. They do this in a fraternal fashion, which acknowledges the important research done by those they criticise.

One such theory has been provided by Conor McCabe, an Irish academic. He has also written for *Look Left*²⁵, the magazine of the Workers Party of Ireland, now a much smaller political organisation²⁶ (*Look Left's* politics, in some respects, resemble those of the Democratic Left Scotland, which publishes *Perspectives*).

McCabe has argued that the GFA is based on a “double transition” – “peace and neo-liberalism”²⁷ Like the authors, he is very critical of neo-liberalism. However, he also suggests “that whatever gets in the way of rational economic moneymaking is not only a drag on neo-liberal rationality but for that very reason is doomed to disappear.”²⁸

Countering this, the authors argue that McCabe's theory “may be said to underestimate the persistence of sectarianism in the social structure.” They go on to make the point out “that it is the persistence of sectarianism, which is limiting peace, or rather contriving a particular kind of peace – war in suspended animation... {and} this sectarianism, far from being incompatible with neo-liberalism, is furnishing it with a new-found vigour.”²⁹

This all-pervading neo-sectarianism reinforces the authors' argument that Republican Socialists need to offer an immediate political alternative. This would challenge the “democratic deficit”, in order to complement immediate economic, social and cultural demands, which challenge neo-liberalism (and authoritarian populism too).

A second theory which the authors challenge is provided by Peter Shirlow, a Northern Ireland born academic, now in charge of the Institute of Irish Studies at Liverpool University. He describes himself as “‘pro-union’ rather than a unionist”.³⁰ He was brought up in a working class Protestant family, has a liberal unionist background, being schooled by Quakers, and now has a wife from an Irish Nationalist background and children with Irish language names. This contributes to Shirlow being “uncomfortable with traditional unionism’s reactionary tendencies.”³¹

It has been customary for many political commentators and historians to distinguish between an Ulster business and landlord dominated Unionism linked more to constitutional politics, and a working class dominated Loyalism more prone to violent extra-constitutional action. The authors, however, outline the long-standing symbiotic relationship between Unionism and Loyalism. They argue that “dividing pro-British sentiment in this way is to misread recent history... {which} in turn can only be the result of a misreading of the old Orange state.”³²

Both Unionists and Loyalists have been strongly committed to upholding the Union, and collaborated to maintain it, e.g. over the Ulster Covenant in 1912; Sir Edward Carson’s promotion of the Belfast pogrom in 1920; the ‘Ulster Says No’ opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985; and the Drumcree protests from 1995-98, despite their associated violence.

And both Unionists and Loyalists remain strongly committed to the defence of the British empire’s violent legacy too, highlighted by their celebration of that imperial ‘blood sacrifice’, the Battle of the Somme in 1916; and by their shared support for another bloody British imperialist creation - the apartheid-type Israel and a partitioned Palestine.

The authors point, though, to Shirlow’s more sympathetic portrayal of some Unionists and Loyalists. Post-GFA, these people have tried to adopt a more tolerant politics. They have raised the issue of Catholic

Nationalist participation in the First World War.³³ However, they do this to emphasise Irish Nationalist support for British imperialism. This is the only politics that might ever make Irish Nationalists acceptable to Unionists and Loyalists. It means Irish Nationalists must reject the anti-unionist and anti-imperialist Republican legacy of 1916 – the Easter Rising - and fall in behind British imperialism’s aims.

James Connolly, a key organiser of the Easter Rising, was proud that the mass movement against Irish conscription saved many Irish lives. Many, almost exclusively Protestant skilled workers, particularly in Belfast’s shipyards, were also exempt from conscription, but they vehemently supported conscription for others, especially Irish Nationalists. On April 14th, 1918, the leaders of the anti-sectarian Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party in Belfast were able to organise a 10,000 strong rally in the city against conscription. Their second attempted rally on April 17th was broken up largely by non-conscripted Loyalist shipyard workers.³⁴ Sectarianism is hard-wired in any attempt to organise on a Unionist/Loyalist basis.

But Shirlow also wants to go beyond what he sees as the misleading distinction between the “nice” “grown-up” Unionists and the “bad”, “delinquent” Loyalists.³⁵ He points out a division within the Loyalist working class between the “mad-dog”, “wreckers and spoilers” (e.g. the late Billy Wright of the Loyalist Volunteer Force and Johnny Adair of the Ulster Defence Association’s/Ulster Freedom Fighters’ C Company, now living in Scotland) and the “transitional”, “transformative” Loyalists (e.g. the late Gusty Spence of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), the late David Ervine and Billy Hutchinson of the UVF/PUP and Dawn Purvis formerly of the PUP).³⁶

But the authors highlight the problem in this attempt to identify a ‘progressive’ working class Loyalism. “Believing it is possible to challenge the state in Protestant working class terms while fighting... to remain a ‘subject’ allows ‘good’ Loyalists to continue to daydream that it is not Britain {the UK state} as such that is undermining the

British/Protestant working class but rather the current political elite.”³⁷

Such an approach does allow working class Loyalists to move beyond neo-liberalism, but only by moving onto the authoritarian populist terrain of ethnic Keynesianism. During the EU membership referendum from 2015-16, this kind of thinking ended up not leading but tail-ending the conservative and reactionary unionist Brexiteers, throughout the UK.

And of course, these unionists always have to find scapegoats. As the authors point out, such thinking “allows for the continuing myth that Protestant working class relative economic disadvantage has in some sense been paid for by *Catholic working class* advantage”;³⁸ just as British Brexiteers attributed the economic deterioration of the ‘white’ working class to migrants. The racism underlying the ‘Left’ Brexiteers’ “British jobs for British workers” was only thinly disguised. This slogan was passed on from the Europhobic fascist National Front to Eurosceptic, New Labour Gordon Brown, and then on to ‘Left’ Brexiteer, recent UNITE general secretary, Len McCluskey, a union bureaucrat who was skilled in talking Left, but walking Right.

Elsewhere, in another example of unofficial Loyalist and official Unionist collusion, the authors quote Feminist, Bea Campbell. She described some of the key participants in the Loyalist intimidation at Holy Cross primary school in North Belfast, in 2001. “The route to school of little catholic girls was blocked by unionist men... Between the blockade and the girls stood a barricade of riot police {the Police Service of Northern Ireland - PSNI}... inexplicably facing the girls rather than their unionist assailants”.³⁹ And also there was Shirlow’s “transitional” and “transformative” Billy Hutchinson (PUP), offering advice to the “wreckers” and “spoilers” wing of the Loyalists!

But Bea moves on from her “inexplicably” to the explicable. “Northern Ireland’s institutions remained unshaken by the atrocity of Holy Cross.”⁴⁰ The heads-turned away attitude of successive British

unionist governments and the authors' arguments about the neo-sectarian nature of the GFA and the nature of working class, Loyalist-based organisations' support for the Union and Empire, make this "atrocious" quite explicable, if no less abhorrent.

f) The role of the UK state and British unionism in defending the Union

Furthermore, such events as Holy Cross remind us, not only of the Unionist/Loyalist continuum the authors have outlined in Northern Ireland. This has always backed the British Empire, Union and 'Ulster' in the face of democratic challenges. But other events have also demonstrated the wider role of the UK state and British ruling class. They constitute the key component in the unionist continuum upholding the Union.

During the Republican insurrection, the UK state had depended primarily on the British army, other security forces, the Diplock courts and prisons to deal with Northern Ireland. All these institutions were prefaced with 'her majesty's or 'royal' to buttress their authority, or in the case of the Ulster Defence Regiment had the queen as colonel-in-chief. The security forces' reach extended into planning for employment provision, new housing, street and community facilities. Only secondarily did they work with the unionist parties, particularly the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the constitutional nationalist SDLP and the local Catholic hierarchy. Yet there was a third strand to British control and that was the security forces' resort behind-the-scenes to Loyalist death squads. These Loyalist were used to do the 'dirty jobs' which could not be done openly in 'her majesty's name.

After the GFA deal, though, the once very visible, non-Northern Irish, British army regiments were withdrawn. The maintenance of 'law and order' is now mainly in the hands of the PSNI, a key, post-GFA, neo-sectarian institution (formed out the old sectarian Royal Ulster Constabulary). The operations of Royal Irish Regiment – RIR (the

successor to the much-hated sectarian Ulster Defence Regiment) are organised from Holyrood Barracks, near Belfast. But the RIR now mainly serves in the UK's overseas imperial wars. However, also to be found at Palace Barracks is MI5. MI5 has been upgraded, and continues to play a key security, intelligence gathering and when it deems necessary, provocateur role in Northern Ireland. But MI5 has the advantage for conservative unionists (and liberal unionists like the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland - APNI) of operating largely unseen.

In the early days of the GFA, conservative unionists tried to paint the new neo-sectarian settlement with a liberal coating. They didn't want to offer their public support to unofficial Loyalist intimidation. Instead, they publicly backed the PSNI to maintain the 'peace'. What this could mean under the GFA has already been seen in the PSNI's behaviour at Holy Cross.

But the GFA's political architects understood that such events as Drumcree, Holy Cross and the Belfast Flag Riots might well happen. So, they also wanted to preserve the semi-detached nature of Northern Ireland with regard to the rest of the UK. The UK state remains Great Britain **and** Northern Ireland. This means that acknowledgement of openly violent events in Northern Ireland can be marginalised at Westminster and in the mainstream media, and their impact and causes minimised, disguised or misrepresented. It also means that these Loyalists can still be manipulated by MI5 and called upon, if it becomes necessary, to help to maintain the Union.

However, we are now seeing a disturbing new phenomenon. A reactionary unionism, which first reappeared as a localised Northern Ireland phenomenon during the Belfast Flag Riots in 2011, has now become mainstreamed. The British ruling class shock at the closeness of the Scottish independence referendum result in 2014 constituted the first step in their abandonment of the liberal unionist, post-1998 'Devolution-all-round' deal. This deal had proclaimed equality for the three nations - Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (in reality a part of the Irish nation) - with the fourth English nation within the UK

state. (With England not having political devolution, its political representatives can use their large overall numerical majority of MPs at Westminster to pursue what they see as specific English interests.)

The deal's Northern Ireland component, the GFA, proclaimed 'parity of esteem' between Unionists/Loyalists and Nationalists/Republicans. But since the 2016 Brexit vote (which in contrast to David Cameron's other referendum in 2014 on Scottish independence, was gained by excluding EU residents and 16-18 years olds from the franchise), reactionary unionism has taken full control of the Tory Party. They are now backed by the majority of the British ruling class. Together they dictate the behaviour of the UK state. Sir Keir Starmer bows to this, hoping the British ruling class will abandon the faction-ridden Tory party and call upon the Labour Party, purged of the Left, to complete their agenda. Therefore, the liberal unionist 'Devolution-all-round' settlement, far from being further developed, is now being rolled back.

In Northern Ireland, this liberalism was never more than a superficial cover for the essentially conservative unionist GFA deal. In Scotland and Wales, liberal unionism had more substance, allowing for the passing of limited, but more progressive legislation than at Westminster, over land, health, education and language. This is why reactionary unionists now want to substantially reduce or even end the powers of Holyrood and Cardiff Bay. Nobody looks to Northern Ireland for progressive legislation precedents! Many reactionary unionists feel the 'parity of esteem' elements of the Northern Irish post-GFA deal can be sabotaged from within, by using walk-outs and boycotts, whilst continuing to pocket the money for their salaries.

The British government's declared Brexit bid to "take back control" was always about the strengthening of the UK state and the British ruling class in an increasingly crisis-ridden global order, in which the British imperialism has continued to decline. The Empire2 delusions of some Brexiteers notwithstanding, Brexit was always going to involve even greater subordination to US imperialism. This is meant to be an upgrade of the old illusory 'Special Relationship' between

the USA and UK, but now as a hoped for America First’/‘Britain Second.’ Under this, the US would also help the UK to further subordinate the 26 counties Republic of Ireland (RoI) to their shared imperial agenda, e.g. undermining Irish neutrality and fully absorbing the RoI into NATO, a process already started at Shannon Airport.

But, in Northern Ireland, we have seen a continuous decline in electoral support for reactionary unionism - in the anti-Brexit vote in 2016; the local council and EU elections both in May 2019; the Westminster general election in December 2019; and most spectacularly in the Stormont election in May 2022, when the DUP, and hence reactionary unionism more generally, lost first place to Sinn Fein.

This long-term political trend has been underpinned by the 2021 Northern Ireland census results, which place the number of Protestants (43.5%) behind the number of Catholics (45.7%). Now Socialists should not be basing their politics on sectarian headcounts. But this is the constitutional basis upon which the GFA was founded, and indeed is the whole basis upon which the Northern Irish Orange statelet was originally formed. So, it does represent a challenge to the GFA. Therefore, as the authors argue, “Under the circumstances, it would appear that the rational option for Unionism would have been to take the steps to negotiate an agreed future {with Irish Nationalists} before they lost their bargaining power”.⁴¹

First, the Unionists could have gone for the kind of bespoke Brexit deal, which Theresa May tried to provide. This would give Northern Ireland businesses the ‘best’ of both economic worlds in the EU and UK. Indeed, such a deal could be seen as a local version of the sort of exemptions which the Eurosceptic Tories (supported by Labour) had been able to extract from the EU in the Maastricht negotiations. All these worsened workers’ conditions, just as the post-Brexit proposed cuts in corporate taxation and the proposed Belfast ‘free’ port in Northern Ireland would. So, again you might have thought that Tories could happily live with such bespoke arrangements.

And secondly, even if Stormont were to grant Irish language recognition in Northern Ireland, this would be no more than successive British unionist governments have conceded for the Welsh language in Wales since 1967 and more reluctantly conceded for Gaelic in Scotland, in devolved Holyrood with the 2005 Gaelic Language Act. (The EU Charter for Regional and Minority Languages gave such languages additional protection. But Brexit is once more encouraging those minority language baiters who want to end any official support for these languages.)

Yet, despite Northern Ireland's majority anti-Brexit vote and the ousting of reactionary unionists from their lead position in the May 2022 Stormont elections, successive Tory governments, under Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, have told Irish Nationalists and Sinn Fein, in particular, to bow before the DUP and other Unionists/Loyalists in the make-up of any new NIE. They are also supposed to concede key parts of the Unionist/Loyalist anti-Protocol proposals, despite these being rejected by the majority in Northern Ireland. Rishi Sunak's retention of Chris Heaton-Harris, Truss's hard Right, European Research Group (ERG) member, as Northern Ireland Secretary, doesn't look like a move to much greater reconciliation either, with regard to the Protocol.

The shared reactionary unionism of successive UK governments explains why they back hard-line Unionism in Northern Ireland. A UK which cannot hold on to its own state territories is unlikely to be seen by other imperial powers as a global contender. This is why reactionary unionists give Unionists in Northern Ireland continued life-support, despite their outrageous demands, their open flirting with Loyalist paramilitaries and their declining backing.

Sometimes, the DUP, the subordinate element in this reactionary unionist continuum, overplay their hand. They did this when propping up May's minority Tory government between 2017-19, whilst still joining with Johnston and the ERG in trying to push the Tories even further Right. The illusion, even apparent to many Unionists, that the DUP were in the driving seat, cost them in the

2019 Westminster general election. Johnson, once elected, soon showed the DUP who really ran the show.

This extension of the authors' analysis of the symbiotic relationship of Ulster Unionism and Loyalism to the wider UK state and British unionism just reinforces the case they are making. The authors appreciate that what is happening in Northern Ireland cannot be divorced from the struggle for self-determination in Scotland and show the UK state's attempts to rein this in.⁴²

But to challenge this unionist continuum more successfully also means countering the British ruling class's all-islands, anti-democratic, 'internationalism from above' strategy, with a Republican Socialist, all-islands 'Internationalism from Below' strategy. This would target the UK's wider "democratic deficit". It also means challenging "the dissident Republican and Irish Socialist approach to the current state of affairs {which} usually leads to differing but one-sided approaches to the post-GFA, partitionist order found in Ireland and to isolating the struggles in Ireland from elsewhere in these islands."⁴³

g) Challenging the limitations of dissident Republicanism: Separatism

In their book, the authors point to a major barrier in trying to establish an independent Socialist Republican politics. Supporters of the GFA, UK governments, other unionists, Sinn Fein, the SDLP, the leaders of the Northern Irish Committee of Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NIC-ICTU) and the mainstream media use "the term 'dissident' as a catch-all to frighten all republicans who criticise the peace process, as if those advocating armed struggle are the only republicans who oppose it... tar-brushing everyone."⁴⁴ Therefore, Socialist Republicans, who oppose the GFA on other grounds, are also targeted.

There are dissident Republicans, now mainly organised in Saoradh⁴⁵ and the associated New IRA,⁴⁶ who do currently support armed struggle. But there are other dissidents who also come out of the earlier Republican insurrectionary tradition - eirigi⁴⁷ and the Irish Republican Socialist Party.⁴⁸ They argue that the political conditions no longer exist to conduct armed struggle but do permit an alternative political path to achieve a reunited Ireland. There are also the non-party 1916 Societies,⁴⁹ which promote a 'One Ireland/One Vote' to achieve a reunited Ireland.

Although disagreeing over the current relevance of armed struggle, what unites these dissident Republicans is they are part of a wider Irish Nationalist, Separatist tradition. This Separatism has also been shared by others – e.g. the post-1922 Treaty, Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) in the USA. Although the AOH is now far less influential in Northern Ireland, it continues to have an impact on Irish-American politics, and thus indirectly back on Irish politics. The AOH has had long-standing ties with the US Democratic Party. These are currently reinforced, with Joe Biden as US president, coming from an Irish immigrant background. A far more recent Separatist organisation found in Ireland 'North' and 'South' is Aontu,⁵⁰ a 2019 breakaway from Sinn Fein.

All wings of Separatist Nationalism distance themselves from the UK state, and the union- and empire-accommodating forms of Irish Nationalism, upheld by the old Irish Parliamentary Party, an earlier AOH, the SDLP and now 'New' Sinn Fein. The Separatists do want the 'Brits Out'.

But Irish Separatism is divided. On one hand, there are those dissident Republicans who oppose US imperialism, with some supporting Russian imperialism⁵¹ (in either its Soviet Unionist or Putin's Russian 'One and Indivisible' forms⁵²). They are also strong in their support for those longstanding victims of western, particularly US imperialism – Cuba and Palestine.

And, on the other hand, the AOH, an exclusively male Catholic organisation. supports a specifically sectarian form of Separatism that upholds traditional Catholic social values. The AOH with its Democratic Party links, opposes Russian imperialism. Aontu also supports traditional Catholic social values, but backs the wider socially reactionary politics advocated by Trump and Putin, which also sometimes lines them up with the DUP.

However, under changed political conditions, the two wings of Separatism, dissident Republican and Catholic social conservatism could still find a partial accommodation. For example, if the Trumpite hard Right, authoritarian populists were to take control in the USA again, then the AOH and Aontu could easily switch to supporting a Trump/Putin imperialist deal over Ukrainian partition. This would help them further advance their shared socially reactionary agenda on migrant, national minority, women and LGBT+ rights.

This is why Putin is supported by and finances the hard and far Right in Europe too. He has also been supported by many in the Tory Party and by Nigel Farage. The dissident Republicans seem blind to this, just as they, along with some Socialists, failed to acknowledge the inevitable hard and far Right domination of Brexit. Irexit, under the current political and economic conditions, could only push the RoI into greater economic dependence on the UK and greater political dependence on the USA.

Earlier revolutionary Socialists, especially the three components of the International Left,⁵³ emphasised the need for Communists to reject Separatism and to become organised in an International. It was only the ebbing of the 1916-21 International Revolutionary Wave, and the emergent counter-revolution-within-the-revolution, that led to a new Separatism. This was given a 'Left' colouring as the 'national road to socialism'. In the USSR and the UK, this might be better described as the 'unionist road to socialism', since it was hostile to any further political separation, i.e, the independence of these imperial states' constituent nations.

In January 1918, with the revolutionary wave on the upsurge, the Bolshevik and Left Social-Revolutionary-led government of the new Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (RSFSR) boldly issued *The Declaration Rights of the Working and Exploited People*. This declared that “The Russian Soviet Republic is established on the principle of a free union of free nations as a federation of Russian Soviet Republics... while leaving it to the workers and peasants of each nation to decide independently at their own authoritative Congress of Soviets whether they wish to participate in the federal government and in the other federal Soviet institutions”.⁵⁴

In this voluntary ‘Internationalism from Below’, the concept of democratic self-determination was not based on Separatism. Breaking up existing empires was seen as a precondition for a new form of unification or internationalism. In March 1919, as the revolutionary wave continued to surge forward, the optimistic, newly founded, Third International declared, “Soon we shall see the foundation of the World Federative Republic of Soviets”.⁵⁵

This was seen as vital, first because the economically backward RSFSR needed the assistance of an economically developed Germany; and secondly to overcome the recent divisive legacy left by capitalist ‘nation’-states, particularly in Europe. This had led to wars stemming from the ‘nation’-state based capitalists’ need to control raw materials beyond their own borders.

During the 1916-21 International Revolutionary Wave, the International Left had never made any claim that Socialism could be successfully built in economically less developed states, or in individual economically developed states for that matter. They all saw an international revolution, which first toppled the weakest link in the imperialist chain, Tsarist Russia, as providing a basis upon which the World Federative Republic of Soviets, necessary to build the basis of Socialism/Communism, could be created. This would enable cooperative economic planning on an international basis, where raw materials, foodstuffs, finished products and technology could be shared. This could overcome the legacy of imperialism’s competitive, wasteful and destructive state borders.

But this World Federative Republic of Soviets, or even an immediate Central and Eastern European Federative Republic of Soviets, based on the revolutions which began in Germany, Hungary, Slovakia and Austria, never came to pass. As a consequence, the International Revolutionary Wave turned in on itself. Largely confined within the border of the old Tsarist Russian empire, all the basic raw materials – e.g. wheat, coal, iron ore and oil - had to be obtained within these territories, or from as much of them as the RSFSR could control. The infant RSFSR was largely cut-off from the more advanced industrial goods and technologies, which it had hoped to gain from the West.

Revolutions are always going to involve armed struggle against counter-revolutionaries within any territories that the revolutionary forces control. However, the fewer the available resources to meet the needs of the people and the greater the resort to military methods, the more the inevitable excesses associated with war are going to occur. And the longer this relative isolation continues, the more the negative features found in the new state and amongst its political upholders, will be.

Furthermore, the newly founded all-Russia Communist Party - RCP(b) - was wedded to the idea of national assimilation to Russia. Vladimir Lenin and the Radical Left, Rosa Luxemburg, represented two of the three components of the International Left. These two wings supported the theory of national assimilation. They got this from Kaul Kautsky, the Second International's 'Pope of Marxism'. Under this theory, minorities, even if they locally formed large majorities (e.g, the 21 million Ukrainian speakers in Tsarist Russia⁵⁶) would eventually speak the dominant language of the state where they lived, in this case Russian, and in the process assimilate as Great Russians.

However, Lenin did support the idea of transitional provision for many minority languages until such assimilation could be attained. For some of these languages, with very few linguistic ties to Slavic Russian, and spoken by peoples who still had relatively little contact with Great Russians, such a transition might take a long time. Lenin could also concede that Poles, Finns and some others might want to join their co-speakers beyond the RSFSR's borders. But when it

came to Slav speaking Ukrainians and Byelorussians the pressure to assimilate was considerably greater. Furthermore, Luxemburg and the Radical Left were hostile to most minority languages. Luxemburg was particularly hostile to Yiddish, but made an exception for the Polish language because Poland was more economically developed than Tsarist Russia. It had a Polish speaking bourgeoisie, whom she thought were necessary to create the main capitalist precondition for Socialism - a working class

Assimilationist thinking also underpinned Lenin's support for the national right of self-determination. This was opposed by Luxemburg and the Radical Left. For Lenin, this demand could have a revolutionary impact, but only until the outbreak of a wider Democratic or later Socialist Revolution within existing states. Then support for the immediate exercise of national self-determination would become counter-revolutionary. So, at this point Lenin joined Luxemburg and the Radical Left. The Radical Left always thought that support for national-self-determination in capitalist countries was counter-revolutionary. But as Lev Yurkevich, a Ukrainian proponent of the third component of the International Left - the supporters of 'Internationalism from Below' - wrote, "A strange freedom is it not, which the oppressed nations will renounce the more nearly they approach its attainment!"⁵⁷

But these 'Internationalism from Below' supporters were also opposed to Separatism which isolated national political parties and newly independent States. James Connolly wanted the Irish Socialist Republican Party to be directly represented at the Second International, not by the British, Social Democratic Federation.⁵⁸ Later the Ukrainian Communists - the Borotbists and the Ukapists - wanted to be directly represented in the Third International, not by the all-Russia CP(b), and its branch office, the CP(b)U. They also wanted a Soviet Federation, where Ukraine was an independent member, not a specifically Russian Federation - the RSFSR - where Ukraine was a subordinate, in effect, neo-colonial unit.⁵⁹

But Irish Republicans can justifiably point out that no revolutionary International exists today. And all we have are the various

confessional sect-Internationals determined to uphold their own orthodoxies (e.g. Marxism, Marxism-Leninism, Trotskyism). This leads to the inevitable political sectarianism, or to the opportunist electoral fronts, which characterise their behaviour.

Given there is no immediate revolutionary situation today, we have to look elsewhere for the conditions to recreate an effective ‘Internationalism from Below’. And to do that, the political limitations of today’s Irish and British Socialists also need to be examined.

h) Challenging the limitations of Irish and British Socialism: abstract propagandism and tail-ending the political projects of others

Today, as we have seen, dissident Republicans are divided over two main approaches to Irish unification – whether to return to the old Provisional IRA’s military strategy (Saoradh and the New IRA), or whether to use legal political campaigning and direct action (eirigi and the IRSP). But Irish and British Socialists are also divided over their approach to Irish unification.

Section A of this review⁶⁰ made a critical assessment of the strategy to achieve Irish unification advocated by John McAnulty of Socialist Democracy (Ireland). John’s approach is based on the premiss, “the Good Friday Agreement was a stunning defeat for revolutionary nationalists {Republicans} and socialists.”⁶¹ The politics flowing from such an assessment can best termed ‘abstract propagandism’.

Instead of offering any programme and activity to address the immediate political situation, John argues that “Breaking the mould involves presenting a new political alternative, a revolutionary break from today’s more or less universal corruption in favour of renewed calls for a workers’ republic”. But such a call is only meaningful in a revolutionary situation where workers have their own independent class organisations - trade unions, cooperatives and community organisations. Today such organisations may be organisationally

independent, but they remain politically dependent, as the authors clearly demonstrate for Ireland. Nor is there a well-supported revolutionary party able to take the lead in bringing about a Workers' Republic.

So, in reality, John's call does not engage with the existing democratic struggle but amounts to an 'abstract propagandist' approach. It's a bit like refusing to support workers striking for a wage increase, because they don't oppose the wages system. Republican Socialists, though, see participation in battles against exploitation, oppression and alienation⁶² as 'schools of struggle', in which we can also learn. And, in the process, we argue for the defence and advance of the politically autonomous working class organisations. This is the context in which an independent working class revolutionary party can break with the legacies of the confessional sects and the bureaucratised Labour/Social Democratic parties. Autonomous organisations of the exploited and oppressed, along with an independent revolutionary party of the working class, united in its diversity are both needed to provide the basis for future Workers' Republics.

Following on what Robbie McVeigh and Bill Rolston term Ireland's "unfinished revolution",⁶³ Section A of this review also used Tommy McKearney's arguments from his earlier book *TPIRA:FIItP*⁶⁴ to assess the post-GFA situation. These arguments are further elaborated in the authors' *TSofNIatDD*.⁶⁵ Indeed, two of the authors, Paul and Tommy, have since written *Who won the war in an Irish town? From the fear of tyranny to the fear of freedom*.⁶⁶ The political significance of this is that they do not agree with John's over-pessimistic analysis and wish to persuade older jaded and cynical Socialists and Republicans, and more hopefully those more eager younger people to look to other political possibilities, already latent in today's struggles.

The authors argue that a "space has begun to merge for progressive politics."⁶⁷ This review agrees with this assessment but is more circumspect about the indicators the authors cite - 1) "the election of two formidable Left candidates {PbP} to seats in the Stormont

Assembly”⁶⁸ and 2) “the emergence of trade union groups such as the Dublin-based Trade Union Left Forum”⁶⁹ (TULF).”

Both PbP and TULF⁷⁰ are all-Ireland organisations, which is an advance on such partitioned organisations as the SPI. PbP is essentially an electoral front organisation for the Socialist Workers Network (SWN) and RISE (Revolution, Internationalism, Socialism and the Environment). Nevertheless, PbP and its constituent organisations have done some good work, particularly in challenging long-standing, Catholic and Protestant fundamentalist, reactionary social values, e.g. over abortion and LBGT+ rights. They support workers’ economic and social struggles. TULF is of a Broad Left nature, with far more coverage given on its blog to trade union officials than to rank and file workers. But TULF is not parochial and gives considerable coverage to international issues.

However, if we assess these two organisations on the basis of the authors’ call for Republican Socialists “to concentrate on the democratic deficit”, and also the importance of the issue of Irish unity, PbP and TULF are found wanting. This reflects the other side of the split amongst Irish Socialists.

When it comes to constitutional issues, many Socialists look to what they see as the more progressive wing of the ruling class or would-be ruling class to take the political lead. This usually follows an extended period of prevarication, showing these Socialists’ discomfort in moving from the economic and social to democratic political issues. They often dismiss constitutional issues as only the concern of the ‘chattering classes.’

But during periods of crisis, constitutional issues tend to come to the fore, and the ‘chattering classes’ are joined by more rooted classes, including the working class. This became very apparent during the 2012-14 Scottish independence campaign. As a consequence, all the Scottish and British Socialist organisations were compelled to take an attitude to the SNP’s constitutional proposals.

Some, like the SPS - the SP(E&W)’s branch office - declared that, since it wasn’t a Socialist Scotland which the SNP were proposing,

they could not join any wider pro-independence campaign. But as it turned out they still advocated voting ‘Yes’. In this case, unlike what would appear to be SD(I) logic in any future Sinn Fein-led Irish reunification campaign - ‘a plague on both your houses’ - the SP(E&W)/SPS were caught between abstract propaganda for a Socialist Scotland and tail-ending the constitutional nationalists.

Others, like the SWP and its breakaways, joined the wider independence campaign, but argued that the best way to win a ‘Yes’ vote was to concentrate on economic and social issues which met the needs of the working class - the majority of people in Scotland. The SNP’s ‘Indy-Lite’ political proposals were left largely unchallenged.

Republican Socialists argued though, within the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) (a widely supported coalition (or united front), formed in 2012), that it should build on the many autonomous independence groups, which proliferated across Scotland during the 2012-14 campaign. They argued that these groups should retain their existence and their full autonomy after any ‘Yes’ vote. RIC should take the lead in getting these organisations to create the political pressure to push for a Scottish Constituent Assembly, where the people of Scotland would decide their future, and not leave it to the SNP government’s proposed negotiators. The SNP planned to have Scottish politicians from the SNP, Labour, Tories, Lib-Dems and Scottish Greens on one negotiating team and Cameron’s UK government on the other. Any outcome of such negotiations would have been decidedly ‘Indy-Lite’ - with Scotland under the Crown, the Bank of England, the British High Command and NATO – or a ‘Scottish Free State’!

Today in Ireland, the issue of unification has also extended further than the ‘chattering classes.’ Sinn Fein’s electoral successes in the 2020 Dail elections and the 2022 Stormont elections indicate this. Sinn Fein has already put in place, Time4Unity/Am Le Haontach,⁷¹ (T4U/ALH), and its outreach, ‘Ireland’s Future’. T4U/ALH is the equivalent of the SNP’s official front organisation from 2012-14 - ‘Yes Scotland’.

With no immediate prospect of an Irish reunification referendum, T4U/ALH has organised a whole series of meetings. Sinn Fein's leadership decide who is invited, just as the invitees to 'Yes Scotland' were decided by the SNP leadership. A recent much-flagged, 'Ireland's Future' conference was held in Dublin's 3Arena on 3.10.22⁷² There was a particular welcome for people participating from a unionist background. But, so far, no politicians from the official Unionist/Loyalist bloc have attended these events.

As the Sinn Fein leadership cuddles up to Fianna Fail and Fine Gael (the Irish tanaiste, Leo Varadkar was at the 'Ireland's Future' conference) they will be pushed further to accommodate the official Unionists. John has already outlined the likely further abandonment of any Irish Republican perspective this will lead to. Sinn Fein will see "the task of achieving Irish unity... defined as the conciliation of unionist culture rather than the defeat of an imperialist power."⁷³ But, as with the British Labour Party's old 'Clause 4 Socialism', there will still be a sentimental residue, in this case of 'Republicanism', to provide some cover.

There are already forces on the Right of Irish nationalism who foresee Irish reunification under the Crown and Commonwealth. Sinn Fein's growing accommodation to these forces means reunification on British imperial terms, just as the UK state and unionist government set the parameters for the Irish Free State and the GFA. However, the establishment of an independent (albeit) partitioned Irish state since 1923, able to call on the backing of the USA, means it is very unlikely that a reunited Ireland could be brought back into the UK, as Baron Nigel Lawson of 'Vote Leave' and Nigel Farage of 'Grassroots Out' wistfully suggested. But Irish reunification under the Crown, Commonwealth and NATO with the backing of the USA, and the City of London continuing to exert its economic influence, could well be the endpoint of Sinn Fein's class conciliatory politics.

PbP, prompted by both the SWN and RISE, has fallen in behind this Sinn Fein-led T4U/ALH, just as the British SWP fell in behind the SNP-led 'Yes' campaign in 2012. They too didn't offer any political alternative, in this case to the SNP's 'Indy-Lite' constitutional

proposals. Furthermore, it is an indication of PbP's willingness to tail-end others over constitutional questions that, back in 2018, in Northern Ireland, PbP supported the SDLP/APNI/NIC(CTU) #wedesebetter call for the reconstitution of the NIE,⁷⁴ so that 'normal' Stormont politics could be resumed.

However, this is now forgotten, with Sinn Fein's emergence as the party with the largest electoral support (24.5%) in the February 2020 Dail elections. PbP has swung behind them. First, they called for Sinn Fein to lead a 'Left' government. This was truly fantasy politics⁷⁵, both with regard to Sinn Fein's longer-term strategic aim – a coalition with Fianna Fail - and the political nature of the other suggested partners. For these included not only Solidarity (PbP, RISE, SPI) and Independents4Change on the Left, but also the Social Democrats, Labour and Greens, which had all participated in Right-led Irish governments.

More recently, PbP's Brid Smith, TD, shared the platform of the 'Ireland's Future' conference in Dublin. She did not use the time to criticise Sinn Fein's growing political accommodation to the 26 counties, Irish state and their record in the 6 counties Northern Irish statelet. Her political criticisms played to the gallery. They were reserved for the "conservative Unionists parties of the north" (an easy target – they were not there), who should be "binned"⁷⁶ – (a purely rhetorical solution).

But so far, there has been no comment on the TULF blog about 'Ireland's Future'. Remaining strong ties with the CTU bureaucracy pledged to continuing Social Partnership with the government and bosses, and past strong links with the Irish Labour Party, make such discussions more difficult. However, the Irish Labour Party has become so discredited over its earlier support for Austerity that there is little doubt some discussion going on behind-the-scenes in TULF and CTU bureaucracy circles. Thus, the TULF blog article, which did address the 2020 Dial election, did not call for a vote for Labour, but for "radical change", which many would see as a call to vote Sinn Fein.⁷⁷

However, Sinn Fein would probably be more favourable to an ICTU, rather than a TULF presence at any future ‘Ireland Future’ conference. The ICTU’s supports Social Partnership. Nevertheless, PbP’s early participation shows that Sinn Fein’s politically savvy leadership appreciate the need for some Left cover. The SNP had Colin Fox, former SSP MSP on ‘Yes Scotland’s Advisory Board.⁷⁸ So space could yet be made for TULF at the top table.

Therefore, it can be seen that there are two Socialist approaches to any Sinn Fein-led campaign for Irish unification – ‘abstract propagandism’, or accommodation to Sinn Fein’s as yet undefined constitutional proposals (which are likely to be teased out behind-the-scenes in Sinn Fein approved ‘civic forums’). But these two Socialist approaches turn out not to be political opposites. In their own distinctive ways, they ensure there is no immediate organise Republican challenge to a non-Republican, Sinn Fein-led Irish reunification campaign.

i) A Republican Socialist approach based on uniting the working class in our diversity and supporting the new oppositional forces in their struggles from below

Like all genuine Socialists, the authors want to give agency to the working class. For most people, trade unions are seen as being the prime working class defensive organisations during any employers’ offensive against jobs, pay and conditions. However, throughout the authors’ book, examples are given of the obstacles presented by the trade union leadership in meeting these aims.

Partition itself greatly contributes to the problem of trying to build cross-border unity on the basis of economic struggles. Although there is extensive trade between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, the wages and conditions in their respective workplaces are negotiated quite independently. This is the case even for companies which operate on both sides of the border, e.g. Lidl, just as it is say in Germany and France, both in the EU. And in Northern Ireland, there is a considerably bigger public sector, from a percentage in

employment point of view. This employment is based around the activities of the devolved statelet, so the divide, between ‘North’ and ‘South’, is further accentuated.

Indeed, even in Scotland, such devolved administrative institutions also lead to different wages and conditions negotiating frameworks compared to the rest of the UK. These conditions have led to the formation and maintenance of separate trade unions, e.g. Northern Ireland Public Services Alliance (NIPSA) for civil servants, and the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) for teachers and further education college lecturers. These two trade unions dominate pay and conditions negotiations in their particular arenas. And this is given an additional twist in Northern Ireland, where most primary and secondary education has been constitutionally divided between the state (read Protestant) and Catholic sectors. The Ulster Teachers’ Union (UTU) organises in the official state/Protestant sector (alongside the all-UK NASUWT), whilst the (all-Ireland) Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO) dominates the official Catholic sector.

Furthermore, there are other serious problems with the current trade union set-up, both in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) and the UK. Senior trade union officials have long enjoyed pay and perks way beyond that of their members. Many, particularly on the Right, are happier mixing socially with local and national politicians, middle level civil servants and top-level local government officials and accepting hospitality from the employers. There is long history of union bureaucrats, Right and Left, moving over to government and private business employment. In the UK, not a few have ended up taking royal honours or ended up in the House of Lords, again including some from the Left.

Elected general secretaries can also appoint full-timers. Their first loyalty is often then to the general secretary, rather than the members. They are in a position to influence any union elections especially if an oppositional rank and file worker member stands. Thus, today’s heavily bureaucratised trade unions, especially in the UK, mimic Westminster. Here it is claimed that sovereignty resides in parliament,

when, under the sovereignty of Crown-in-Westminster, it lies in the Inner Cabinet (and more secretively with the Privy Council). Trade union leaders like to claim that sovereignty lies with the members at the union's annual conference, whereas in reality, it lies with the general secretary and his appointed officials in the trade union HQ.

However, the authors point to an additional obstacle in Northern Ireland, which involves the trade union leaders. They highlight the role of Fresh Start, a Social Partnership scheme, which brings together trade union officials, politicians, senior civil servants and the employers. The effect of Social Partnership is often to reduce union leaders to a free personnel management service for the employers.

The authors develop their case using the NHS (Northern Ireland) Bengoa Report. This was designed to “modernise the health service”⁷⁹ The authors show how Bengoa acknowledged that “worker conditions would change”⁸⁰ and not for the better. But Bengoa was welcomed by Kevin McCabe, Assistant Secretary of NIPSA and John Patrick Layton of UNISON.⁸¹ UNITE regional officer, Kevin McAdam, argued how “the union has a positive outlook towards this process of reform”⁸² But Bengoa wasn't going to negatively affect these trade union officials' pay and working conditions. As a Social Partnership scheme, Bengoa was going to bring them closer to politicians, senior civil servants and other employers – better paid work and junketting.

And Social Partnership is underpinned by the neo-liberal GFA. Furthermore, many trade union leaders in the ‘South’, in the face of ever-weakening influence under the long-standing Social Partnerships there, are still wedded to these. They hope to be brought back into the right offices. Here, prosecco and canapes have long replaced beer and sandwiches. A Broad Left approach, like that of TULF, seeks to exert pressure within the trade unions under the two existing state set-ups, underpinned ‘North’ and ‘South’ by the GFA. In this they face an analogous problem to Sinn Fein seeking Irish reunification through similar constitutional arrangements.

If trade unionists are ever to link up ‘South’ and ‘North’ in action, it is not a Broad Left approach that is needed. TULF seeks to replace existing Right trade union officials with Left trade union officials. A Rank and File approach, or ‘industrial republicanism’, is required. This seeks to put sovereignty in the hands of the members in their workplaces (and drawing on the IWU precedent their communities too). All union officials should be paid on the basis of workers’ average earned pay (or possibly in some unions representing better paid workforces, the average earned pay of these members). All officials with responsibility for negotiating and policy making should be elected, with mechanisms in place for recall. Such representatives would not be so wedded to the Social Partnerships and the GFA.

Using Bengoa, the authors argue what is needed in relation to health is “a community and trade union approach {as pioneered by the IWU} connecting {autonomous} social networks and social support that can best provide policies on health promotion”.⁸³ They also provide an example of a “candidate...{Gary Donnelly} elected to Derry City Council {in} 2014, campaigning on the ground for the establishment of a detox unit in a city.”⁸⁴ There is a clear parallel here with the work begun by Peter Krykant in the face of the massive drug problem in Scotland.⁸⁵

So, where do we look to build the forces for an immediate Republican campaign for Irish unification? Certainly, selecting economic, social and cultural issues is important for Socialists. And economic struggles occur almost daily and show a rising world-wide trend in the face of ongoing employer and government attacks. But putting an emphasis on trade union economic struggles to bring about Irish reunification is misplaced.

And the current call by many Socialists for more coordinated industrial action, even a one-day general strike, needs to be treated with some caution. Broad Left union leaders are skilled at using other unions’ members’ simultaneous actions as additional bargaining leverage to make their own settlements which soon break up any short-lived unity. After the massive cross-public sector pensions strike in the UK on November 11th, 2011, UNITE’s Broad Left leader,

Len McCluskey, was one of the first to press for a separate deal for his members.

Even when trade unions extend their operations to wider community and social issues, e.g. water supply (Right2Water), housing (Raise the Roof), health (the Bengoa Report), the different natures of the states, 'South' and 'North' tends to fragment these struggles. Thus, the chronic housing shortage in Dublin largely reflects the role of Southern based property firms and behind them the operations of the global banks and vulture capitalists.⁸⁶ Whereas one of the main problems with housing in Belfast is the method of its allocation, reinforced under the GFA.⁸⁷ When Loyalists organise sectarian intimidation to expel Irish Nationalists and migrants from their homes, they are often assisted by the PSNI, who pressurise the victims of these attacks to move for their own safety, doing the Loyalists' dirty work for them.

Yet, there is one arena where many already realise the Border is an impediment to any effective action. That is environmental degradation. Indeed, both the Cop26 and Cop27 mobilisations not only involved Dublin⁸⁸ and Belfast, but many places, across these islands and throughout the world⁸⁹ The choice first raised by Rosa Luxemburg, in the face of the threat of World War 1, 'Socialism or Barbarism', is today posed, with the added spectre of global warming, as 'Socialism or Extinction'. Workers and the wider oppressed are most affected by environmental degradation and the serial abandonment of whole regions when their resources have been exhausted or their use become obsolete.

Furthermore, despite the dismissive attitudes of some Socialists towards what they see as middle class Greens, many more environmental activists are serving punitive jail sentences, than is currently the case for trade union activists. This means that they are often more questioning of the existing state, than many who 'big up' trade union activity.

Going beyond simultaneous actions, 'South' and 'North', Ireland has also witnessed cross-border action over social issues. The campaigns

over women's rights, particularly abortion, and gay and transgender rights, have led to demonstrations in Dublin and Belfast, bringing many people over the Border. There is a shared awareness that whatever the sectarian religious differences between the Catholic hierarchy and Protestant fundamentalist denominations, they have a common reactionary social agenda. Many, particularly young people, clearly understand this and have shown solidarity by attending events 'South' and 'North'.

The first Belfast Pride march in 1991 faced intimidation from Loyalist and Protestant fundamentalist bigots⁹⁰ opposing 'Satan's sodomites.' The Catholic hierarchy did not mobilise their supporters on the streets but were still loud in their public condemnation of gays. However, the 2022 Belfast Pride demonstration was one of the year's biggest events in the city. This was organised around the theme of a "community united in diversity". Asylum seekers and refugees were given the lead.⁹¹

Those Socialists who dismiss the struggle for LBGT+ rights as diversionary 'culture wars', or even 'wokeism', reveal their own deep Economism (and sometimes worse). Leaving such issues to the Right means abandoning the war on oppression and alienation, the other two pillars of capitalism, along with exploitation. And, of course, the vast majority of the LBGT+ community are members of the exploited working class, a class which can only be united in our diversity.

Another group who will find themselves up against the state are those migrant workers most affected by any hardening post-Brexit Border. Sinn Fein has confined its attention, though, largely upon those Irish residents who have long-lived close to the Border. Ever since the EU-backed GFA, these people have seen the virtual disappearance of the Border for all practical purposes. This has been a huge advance on the heavily RUC policed, British army fortified posts, and in places cratered roads found there during 'The Troubles'. But now 'Brexit' threatens all this.

Sinn Fein-led Borders Communities Against Brexit (BCAB) looks to the EU leaders and to Joe Biden to address the new post-Brexit

problems, highlighted by the Unionist/Loyalist attack on the EU Protocol. But the BCAB does not show much concern for migrants. Yet they will be even worse affected, and indeed non-Irish migrants from the ‘South’ already face problems crossing the Border, even when married to people from the ‘North’.

Tory Home Secretaries have shown particular and ever-increasing hatred for new migrants and asylum seekers (Theresa May, Priti Patel and now Sue Braverman). Some migrants can nevertheless be admitted to the UK to be super-exploited under temporary work contracts. This was already promised by the ‘Vote Leave’ wing of the Brexiteers and new legislation is being put in place for this purpose. Post-Brexit, most EU citizens in or seeking work will face the same draconian laws that non-EU citizens have long faced.

It is not hard to see that Tory governments, more than prepared to whip up xenophobia and racism directed at migrants and asylum seekers trying to cross the English Channel moat, will use the Brexit political opportunities to direct their attacks on migrants and asylum seekers seeking to cross Ireland’s land Border. In this they will try to curry favour with those Brexit-supporting Unionists and Loyalists wishing to further undermine the GFA and its ‘parity of esteem’. Only for the Tories, their priority is to reinforce ‘Fortress Britain’ – with British-Ulster acting as outer defence works on the far side of the Irish Sea moat.

Republican Socialists though should, as well as backing the efforts of the long-established Border residents, be prioritising the defence of migrants and asylum seekers. The successful precedent of taking direct action to defend migrants and asylum seekers has already been seen in Scotland, in Glasgow and Edinburgh. Activists and members of the Pollokshields community in Glasgow successfully resisted the Home Office’s attempt to arrest and deport two Sikhs living in Kenmure Street on 13.5.21.⁹² Since then, migrant defence networks have been organised in Glasgow and Edinburgh.⁹³

A key feature, once again, of such organisations is that their practitioners hold few illusions about the nature of the state they have

to confront. In the face of a harder Border within Ireland, Republican Socialists could promote similar activity, linking it to our shared critique of the UK state, and the extension of the Partition already underpinning the GFA.

Another suggested arena for Republican Socialist activity is the language issue. The authors highlight the role of “Linda Ervine, a language rights activist and Protestant based in East Belfast... one side her family was entrenched in a sectarian political agenda, most recently the... UVF, another part of her family tradition... had a deep commitment to secular labour movement politics, through the Communist Party.”⁹⁴

Linda is closely involved with the Skainos Centre located in Lower Newtonards Road in East Belfast, a heartland of Loyalist sectarianism in East Belfast. This Skainos Centre is surrounded by many displays of Loyalist murals and paramilitary flags. This makes the existence and success of this non-sectarian, indeed anti-sectarian centre, also supported by the local Methodist Church of Ireland, significant. It houses the Turas Irish Language Programme.

Under the sectarian GFA set-up, the Irish language, despite historically being spoken by some Protestants and now being learned by others, has continued to be attacked, and in some cases publicly ridiculed, by Unionists and Loyalists. They claim Irish is only spoken by a few and is promoted by Republicans for anti-British purposes.

However, the Irish language has been recognised as an official language by the EU. Its position in Northern Ireland was underwritten by the EU’s European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The body responsible for the Irish language in Northern Ireland is Foras na Gaeilge (FnG).⁹⁵ Annoyingly for some Unionists and Loyalists, the FnG is an all-Ireland body.

Unionists and Loyalist could do little about FnG whilst the UK remained part of the EU. So instead, some decided to promote the Ulster Scots language, or Ullans, which is related to the Scots language or Lallans. The Ulster Scots Agency/Boord of Ulster Scotch (USA/BoUS), its HQ located in Belfast, was set up, like the FnG

under the GFA. But the EU, in an attempt to prevent the USA/BoUS being used for sectarian purposes, also created a regional office in Raphoe, in east County Donegal in the RoI. Historically many Scots had settled here.

Now that Northern Ireland with the UK has left the EU, this places the FnG in a more politically exposed position than Bòrd na Gàidhlig in Scotland,⁹⁶ or the Senedd's official Welsh Language Commissioner in Wales.⁹⁷ The abortive Irish language struggle in Stormont, and the, so far, more productive struggle at Westminster to get official recognition for the Irish language (using Welsh and Scots Gaelic precedents within the UK) have opened up splits amongst those promoting the Irish and Ullans languages.

Sadly, some Republicans and Socialists have a mirror attitude towards Ullans, that many Unionists and Loyalists have towards the Irish language – it is only spoken by a few and promoted by Unionists and Loyalists for anti-Irish purposes. And there has indeed been such Unionist and Loyalist instrumental support for Ullans. The late Lord Laird, with a pronounced, if at times eccentric, sectarian past and a history of expenses swindling and paid lobbying, was an early promoter of Ulster Scots to counter the Irish language and Irish Nationalism. He was a founder member of the USA/BoUS.⁹⁸

However, there are Ullans speakers and supporters who do not see the promotion of this language in sectarian terms. Furthermore, their support for the language has more in common with those in Scotland and England, who champion rural and urban working class speech. This has always been culturally marginalised. Within Ulster Unionism elevated the Ulster landlords' and business leaders' spoken English. At times, they were prepared to patronise the 'lower orders' and their speech. Those Ullans advocates who oppose this, approach have already cooperated with Irish language speakers in organising joint events, including traditional music. The interpenetration of Irish and Ulster-Scots musical traditions is particularly strong.

Furthermore, going back to the political highpoint, in the late 1790s, of Irish cross-community cooperation, uniting Protestant, Catholic

and Dissenter, many of its United Irish advocates, particularly Ulster-Scots-speaking weavers and their poets, were to the forefront of this struggle. The mainly secular Presbyterian (Dissenter) Belfast leadership of the United Irishmen (and there were prominent women too, both Presbyterians and Catholics in their ranks) also promoted the Irish language and traditional Irish music. Their journal, the *Northern Star*, published an Irish language miscellany, *Bolg an tSolair* in 1795 and promoted the Irish slogan, *Eireann go brach* – ‘Ireland Forever’.⁹⁹ One of their members, Henry Joy, organised the Belfast Harp Festival in 1792.¹⁰⁰

And the Scots poet, Robert Burns, who wrote much of his poetry in Lallans, was also sympathetic to the Gaelic language and music.¹⁰¹ He had strong connections with Ulster, some of its United Irish supporting weaver poets and Henry Joy, who visited him in Dumfries.¹⁰² Interest in Burns transcends narrow cultural milieu and is international. Burns has recently been enjoying something of a revival in Belfast.

The politically contrived conflicts between Irish and Ulster-Scots/Ullans are often particularly bitter, given the entrenched sectarianism found in Northern Ireland. However, such conflicts, this time between Scottish Gaelic and Scots/Lallans, are also well-known in Scotland. It would help these languages and their supporters in Ireland and Scotland, if their links were better appreciated and a greater solidarity developed.

Only the British ruling class and the UK state benefits from divide-and-rule language politics. Part of their strategy is to elevate the Queen’s English or BBC English to a privileged position. In challenging this, support for Irish, Ullans, Scots Gaelic and Lallans could contribute to wider cultures of resistance’. The Irish language achieved this in her majesty’s ‘Jailtacht’ during ‘The Troubles’. When Sinn Fein prevaricated over the Irish language to keep the GFA on the road, the radical Irish language group, An Dream Dearg (ADD), mounted a thousands’ strong demonstration in Belfast.¹⁰³ This demonstration wasn’t a one-off, since ADD was able to repeat this on 22.5.22.¹⁰⁴

The campaigns of the Welsh Language Society/ Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg¹⁰⁵ (WLS/CyIG) massively contributed to the the successful revival of the Welsh language. Many activists were jailed in the process. This led WLS/CyIG activists to question the state, in a way many trade unionists involved in economic struggles don't. In the Welsh-speaking heartland of Gwynedd, the council voted on 10.10.22, by 46 to 4, to call for the abolition of the Prince of Wales.¹⁰⁶

j) Conclusion

The authors highlight the “democratic deficit” in Northern Ireland. This review has extended this analysis to the whole UK state, and beyond that to its projection, the British Empire. The political glue holding these together has been the sovereignty of the Crown-in-Westminster, with all its anti-democratic Crown powers, and its administratively and politically devolved institutions. The ideological glue holding these together has been the promotion of various British (including Greater English) and hybrid British identities – Welsh-, Scottish-, Irish- and ‘Ulster’-British.

This section of the review has emphasised the significance of struggles which more easily understand the nature of the UK state. This is vital for the author's aim of “concentrating on the democratic deficit”. This points to the sort of ‘Internationalism from Below’ thinking which challenges both the British ruling class and their UK state's bureaucratic ‘internationalism’ from above. In the process, it also challenges those dissident Republicans with their Separatist tradition and those Irish and British Socialists with their semi-detached relation to each other. This just reflects the set-up of the UK state – Great Britain **and** Northern Ireland.

The Radical Independence Campaign, set up in Scotland on 30.11.12, began to think in Republican, 'Internationalism from Below' terms. And, despite, from an Irish point of view, the RICs unfortunate initials, it was welcomed by Bernadette McAliskey. She addressed the 2nd RIC conference¹⁰⁷ and the ‘London Says Yes’ rally.¹⁰⁸ RIC speakers were well received in Dublin, Belfast and Newry, whilst the

slopes of Divis/Black Hill behind Belfast were adorned with a massive 'YES' made up of stones. This was in defiance of Sinn Fein's advice not to get involved. This self-denying ordinance, again reflecting Ireland's and Irish Nationalists' semi-detached relationship, was not practised by the Loyalists.

The Republican former leader of Plaid Cymru, Leanne Wood also addressed a RIC rally in Glasgow,¹⁰⁹ and Edinburgh RIC sent a message to the Scotland 'Go For It' rally, she addressed in Cardiff, on 13.9.14.¹¹⁰

This underlines the need today for an islands-wide coalition to campaign for a united Poblacht na hEireann or Irish Republic; a Scots Commonweal/Poblachd Albannach or Scottish Republic; a Gweriniaeth Cymru or Welsh Republic; and a People's Commonwealth or English Republic. It is the ongoing decline of the empire, which has brought about an increased questioning of the Union, which was created to promote British imperialism. There has been a growing opposition to the Union, Empire and Monarchy in Ireland (including the 'North'), Scotland and Wales. Yet all of these nations contributed in the past to Union, Empire and Monarchy. And some of the UK's most reactionary upholders are still to be found in these countries.

England, the core of the wider Union and British Empire, has an even deeper history of Labour, trade union and Socialist accommodation to Union, Empire and Monarchy (often disguised on the Left as British 'internationalism'). Yet the massive Black Lives Matter protests in England, especially in Bristol in 2020, and the post-Windrush and Grenfell Towers scandals, highlight the importance of those people from a Black (and other) migrant background. They have far fewer illusions in the Union than most of the British Left.

One former colonial British West Indian state after another, Bahamas, Barbados, Jamaica., Grenada, Antigua and Barbuda and St Kitts-Nevis is questioning the Crown connection and pushing to be an independent Republic. This isn't just seen as a political necessity but

is also linked the socio-economic demand for compensation for the horrific British imperial slaving legacy.

And it was not only the English who took part in promoting Black chattel slavery. The British Empire also drew in Scots, Welsh and Irish as slave masters, slave drivers and slave traders. Therefore, in building a wider Republican coalition, our democratic organisation needs to extend to both long-standing and more recent migrants. Some of these people have created ‘communities of resistance’, e.g. Brixton in London, Handsworth in Birmingham and St. Pauls in Bristol. They and have also developed their own forms of the English language, demonstrated in the works of Linton Kwesi Johnson¹¹¹ and Benjamin Zephaniah.¹¹² Linton (rather letting unionist and imperialist Scotland, Wales and Ireland off the hook!) wrote *Inglan is a bitch*.¹¹³ Benjamin rejected an OBE.¹¹⁴ Their communities still retain political links to their former colonial homelands.

The St. Andrews Agreement, successor to the GFA, constituted a UK state ‘internationalism from above’ deal signed in Scotland, but with no Scottish input whatsoever. So, perhaps, the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) can join the book’s authors and others to help create an All-Islands Republican Internationalist Coalition (AIRIC) also eager to involve migrants and asylum seekers and to support those exploited and oppressed particularly by British imperialism elsewhere in the world. Fortuitously, the Gaelic ‘airic’ in English means ‘agreeable’, but this would be a very different form of agreement to the GFA, one based instead on ‘Internationalism from Below’.

Allan Armstrong, 26.11.22

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