



Tuesday, November 5<sup>th</sup> 2013

## **Statement on sectarianism from UNITE Regional Youth Committee**

The Northern Ireland peace process has helped create the opportunity to bring about stability, normalisation and progress in economic and social issues across the region. However, over the last year, sectarian tensions in Northern Ireland have been ratcheted up around a whole range of issues – from flags to parades, from the names of parks to how we remember the past. Unfortunately at times, rather than counteracting this trend and providing positive leadership, some unionist and nationalist politicians have tended to be central to the problems. Provocative statements have been made by people in responsible positions, acting in a way which has served to raise the temperature around these issues. At the same time they have continued to happily work together to slash jobs, freeze pay, attack benefits, cut services and – of course – give themselves a £5,000 pay increase!

It will be working class communities that will bear the biggest brunt of this deepening sectarianism – in the form of attacks, threats and intimidation – as was the case throughout the ‘Troubles’. Communities are blighted by sinister elements determined to drag us back into conflict and rising tensions. These elements are preying upon a ‘lost generation’ of young people who see no hope of a decent future, a generation failed by the austerity policies of the ConDems and the Assembly Executive, facing mass unemployment and endless poverty. We urgently need to build a positive alternative for these young people.

The overwhelming majority of people in both communities are absolutely opposed to any return to the dark days of the past. The trade union movement – which unites workers from all traditions, and is larger than any divisive organisation – has the power to give this often-silent majority a voice and turn the tide against sectarianism, as was demonstrated time and again over decades of conflict. Trade unionists have a long history of challenging and speaking out against sectarianism. Our movement has a particular duty and ability to respond when our members face attacks, threats or intimidation.

On numerous occasions, workers have forced paramilitaries to lift or quietly drop death threats by demonstrating their unity through strikes, walk-outs and demonstrations. In 1993, Shorts workers – including members of the predecessor Unions that now form Unite – walked off site in protest against the killing of a Catholic member of staff by loyalists. Weeks later, they marched united in protest with other workers against the IRA's bombing of a chip

shop on the Shankill Road. These and other protests played an important role in pressuring paramilitaries into the 1994 ceasefires and precipitating the peace process.

More recently, in 2001, postal workers in Belfast immediately walked out in response to the sectarian killing of a fellow postal worker. Trade unionists will always be prepared to stand in solidarity with our comrades. Members who take action to challenge sectarianism can expect full Unite's full support.

We have much more in common than divides us. To consign sectarianism to the history books, we need to build a movement which unites working class people to fight for our common interests – for jobs that pay a living wage, rights at work, high-quality healthcare and education, affordable housing, decent benefits and pensions. That means using the industrial strength of organised workers and mobilising support from the communities to fight the cuts and resist attacks from profit-hungry bosses.

But we also need to consider the question of building a political voice which challenges sectarianism and instead seeks to represent all working class people.

The trade union movement believes that a strong focus and drive must be sustained and built upon in relation to the long term process of healing community divisions, tackling inequalities, addressing sectarianism and working with others who strive for these ideals. We will challenge those who undermine these ideals and will redouble our efforts to build a shared and reconciled society.

**ENDS**

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