

Austerity and Inequality: A threat to peace?

Key points from Conference

The Equality Coalition is an umbrella network for equality NGOs and trade unions, co-convened by CAJ and UNISON. On the 15 October the above conference was held in Belfast, in partnership with ICTU, the Participation and Practice of Rights (PPR) and the Human Rights Consortium. The conference featured a range of member group speakers as well as speakers from the OECD mission to NI, a member of the UN economic, social and cultural rights committee and the heads of the human rights and equality commissions. Equality Coalition members at their meeting of the 3 November agreed the following key points:

1: Austerity and resultant inequality are a threat to peace

- The two governments themselves in the 2003 Joint Declaration took the position that unless the 'economic and social profile' of the most disadvantaged communities, including areas which were 'predominantly loyalist or nationalist' were 'positively transformed' the reality of a 'fully peaceful' society would not be complete. Government has however for a number of years been pursuing austerity policies that it knows are going to make the conditions for people in such communities much worse;
- We cannot be blind to international experience. The impacts of austerity fuel both inequality and conflict in many places. To impose them in a divided society emerging from a conflict in which inequality was a major issue carries significant additional dangers. The very patterns of deprivation, disadvantage and inequality that the peace settlement committed to tackling are likely to be now exacerbated and entrenched;

2: Whilst austerity is London-imposed the Northern Ireland Executive have some powers to make policy choices that can mitigate its impacts

- The NI Executive should, on the basis of objective need, adopt the strategy to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation that it is legally required to do;
- The NI Executive should consider raising revenue through increasing the rates paid on properties owned by the better off;
- The NI Executive should consider introducing rent controls to both alleviate the cost pressures on low income families and, by reducing Housing Benefit monies paid to property owners, provide an alternative method of reducing social security costs;
- The NI Executive should adopt a childcare strategy that implements comprehensive provision and boosts the economy by allowing parents to stay in work and increasing the economic participation of women;

3: The UK government should not impose economic policies blind to the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland and the peace settlement;

- The UK government should cease to impose economic sanctions on Northern Ireland and rescind the 100s of millions of pounds of 'fines' already levied for resistance to implementing social security cuts. The UK government knows such cuts would exacerbate deprivation, religious inequality, child poverty, and a situation of high rates of disability in conflict with its commitments in the peace agreements;
- Rather than a norm of blanket introduction government should proof its macro policies against the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland. For example how is an ideological drive to reduce the size of the state going to impact in a context where areas most affected by the conflict here tend to be those most reliant on a higher proportion of public sector employment and services? How is it going to impact on existing inequalities in health and housing?
- The UK government should cease rolling back the equality and human rights provisions of the peace Agreements and implement its many outstanding commitments;

4: Austerity measures, including the Stormont House Agreement package, must be subject to the equality proofing tools of the peace settlement;

- There is a concerning pattern emerging whereby major policy decisions on social security or public sector cuts are studiously avoiding proper equality proofing. Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs) require the consideration of alternative policies where proposed policies will negatively impact on equality. There is no exemption for austerity.
- The permanent disappearance of up to 20,000 public sector jobs and the services they provide under the 'Voluntary Exit Scheme' is being taken forward without an overarching EQIA. Some public authorities have already taken the view that there will be no equality impacts regardless of who applies and who is selected, even if the VES exacerbates the unemployment differential, unequal pay or leads to the under representation of other equality groups in the workforce;
- As well as the equality duties other tools such as human rights budget analysis should also be used to scrutinise the impact of policies and proposals. At present there is no centralised monitoring of the cuts and their impacts on substantive equality across all categories. All austerity policies including those under the Stormont House Agreement, should be properly equality proofed;

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