

Fianna Fail wins Irish election

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The ruling Fianna Fail in Ireland did better than expected in the 24 May general election to the Dáil Éireann. The outcome has been proclaimed a triumph for residing Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, who is now the first Irish premier since Eamon de Valera to win a third term in office.

Fianna Fail won 78 seats, a loss of only three. But its coalition partners, the Progressive Democrats, were nearly wiped out, dropping from eight to two seats. Fine Gael won 51, an increase of 20. Labour won 20, maintaining its previous number of seats. The Greens held onto six seats, while Sinn Féin lost one seat, reducing their delegation to four. The Socialist Party lost its only seat, while the number of independents was reduced from 14 to 5.

The result means that Fianna Fail is in a strong position to form a new coalition, perhaps with the Greens, although at this point the favoured option is a renewed arrangement with the remnants of the Progressive Democrats and a number of independents.

Fine Gael's government prospects are much slimmer. Despite their unexpectedly large electoral advance, a coalition would depend on cobbling together working arrangements between all the parties and independents excluding Fianna Fail and Sinn Féin. Horse-trading of ministerial positions, inducements and marginal policy alternations will likely continue until the Dáil reconvenes on June 14.

The result for Ahern and Fianna Fail is significant. It raises the question as to why a corrupt politician—whose personal finances were again subject to damaging scrutiny in the early stages of the election campaign, and who is continually in fear of new revelations from the Mahon Tribunal into Dublin planning “irregularities”—remains in power. And why, despite broad opposition to the government in the working class, the election was essentially a two-cornered contest between near-programmatically identical parties

of the Irish bourgeoisie.

Both Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, whose origins lie in opposing positions on Ireland's partition by British imperialism in 1921, advanced themselves as the best defenders of the Irish investment economy. Both, along with the Labour Party and the Greens, insisted on maintaining the low rate of corporation tax of 12.5 percent—the fiscal basis of the investment boom that has propelled Ireland into the ranks of countries with the highest per capita incomes in the world. Both advanced spending plans entirely dependent on maintaining an economic growth rate of around 5 percent.

Given this general agreement, the election result hinged on Ahern's ability to shrug off the corruption allegations while claiming credit for a successful economy. Ahern was also able to pose as a statesman following his role in restoring devolution in Northern Ireland. Fianna Fail could also point to the inexperience of Fine Gael's Enda Kenny as a prospective alternative Taoiseach.

The Progressive Democrats, the party formed ostensibly as an anti-corruption split from Fianna Fail, but which served to lead the way on a low tax and privatisation agenda, was severely punished, with most of its seats going to Fine Gael. The Progressive Democrats' former tanaiste, (deputy prime minister), Mary Harney, is personally associated with the government policy of introducing private hospitals on public hospital sites. Harney survived, but her successor as tanaiste, Michael McDowell, lost his Dublin seat.

McDowell's principal achievement as party leader was to undermine whatever anti-corruption credentials his party retained. He played a particularly obvious role during the “Bertiegate” scandal last year. Having threatened to resign and bring down the government at the peak of row over Ahern's financial relations with a number of Manchester businessmen, McDowell backed

off to keep Fianna Fail in power.

No party consistently questioned, still less sought to overturn, the domination of economic and political life by the interests of a small number of banks, financial services companies and property developers. Every party viewed a continued flow of investment as the only means through which living standards could be improved.

The broad frustration in the working class at high living costs and vast social inequality could therefore find no means of expression. In the absence of any serious policy differences between the major parties, the vote for Fianna Fail comes down to an expression of “better the devil you know.” Ahern and his party, and the property interests they represent, may be mistrusted, even broadly reviled, but large sections of working people do not see any viable alternative.

This is confirmed by the debacle suffered by ostensibly more left parties such as Sinn Fein and the Socialist Party. Both serve to prevent workers in Ireland from making a political break from the all-pervasive atmosphere of Irish nationalism and its deadening impact on all aspects of political life.

Fresh from the revival of the devolved assembly in Northern Ireland, having finally accepted all the requirements of the British and American governments regarding the disbanding of the IRA, Sinn Fein was expecting to do well in the South—presenting itself as the definitive all-Ireland national party.

The Gerry Adams leadership viewed with relish the prospect of being in power in the North, through devolution, and in the South through coalition with Fianna Fail. Sinn Fein targeted some of the more working class areas of Dublin, where the party has formerly had some success in highlighting aspects of the social crisis.

But instead of winning between 12 and 15 seats, Sinn Fein lost one. While its percentage of first preference votes marginally increased, by 0.4 percent, this was far from the breakthrough predicted by Adams.

The combination of nationalist rhetoric and promises of limited social reform fell flat. In addition, prior to the campaign Adams had dropped the party’s commitment to increase corporation tax as he eyed a coalition with Fianna Fail. Hence Sinn Fein’s reformist demands carried even less weight with workers and voters drew the conclusion that they should support one

or another of the major parties.

Also significant was the loss of Joe Higgins’ seat, also to Fine Gael. The overall vote for the Socialist Party, the Irish supporter of the Committee for a Workers International, went down from 0.8 percent of the national first preference votes to 0.6 percent.

Higgins has combined single-issue campaigns on such issues as refuse removal with leadership of the group of independent members of parliament—a collection of Fianna Fail fellow travellers, non-aligned republicans and campaigners whose motivation is primarily one of winning concessions for their local areas. Most of the independents lost their seats too.

While Higgins insisted that, had they won seats, the Socialist Party would stay out of a coalition with either Fine Gael or Fianna Fail, this was not the position of the independents with whom they were happy to work for years. Many of the independents will currently be receiving phone calls from Ahern, seeking an alliance to keep Fianna Fail in power.

The Socialist Party’s principle political role is to systematically obscure the programmatic issues posed to workers in Ireland. Rather than educate workers on the need for a political programme based on socialist internationalism, the focus of its election campaign was purely on demands for better local transport, health and primary school provision.



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