

Vote “No” in the Irish EU referendum

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The Socialist Equality Parties of Britain and Germany call for a decisive “No” vote in today’s referendum in the Irish republic on the European Union’s Lisbon “Reform” Treaty.

The Treaty is an attempt by the European bourgeoisie to bypass popular hostility to its plans to consolidate a trade, military and political bloc at the expense of workers’ social provision, wages, democratic rights and working conditions. This is coupled with a significant expansion of militarism.

In 2005, voters in the Netherlands and France overwhelmingly rejected these plans, voting down the European Union’s proposed Constitution. Now, via the backdoor and in a fundamentally anti-democratic manner, the European bourgeoisie is attempting to implement these same policies with the Lisbon Treaty. By substituting the word Treaty for Constitution, the European powers have sought to prevent any further expressions of popular sentiment from vetoing their objectives, as was the case with referendums on the now abandoned constitution in France and the Netherlands.

As with the constitution, the Treaty makes clear that the European ruling elite’s efforts to more effectively compete against their global rivals—particularly the United States—are to be paid for by working people.

The Treaty upholds economic liberalism as a core EU objective, building on the Bolkestein Directive, which sanctions the wholesale privatization of public services and welfare provision across Europe while overturning labour protections, particularly in Eastern Europe.

At the same time, it creates a new post—effectively that of a European “foreign minister,” although this term cannot be used—whose purpose will be to press ahead with efforts to forge a more effective military component for the European Union. Its aim is to ensure that Europe no longer has to take a backseat to the United States in the revival of neo-colonialism seen in Iraq and Afghanistan, but is able to launch its own military interventions, wherever its trade or political interests require it to do so.

As part of this consolidation, by 2014 decision-making in many policy areas is to be by majority voting instead of requiring unanimous endorsement. This will strengthen the control of the more powerful states, especially Germany, over the small accession countries.

Both France and the Netherlands have subsequently ruled out any referenda on the Treaty, as have the majority of EU states, which intend to adopt the agreement through their various parliaments. Fifteen have so far agreed to the Treaty, which must be ratified by all 27-member states in time for the 2009 European elections.

Only Ireland is constitutionally obliged to hold a referendum. Thus, out of a European population of 620 million, only one country of four million will be given any say on the Treaty. Even this has caused nervousness within the European ruling elite.

Formally, an Irish “No” vote would mean the end of the treaty. This has led European Commission president Jose Manuel Barroso to

declare that “there is no Plan B” and that a “No” vote “would have a very negative effect for the EU.”

The European ruling elite fears that an Irish rejection would further disrupt EU consolidation by exposing its complete lack of popular support, and still result in a permanently weakened bloc. It is not hard to see why. Across the continent, tens of thousands of farmers, fishermen and hauliers are currently involved in mass protests against escalating fuel costs that threaten to ruin their businesses and destroy jobs.

These protests are only the foretaste of the social movements to come. The world economic crisis heralded by the US sub-prime mortgage collapse and the consequent rise in the costs of essential commodities will only amplify the demands of national governments and the transnational corporations for even greater inroads to be made into the living standards and democratic rights of working people. This in turn will inevitably provoke mass resistance.

In one of the most gloomy assessments of the EU’s prospects, the Bertelsmann Stiftung think tank noted the options facing the EU in the face of rejection: call another vote in Ireland, further amend a constitutional reform already designed to be impenetrable, give Ireland further opt-outs from EU legislation, or abandon attempts to reform the constitution altogether.

The Bertelsmann report “Green Light from the Emerald Isle?” concluded that none of these options were attractive: “This is why the European Union and the Irish government are betting everything on one outcome. A ‘no’ vote in the Irish referendum would therefore be an utter disaster for Europe.”

In reality there is no reason to suppose that the EU will allow a popular verdict against its proposals to prevent them from being implemented. It is unlikely that a second referendum will be organized, as was the case in 2002 after Ireland initially rejected the Treaty of Nice in 2001. More probably the measures contained in the Lisbon Treaty will be implemented surreptitiously. The changes in voting rights, for example, could be mooted at a forthcoming intergovernmental conference.

Nevertheless, the possibility of an Irish “No” vote is a stark demonstration of how isolated and deeply unpopular the EU has become.

For years Ireland, a major recipient of European funding, was considered one of the relatively safest bets in terms of securing political backing for the EU. All this has changed, however, and significant political resources are being directed by the Irish and European bourgeoisie in an attempt to cajole and intimidate Irish voters into delivering the required result.

The three major Irish political parties—Fianna Fail, Fine Gael, and the Labour Party—have buried what few differences they have to jointly call for a “Yes” vote. They are especially concerned that opposition to the Treaty will be compounded by growing disaffection with the Fianna Fail/Green coalition government.

Opinion polls anticipate a close vote, and in recent weeks the “No” campaign has been gaining ground. The latest poll, published Sunday June 8, suggests 42 percent will vote “Yes” while 39 percent will vote “No”. Other recent polls have given the “No” side a slight majority.

At a press conference June 9, newly installed Irish Taoiseach and Fianna Fail leader Brian Cowen stated, “We stand together in the overall national interest and beyond partisan party politics.” Irish voters should “do their patriotic duty,” Cowan said, having earlier claimed, “The progress Ireland has made would not have been possible without us being positive members of the European Union.” Enda Kenny for Fine Gael said that the result was so central to Ireland’s future prosperity that it “transcended party differences.”

The “Yes” campaign is also backed by the Irish Congress of Trades Unions and the Irish Farmers Association.

The Irish economy is dangerously exposed to world economic recession. Where once the so-called Celtic Tiger of the 1990s could offer cheap labour and low taxes to US companies aiming at Europe, new investment generally goes to China or Eastern Europe.

Moreover, the relatively high growth rates of recent years in the Irish economy were sustained by a property bubble that has made Dublin one of the most expensive cities in the world, with an average house costing €386,658. This same reliance on property now makes the prospect of a sharp slump all the more likely. House prices in April this year fell at an annual rate of 9.2 percent, compared with 8.9 percent in March. Recent growth forecasts have been revised downwards, while unemployment now stands at the highest level for nine years.

All the parties are concerned that whereas in the past Ireland has benefited enormously from EU largesse in the form of regional grants, should the Treaty be rejected future requests will be viewed unfavourably, leaving the Irish bourgeoisie ill-equipped to fend off deepening social tensions.

Such a threat was implicit in the remarks of French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, who warned that Europe would view a treaty rejection with “gigantic incomprehension.”

“It would be very, very awkward if we couldn’t count on the Irish, who themselves have counted a great deal on Europe’s money,” he added.

Referring to the real possibility of a “No” vote, the *Financial Times* complained that it “seems extraordinary that the Irish could be so apparently ungrateful.”

The lesson, its editorial continued, was that it was “absurd” to put such measures to the vote. In the meantime, “Irish voters would be ill-advised to reject it. There is no cost-free No vote. Ireland would be weakened in Europe, and Europe would be weakened in the world.”

The call for a rejection of the EU treaty by the European sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International has nothing in common with those made by the “No” campaign in Ireland, which encompasses Sinn Fein, various right wing organisations, left radical groups and the Unite trade union.

Whatever their differences in emphasis—some right-wing groups oppose the extension of abortion rights, while others point to the dangers of a threat to Irish “neutrality”—these campaigns are characterised by a nationalist outlook which only weakens and divides the working class in the struggle for a genuinely progressive solution to the depredations of global capital.

Sinn Fein is the only party with representation in the Dáil (parliament) opposing the treaty. But it is pro-EU and focuses on issues such as the possible loss of a permanent Irish commissioner and

a halving of its voting strength. Its opposition is an attempt to secure more bargaining clout for Ireland and the smaller nations. Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams has insisted that “Ireland’s place is within the EU,” but complains that too much control is in the hands of the EU’s larger countries. A “No” vote would be used to redress this situation, Sinn Fein claims.

A primary concern for Sinn Fein is the fact that the Lisbon Treaty calls for the harmonisation of corporate tax across Europe. This could mean the European Court of Justice deciding that Ireland’s 12.5 percent rate of company tax represents a distortion of competition. Sinn Fein’s member of the European Parliament for Dublin, Mary Lou McDonald, has accused the government of compromising Ireland’s position on tax and neutrality.

This concern to preserve low corporate tax unites Sinn Fein with the most prominent “No” campaigner, the communications and cell phone entrepreneur Declan Ganley, whose “Libertas” group has attracted considerable media attention. Ganley is described by the June 10 *Independent* as “Ireland’s Mysterious Mr. No,” who “has amassed his fortune with international ventures which have taken him to the US, Russia, Bulgaria and Latvia.”

It adds, “Some of his many companies do business with the US military-industrial complex—one supplies emergency response systems to the military—leading some in the Yes camp to portray him as a shadowy figure with connections to neoconservatives whose organisation is being bankrolled by sinister money from outside Ireland.”

Ganley, who has poured massive sums into the “No” campaign, opposes the Lisbon Treaty from the standpoint of sections of Irish business who want to cut the already minimal corporate taxation level.

While voting against the EU as a matter of principle, working people cannot give any support to the “No” campaign on the EU treaty.

The European Union cannot be democratically reformed or adapted to meet workers’ interests. The working class in Ireland and throughout Europe requires its own independent perspective—one that counterposes to the Europe of big business the United Socialist States of Europe.

It is vital for the interest of Europe’s people that the continent is united. In the last century the division of the continent into competing nation states led to the horrors of two world wars, fascist dictatorship and the Holocaust.

But unity can only be achieved in a genuinely progressive manner based on a perspective that seeks to fundamentally reorganize the entire basis of economic life, through the abolition of production for profit based on the nation state. Only such a socialist perspective can realize the tremendous potential of the wealth and productive forces in the interests of society. This programme requires the coming together of workers across all national, ethnic and cultural divides, in a common political struggle against the European Union, its institutions and the capitalist profit system as a whole.



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