European powers to continue with Lisbon Treaty despite Ireland "No" vote

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The major European powers, led by Germany and France, have made clear they will seek to defy Ireland's rejection of the Lisbon Treaty in the referendum held June 12. In a 53 percent turnout, 53 percent voted "No" while 46 percent voted in favour.

The vote should have torpedoed the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, which requires unanimous backing by the European Union's 27 member states. But José Manuel Barroso, the president of the European Commission, said, "Eighteen member states have already approved the treaty, and the commission believes the remaining ratifications should continue to take their course. I believe the treaty is alive."

German Chancellor Angela Merkel insisted, "We must carry on," while Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said, "We're sticking firmly to our goal of putting this treaty into effect. So the process of ratification must continue." A senior German government spokesman told the *Irish Times*, "Ratification will continue and either Ireland votes again or we try to come up with a new text."

France takes over the rotating EU presidency next month and French President Nicolas Sarkozy has urged EU countries to continue ratification of the treaty. France's Europe minister, Jean-Pierre Jouyet, said that "specific means of cooperation" could be invoked to deal with Ireland. "The most important thing is that the ratification process must continue in the other countries, and then we shall see with the Irish what type of legal arrangement could be found."

The Labour government in Britain is also continuing with its ratification process. On Wednesday, the Lisbon Treaty is due to receive its third and final reading in the House of Lords. Europe Minister Jim Murphy said that it was now up to the Dublin government to come up with proposals to salvage the treaty. "The Irish government need to come to the European Council meeting this week to tell us, the UK and other governments in the European Union how they think we should be taking this forward based on the sovereign decision of the Irish people," he said.

The European Council meets in Brussels later this week and Germany and France are leading an effort to isolate Ireland and push through ratification. They continue to threaten the creation of a "two-track" EU when faced with objections. This places maximum pressure on Britain to stand firm, which has always feared such an outcome. They will also seek to ensure that those parts of Lisbon that can be implemented without treaty amendment are swiftly adopted.

A propaganda campaign has been mounted to claim that a vote by less than 1 percent of the EU's 490 million population should not scupper a treaty already ratified by 18 member states. Axel Schäfer, the German Social Democrats' leader in the Bundestag committee on EU affairs, insisted, "We cannot allow the huge majority of Europe to be duped by a minority of a minority of a minority.... We think it is a real cheek that the country that has benefited most from the EU should do this. There is no other Europe than this treaty."

Italian President Giorgio Napolitano said, "Now is the time for a courageous choice by those who want coherent progress in building Europe, leaving out those who despite solemn, signed pledges threaten to block it."

These responses epitomise the undemocratic character of the entire EU project. The reality is that ratification was designed to prevent popular scrutiny, let alone a vote on the issue. Only the Irish government was constitutionally obliged to hold a vote because Lisbon required changes to Ireland's constitution as participation in EU defence and security projects ended its formal position of neutrality. That the vote went against acceptance in a country that has supposedly been a major beneficiary of European largesse shows how widespread hostility is to the EU throughout the continent.

This places seemingly insurmountable difficulties before those urging a second Irish referendum, as happened previously in 2001-2002.

The Lisbon Treaty, signed December 2007, essentially continued—with some cosmetic changes—the European constitution rejected by voters in the Netherlands and France in 2005. Both treaty and constitution represented an effort by the European powers to forge a political, diplomatic and military apparatus for the EU trade and currency bloc to rival its major competitors in the United States, Russia and China.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the European powers have repeatedly been frustrated in their efforts to project EU influence by the absence of foreign policy coherence and a military capability concomitant with the trade bloc's vast economic weight. To overcome this, the treaty agreed to a "High Representative for the Union in Foreign Affairs and Security Policy," leading a "European External Action Service," a president of the European Council, consolidated policy making on security, justice, energy policy, research, and territorial cohesion.

The treaty also included measures to ensure that the EU's "big four"—France, Britain, Germany and Italy—dominated decision-making in a bloc. National vetoes would be removed. In the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq war, European foreign policy was hamstrung by US efforts to organise a "new Europe" of former Eastern bloc countries and Britain, against the "old Europe" of the continental powers.

The treaty also built on existing measures to tear up national service industry regulations in the interests of the largest and rapidly expanding EU utility corporations.

The "No" vote came as a shock to much of the Irish political establishment, who as late as the close of polls on June 12 were still predicting a close result in their favour. It is a major setback for newly installed Taoiseach *(*prime minister) Brian Cowen, who replaced Bertie Ahern six weeks ago after he resigned over allegations of financial corruption.

A coalition of the ruling Fianna Fail, Fine Gael, and the Labour Party all campaigned for a "Yes" vote, pointing to the substantial handouts directed towards Irish economic development over the years by the EU, describing it as a "patriotic duty" and even proof that the Irish people were "good Europeans." Pope Benedict XVI even took the opportunity during a mass at St. Peter's Square to describe Ireland's Saint Columbanus as "one of

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the Fathers of Europe," who could even be called a "European saint."

The "No" vote expresses a deepening alienation of working people from both the Irish political elite, opposition to the undemocratic measures contained in the treaty and to the EU as a whole. Initial analysis of voting patterns suggested that in a broad sweep of urban and rural working class areas, the "No" vote was higher than in more prosperous areas, although turnout was lower. An *Irish Times*/ MRBI poll prior to the vote on the Lisbon Treaty showed that the "Yes" vote registered a majority only among the better-off ABC1 voters, while in the working class C2DE category there was a big majority for a "No" vote.

EU leaders might point to the subsidies directed towards once impoverished Ireland as an expression of the benefits derived by Ireland from the EU. But these subsidies were primarily spent on infrastructure and corporate grants to facilitate Ireland's development as an export platform for US corporations seeking access to Europe and European companies looking for a low-tax regime close to the continent.

Many of these operations are in now the process of relocating to even cheaper areas in Eastern Europe. Simultaneously, a building boom and property speculation bubble are rapidly coming to an end. Two days before the referendum, figures showed that unemployment had passed the 200,000 mark for the first time since 1999. In the year to May 2008, unemployment rose 31 percent, with nearly 1,000 workers a week joining the dole queues. Unemployment increased 22 percent in one month in Dublin, while in County Wexford in the southwest of the island, another building hotspot, the increase was 40 percent.

Price inflation is also increasing, with an annual overall rise of 4.7 percent recorded in April. Food prices went up 8 percent, fuel costs 23 percent, and home heating oil increased a massive 47 percent. Overall, retail sales are down 3.2 percent since the start of the year. Mortgage costs, already crippling large sections of workers, increased 2 percent in one month alone. Residential mortgage debt now stands at 75 percent of Irish GDP, up from 24 percent in 1997. The Breugel think tank warned that the economic situation in Ireland had "darkened dramatically recently, amid severe downturns in the housing market."

Another component of the "No" vote was the desire to uphold Ireland's constitutional neutrality, which expressed, in a partial and distorted way, antiwar sentiment and opposition to the Irish government's participation in the US and British war effort in Iraq by allowing military refuelling at Shannon airport.

But while the "No" campaign benefited from such sentiment, it was made up of groups that in no way articulated the social concerns and political interests of the Irish working class. The "No" campaign included many Catholic groups anxious to keep abortion illegal in Ireland and found its most prominent spokesman in pro-US businessman Declan Ganvey and his Libertas organisation. Both Ganvey and Sinn Fein, the only party in parliament calling for a "No" vote, opposed the treaty from the standpoint of upholding Ireland's right to set corporate taxes independently of the EU, which presently stand at 12.5 percent, in order to retain a competitive advantage in attracting global investment. Many of the groups involved, including the Unite trade union, supported the EU and Ireland's continued membership, differing only on the treaty itself.

A "No" vote, while expressing legitimate disaffection and opposition, is clearly inadequate—as the plans to continue with ratification demonstrate. The working class is in a political struggle against the major institution of big business in Europe and it needs its own political programme and leadership in order to take this forward. A significant role in preventing such a development is played by Ireland's left groups, the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party, both of which were active in the "No" campaign. It is they who ensured that workers were given no opportunity to delineate their stance from Libertas and its ilk, and who never elaborated anything amounting to an independent perspective on the central issue of Europe's integration.

The Socialist Party centred its campaign on a series of statements from Joe Higgins, a member of the *Dáil Éireann*, the Irish parliament until he lost his seat last year. Higgins had promised in January 2008 that the Socialist Party would outline its perspective "counterposing a democratic, socialist Europe of workers to the capitalist club that the EU is." But this was never elaborated in its published campaign material.

Higgins's column on the eve of the vote, "Why you should vote No to Lisbon," listed opposition to wage lowering, the European Court of Justice, to the attacks on public services and to militarism, but did not oppose the EU itself. Instead he intimated that the EU could be reformed, stating that he saw the Lisbon Treaty as a lost opportunity: "Lisbon should have been an opportunity to exclude public services once and for all from the rules of the market and international trade."

The Socialist Workers Party made similarly vague criticisms of the EU, with its "Vote No" web site noting that the Lisbon Treaty makes "little provision for a social Europe," "does nothing to address the lack of democracy" and "forces countries to increase military spending."

Its reply to frequently asked questions on the Lisbon Treaty also explicitly advocates reform of the EU, stating, "The European Trade Union Confederation calling for an amendment to the Treaty. But any amendment to the treaty can only come about by an Irish No Vote forcing renegotiation."

The party's leading Irish trade union bureaucrat, Jimmy Kelly of Unite, was more explicit, writing in an April 2008 article that the Irish Congress of Trade Unions should demand the Irish government "*postpone* the Lisbon Treaty to allow time to address the issue of trade union rights" (emphasis added). He complained, "The Irish Government has failed to provide a basis for workers to view this Referendum as genuinely delivering on rights in the workplace *or delivering on the Social Europe as set out in the original Lisbon Treaty*" (emphasis added).

The EU cannot be reformed. And there is no such thing as a "Social Europe." The EU is a massive apparatus dedicated to the forging of a continent-wide trade and military bloc able to better compete against Europe's rivals through the systematic destruction of wage and social conditions.

Unification of Europe is both a progressive and necessary goal, but it must be carried out by the working class in opposition to the all the rival cliques of capitalists and their political advocates, whether they favour greater EU integration or they oppose it.

Only the perspective of the United Socialist States of Europe, as part of a world socialist federation, opens the prospect of a peaceful, culturally and technically advanced Europe using its immense productive capacities to meet human need throughout the continent and worldwide. To take this perspective forward in Ireland demands the urgent construction of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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