

Ireland: Vote “No” to the Lisbon Treaty

For the United Socialist States of Europe

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The Socialist Equality Parties of Britain and Germany call for a “No” vote in the Irish referendum on the European Union’s Lisbon Treaty on Friday, October 2.

Nothing has changed in the Lisbon Treaty since it was last rejected by Irish voters on June 12, 2008. It remains what it always was—the European Union’s contemptuous manoeuvre in response to the 2005 plebiscites that saw French and Dutch voters reject the proposed European Constitution.

Designed to consolidate a political, trade and military bloc to advance the interests of Europe’s imperialist powers worldwide, the constitution promoted the further privatisation of social services and the break-up of residual labour protection across the continent.

It was thrown out by the working populations of France and the Netherlands, who correctly identified it as hostile to their interests. But its essential aims were reintroduced in the guise of a treaty, on which only Ireland is constitutionally obliged to hold a referendum.

Outside of Ireland, some 490 million people within the EU have had no say on the treaty, which has been ratified behind their backs by parliamentarians and heads of state. Only last week, while national elections were still underway, German President Horst Koehler signed a law ratifying the treaty.

Ireland’s own ruling elite is no better. Lisbon was rejected by 53 percent to 46 percent in 2008, but its supporters in all the major Irish parties, media and business, have determined that they will keep going until they get the result required.

The entire experience testifies to the fundamentally undemocratic character of the treaty and the EU itself, and confirms the need for the working class to oppose it.

EU offers concessions

The EU is doing everything to ensure success this time around in the Irish ballot. Having spent almost a decade trying to get the constitution through in some form or another, it is anxious that the treaty is not defeated for a second time, scuttling plans for an EU president, foreign policy head and the re-organisation of voting powers in line with the interests of Europe’s largest economies.

To this end, the European Commission has organised a €1.5

million advertising campaign in support of the treaty, while in December the European Council offered Ireland opt-outs so that it can maintain its existing reactionary laws on abortion, euthanasia and same sex marriage. Ireland’s so-called military “neutrality”—which has not prevented the use of its airspace for CIA rendition flights—was also supposedly guaranteed, with the agreement that the country will not be “forced” to participate in European military adventures.

Most significantly, the country’s right to organise its own national taxation system has been upheld. Ireland’s corporation tax rate is 12.5 percent. This low rate was a crucial factor in the Celtic Tiger investment boom of the 1990s and early 2000s, and in fuelling the property and speculative bubble that followed.

On this basis, Fianna Fail, Fine Gael, the Labour Party and the Greens have again called for a “Yes” vote. Out of the country’s 166 MPs, 162 are backing the treaty. So too is the Catholic Church, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Irish Farmers Association. Public sector union SIPTU, in a shift from 2008, has also quietly endorsed the “Yes” campaign.

Major corporations such as Intel and Microsoft are calling for a “Yes” vote, with Intel providing €200,000 to the campaign. The boss of budget airline Ryanair, Michael O’Leary, has offered one million free flights for a favourable result.

The “Yes” campaign claims that success is vital for Ireland’s economic recovery. Playing on working people’s fears over their jobs and living standards, their slogan is “Yes for jobs, yes for the economy.”

Such claims are false. Last year, the Irish government was the first in Europe to organise a multi-billion euro rescue of its financial system. Some €400 billion of tax payers’ monies were used to guarantee large bank deposits. The objective was not to protect working people, but to reassure the international financial markets that Ireland was still open for business.

Since then, the government has implemented two emergency budgets, with a third anticipated shortly. While eschewing tax increases on the major corporations and super-rich, billions are being cut from public provision and welfare. New proposals include cutting the health budget by 10 percent, social welfare by €1.5 billion, and education by €700 million, including more than 6,000 redundancies.

Ireland’s Finance Minister Brian Lenihan, while stating he was not “threatening the people,” warned that in the event of a “no” vote, “there will be a substantial loss of goodwill towards Ireland.”

Recovery was dependent upon European backing, he continued. The EU Commission sought to reinforce this message with an announcement that €14.8 million from a European Globalisation Adjustment Fund would be made available to help 2,400 Dell workers facing unemployment to find new jobs, translating to around €6,100 per Dell worker. José Manuel Barroso, president of the EU Commission claimed, “The EU is built on solidarity...our natural response is to come to the aid of those who are experiencing difficulties.”

No such funds will be offered to the 440,000 workers on the dole queues in Ireland, whose numbers have grown by 78 percent over the last year. Irish unemployment is now the second only to Spain in Europe.

“European” backing is not an alternative to a further attack on jobs and living standards. Throughout the continent, every national government is looking to enforce austerity measures. Already in the EU, 7.7 percent of the 221 million workforce is officially unemployed. This will worsen as the European bourgeoisie seeks to offload the burden of its handouts to the banks and international financiers onto working people.

The provisions of the treaty consolidate this class offensive. As the “Ireland for Europe” website noted frankly “...employers and unions realize how important it is to maintain a strong relation with Europe so that Irish bonds do not fall further in their standing in international markets.”

The dangers of nationalism in Europe

While voting against the EU as a matter of principle, working people cannot give support to any of the various “No” campaign groups, all of which either defend the status quo on an explicitly nationalist basis and/or claim it is possible to reform the EU.

The “No” campaign comprises open reactionaries, including the well-funded low tax Libertas group and Catholic organisations opposed to abortion rights, together with the nationalist parties led by Sinn Fein and various pseudo-left groups.

Nationalism offers no means of opposing the escalating attacks on working people’s living standards in Ireland and across Europe.

Sinn Fein, the Workers Party (formerly the official IRA) and Eirigi, a recently formed left republican group, are allied with the Socialist Workers Party, the Socialist Party, and the Communist Party of Ireland in the “Campaign Against the EU Constitution.”

They do not oppose the EU as such, but attempt to sow the illusion that it is possible to modify “the European project,” and “change direction, away from the failed neoliberalism which has caused the crisis and away from militarism.”

While claiming that it is “time for the peoples of Europe to determine the direction of the European project, not the political elite,” the campaign makes no call for international solidarity, let alone the fight for socialist working class unity. Behind all the talk of Europe’s “peoples,” its thrust is a defence of the existing nation state set-up.

The dangers of this approach are all underscored by the developing international economic crisis and the increasing turn towards protectionism by the major powers. Even as Europe’s bourgeoisies work might and main to force through the new treaty, their project of European “unity” is unravelling.

Ireland’s bank bailout was only the first of the beggar-thy-neighbour measures enacted by rival governments in the wake of the global credit crisis.

Writing in the *Financial Times* on the potential outcome of the Irish referendum, Wolfgang Münchau decried “the conduct of the EU during the financial crisis, and the narrow-minded reassertion of national sovereignty in macro and micro-economic policy,” noting the absence of EU leaders “strength and solidarity to treat economic crisis management as a common endeavour.”

In the last weeks there was the sale of GM Europe to the Canadian-Russian consortium Magna. Brokered by the German government to advance its strategic alliance with Russia, it has seen the various national trade unions in Europe competing with one another as to which country’s workforce should be made to carry the cost of the resulting restructuring.

On itself, a “No” vote will do nothing to alleviate the nationalist tensions developing across Europe—which twice in the 20th Century was the cradle for world war. In the absence of a politically unified struggle by the European working class for the abolition of the capitalist profit system and the reorganisation of economic life on a socialist basis, the collapse of the EU and of the euro currency will signal a deepening social and economic catastrophe for the continent.

Only the perspective of the United Socialist States of Europe offers a way forward for the working class in Ireland and Europe. This is the programme of the Socialist Equality Parties in the UK and Germany. We call on all workers, youth and intellectuals who agree with this perspective to join the SEP and take up the fight for a socialist world.



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