

Irish referendum endorses European Union's Lisbon Treaty

Steve James
5 October 2009

The European Union's Lisbon Treaty has been endorsed by Irish voters in Friday's referendum by a majority of 67 percent of voters to 33 percent. Turnout was 58 percent.

Large "Yes" majorities, over 80 percent, were recorded in Dublin and nearby Dun Laoghaire, while only rural Donegal voted "No". The result reverses last year's vote, when the treaty was rejected by 53 to 46 percent and brings final ratification of the treaty nearer.

It is a measure of the undemocratic character of the Lisbon agenda that Ireland's three million eligible voters are alone amongst the EU's 490 million population in having been given the opportunity of voting on the treaty. Lisbon is designed to strengthen the EU as an imperialist trading, diplomatic and military bloc and global rival to the United States and China. The treaty replaced the failed European Constitution, which was rejected by plebiscites in France and the Netherlands in 2005. Only Ireland's constitution required ratification of the European treaty by popular vote.

In 2008, sections of voters saw rejection of the treaty as a means of registering a protest against the Fianna Fail/Green administration of Brian Cowen, in addition to hostility towards the treaty's provisions. In a mockery of democratic practice, having been rebuffed in 2008, the EU and the Irish government simply came back with a better organised campaign and spent more money in pursuit of the result they want.

The dramatic shift towards endorsing Lisbon was primarily the result of political blackmail, manipulating widespread fears that the worsening global recession would have a more devastating effect on Ireland if it did not continue to enjoy the economic patronage of the EU. Rejection, it was insisted, would leave Ireland nationally isolated, ruined and on the margins of Europe.

In the past year, the Irish economy has been one of the worst affected by the world financial crisis. Unemployment is anticipated to reach over 13 percent by the end of the year. Successive rounds of budget cuts have, and will continue to make deep inroads into social spending and public sector wages. Private sector wages have also been slashed. GDP is

currently predicted to shrink 7.45 percent this year.

The "Yes" campaign, involving the two government parties, Fianna Fail and the Greens, as well as their opponents Fine Gael and Labour, played aggressively on widespread fears for jobs and social provisions. The well funded campaign, which also involved leading corporations such as Microsoft, Intel, Ryanair, a host of employer, trade union and farming organisations and the entire Irish press, threatened workers, in the words of the employers' federation Ibec, that a "Yes" vote was "an essential step on the road to economic recovery".

In addition, opt outs were offered by the European Commission to the Irish government on abortion, investment-oriented low taxes and the country's purely nominal military neutrality to neutralise aspects of the "No" campaign. One-off payments were also offered to Dell workers facing unemployment.

The combined efforts of the "Yes" campaigners have perpetrated a hoax. The result will do nothing to alleviate the pressure on living standards. The same wealthy layer that called for a "Yes" vote have pushed through all the cuts in social spending and organised the €400 billion guarantee to the Irish investors and the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) bailout of ruined Irish banks. By opening the door to further liberalisation measures, the treaty will pave the way for further attacks on the working class by government and corporations in Ireland and across the continent.

However, economic blackmail alone does not explain why a deeply unpopular government, in the midst of a huge economic crisis, has been able to railroad through a measure which is inimical to the interests of the vast majority of the population. The second major factor in the turn-around was the political rotteness of the "No" campaign.

A loose alliance led by Sinn Fein and including anti-abortionists, low tax campaigners, pacifists and various pseudo-left groups all upheld an essentially nationalist agenda in opposition to the treaty's provisions.

Sinn Fein called for a "better deal" for Ireland,

complaining that “we will lose our permanent commissioner and our voting strength on the Council will be cut by half while the bigger states double their strength”.

Entrepreneur Declan Ganley’s *Libertas* is a right-wing, free-market lobby that denounces the “overweening power of the EU as tantamount to socialism”.

The anti-abortionist *Coir* upheld Ireland’s “national sovereignty” in order to ensure that abortions would remain illegal.

The Communist Party of Ireland declared baldly that a “No” vote was the work of “true patriots”.

The petty bourgeois groups such as the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party opposed various pro-market and deregulatory aspects of Lisbon, as well as steps towards greater militarism, but articulated no fundamental opposition to the EU as a capitalist institution and offered no political alternative other than to echo aspects of the rhetoric of the nationalist right. The “Vote No” site run by the SWP, for example, stressed, “This referendum is NOT about membership of the EU. If we vote NO, we cannot be thrown out of the EU.” It then concluded with the demand, “Stop the building of an undemocratic EU super state”.

Such an opportunistic mishmash had no possibility of convincing the majority of workers that there was a basis for defying Ireland’s corporate and political elite.

The Irish result was hailed as an endorsement of the EU by its leading politicians. President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso claimed the vote was a “sign of confidence by the Irish electorate in the European Union”. Chancellor Angela Merkel opined, “Germany, on Germany unity day, is very happy”. Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, claimed, “We can finally push the button for the better European cooperation that the Lisbon Treaty can give us”. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown proclaimed the “treaty is good for the UK and good for Europe”.

Final ratification of the treaty now depends on pressurising and bribing the political leadership of Poland and the Czech Republic. Polish President Lech Kaczynski is expected to sign in the next few days. Czech President Vaclav Klaus has stated that he does not intend to sign until the Czech Constitutional Court has ruled on the matter, but Czech Prime Minister Jan Fischer has re-assured the EU that ratification will take place before the end of 2009. Neither decision depends on a popular mandate.

After final ratification of the treaty, a new EU Commission will take office in January while the EU governments will decide on an EU president and foreign minister. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, in office during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, has been put forward as one possible candidate along with Felipe González, the former Spanish

prime minister, and Jean-Claude Juncker from Luxembourg.

A range of EU issues, judicial, educational and economic, will no longer require unanimous agreement from all member states. This will “streamline” decision making to ensure the continued dominance of the major European powers. Military and foreign policy decisions will still require full agreement.

Even so, none of the EU’s internal divisions have been resolved. The next turn of the economic crisis will inevitably bring nationalist tensions to a new peak of intensity.

One day before the Irish vote supposedly ushered in a new era of EU harmony, newspaper reports suggested the creation of a new Franco-German axis at the core of the EU. According to the *Times*, a new treaty was in preparation between the two governments that would cover defence, industrial policy and immigration.

The move is an explicit attempt to isolate Britain and immediately intended to undermine Blair’s candidacy for EU president. Joschka Fischer, the former German foreign minister, endorsed the necessity of a renewed Franco-German axis, stating, “The centre of gravity of Europe can only be Paris and Berlin. Britain has decided to stay on the edge. Italy is...Italy. Poland has a way to come. Spain is buried in deep crisis”.

For its part, the Irish government intends to use the referendum result to press ahead with a new 2010 budget, which will deepen spending cuts still further. A vote is due October 10 on the multi-billion NAMA bailout, which Taoiseach Brian Cowen is expected to push through with the support of the Greens.

The working class of Ireland and Europe is faced with the need to advance a clear socialist alternative to the pro-capitalist and nationalist agendas pushed by all the official parties, whether for or against Lisbon. The progressive and necessary unification of the continent and the mobilisation of its vast economic resources to meet the needs of society require that the working class forms its own party and assumes power through the creation of the United Socialist States of Europe.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact