

Ireland's United Left Alliance: A fake oppositional movement

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The onslaught against the population launched by the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), implemented by the Fianna Fáil-Green Party government and supported in its essentials by the opposition parties, aims to slash the living standards of working people in order to pay for the gambling debts of the financial elite.

In the face of similar attacks, social anger is on the increase across Europe. Major protests have taken place in Greece, France and Britain against austerity measures. In Spain, military force has been used against striking workers to force them back to work. On November 27, Ireland saw one of the largest protests in years, as tens of thousands took to the streets of Dublin to oppose the deep cuts being made.

The United Left Alliance (ULA) was founded last month through the collaboration of the Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP). Advancing itself as a political alternative to the official parties that are collaborating with austerity measures, its true function is to contain developing opposition in the working class by boosting illusions in the possibility of winning social reforms through an orientation to the trade unions and Labour Party.

The bona fides of the ULA are accepted by Ireland's ruling elite, which has afforded extremely favourable and extensive coverage to an organisation of significantly less than 500 people. The press, TV and radio widely reported the founding of the Alliance, and its leading members, such as SP Member of the European Parliament Joe Higgins, are featured regularly on news and talk show programmes alongside other establishment politicians. The morning after its launch, on November 26, Higgins was invited on to RTÉ's "Morning Ireland" programme to discuss what the ULA stood for.

On the same week that the founding of the ULA was proclaimed, the government was locked in talks with the IMF over plans to impose the most drastic austerity measures in the history of the state. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) had been forced to call a demonstration in Dublin. Sections of the political

establishment were keenly aware that, as anger mounted within the population, it was critical that a "left" alternative could be presented as the semi-official opposition to the cuts dictated by the EU and IMF. The *Sunday Business Post* published a lengthy analysis on November 28, warning of the threat of increased social strife.

The Alliance's founding programme is ideally suited to striking a pose of opposition that does nothing to threaten to fundamental interests of the Irish bourgeoisie. The statement presents a collection of demands, such as "tax the greedy not the needy" and for more public spending by the state. Achieving such aims will come about through pressurising the Labour Party and the trade unions to take a more leftist stand, it states.

The "candidate pledge", which all of those representing the ULA in the upcoming election must sign, opens by stating, "The United Left Alliance has no confidence in conservative parties and believes that the interest of the poor and those on middle incomes cannot be furthered by coalition government with such parties."

"Accordingly, Alliance Oireachtas members will not give any support by voting or abstaining to any government or proposed government, including a 'national government', containing conservative parties including Fianna Fail or Fine Gael."

This political sophistry leaves the way open for collaboration with Labour, and possibly Sinn Féin. In truth, there is no legitimate basis for making a political distinction between them and the "conservative parties". Labour will most likely form a government with Fine Gael and is fully supportive of austerity measures, while Sinn Féin has been imposing such measures north of the border alongside its coalition partners, the Democratic Unionist Party.

In November, Labour Party leader Eamon Gilmore addressed a pre-budget seminar of party activists in which he said that, should Labour come into government, "we will not be able to press a button and rewind the 2011 budget." Instead, Labour would set out budget proposals based on a "budgetary adjustment" of €4.5 billion for 2011. This is just

€1.5 billion less than Fine Gael, but Labour intends to factor in this figure and more over the next year or so.

Higgins was forced to deny that a coalition with either party was possible. But the very fact such a possibility was considered feasible by the media points to the character of the new organisation.

The Alliance combines its orientation towards Labour with a focus on the trade unions, which it insists are the major vehicle through which workers can conduct their struggles. This is after savage attacks have been implemented since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008, for which the unions are fully responsible, thanks to their collaboration with the government in various “social partnership” arrangements. The latest expression of this is the Croke Park Agreement, which sanctions thousands of job losses and pay cuts, enforced by a four-year strike ban.

ULA representatives are pushing for the unions to call for a 24-hour general strike, along the lines of those held in Greece and Spain earlier this year. But this would only be used as a means to allow workers to let off steam, while the unions continued their collaboration with management and government.

Richard Boyd Barrett of the SWP-dominated People Before Profit Alliance (PBPA), wrote in an article in the October 28 edition of the *Irish Times* that the alternative to the current set-up was a “just, fair and sustainable society.” He said achieving this could start by supporting the unions’ call for the November 27 ICTU demonstration.

The SWP and SP have been brought together because both represent significant factions within the trade union bureaucracy. For months, talks on the ULA were described as deadlocked. The SP was reported to be insisting that the ULA’s programme make reference to “socialism” and socialist policies, whereas the SWP argued that to do so would alienate potential supporters of the ULA. In the end, such minor quibbles were set aside, or more correctly resolved on the SWP’s terms. The coalition’s programme makes no call for socialism.

The SWP’s aversion to socialism, its claim that it will alienate potential support, is bound up with the forces it is seeking to attract—trade union functionaries and disenchanted Labourites. Its allies in the People Before Profit Alliance, who we must assume are equally averse to socialism, include the Community and Workers Action Group (CWAG), which was led by Joan Collins, a former leading member of the Socialist Party! Collins left the SP in 2004, after the party had refused to back her candidacy for a local council election. Instead, she ran under the banner of the Anti-Bin Tax Campaign and won election to Dublin City Council.

Notwithstanding terminological differences, the SWP and

SP share common positions on all essential questions, most importantly on their approach to the trade unions and a shared hostility to any independent movement developing within the working class. Their attitude reflects that of their parent organisations in Britain, where both groups are allied in or compete in electoral fronts such as the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, or campaigns with various acronyms derived from the words “workers”, “alliance” “resistance”, and “cuts”.

These groups have been brought together, despite their factional conflicts, in order to form a “united” organisation whose primary task will be to prevent the working class from breaking with the trade unions. That is why, after months of quarrelling, the ULA was formed just in time for November’s ICTU-organised demonstration in Dublin. The head of the ICTU, David Begg, and the leader of Ireland’s largest union, Jack O’Connor of SIPTU, were both booed by those attending the demonstration—evidence of the contempt in which they are held for their treacherous record.

Following the main rally, the ULA held its own in order to insist that the trade unions could be won to a fight. Higgins declared that “20 years of social partnership...has left us with a trade union leadership that does not know how to fight,” before urging, “The rank and file of the trade union movement must take back the trade unions.”

The fight against the onslaught on working people will succeed only through a complete break from such outfits, which function as outriders and PR-men for the ICTU and Labour Party bureaucracy and bitter opponents of socialism.



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