

Labour seeks coalition with Fine Gael in Ireland

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As polling day approaches in the Irish elections, the Labour Party has made a coalition with the conservative right-wing Fine Gael its central message.

Support for Fine Gael has increased to the point where the possibility of a single party government is being considered. But the most likely outcome of today's vote will be a coalition of Fine Gael and Labour, who are running almost level with Fianna Fáil in second place.

Although the media made much of a number of minor disputes that broke out between the two parties during the past weeks, on all essential points they are agreed. Labour has committed itself fully to the imposition of the European Union/International Monetary Fund-dictated programme of austerity measures to pay for the bank bailout. While claiming that it would seek to spread the cuts over a longer timeframe than Fine Gael, it is still calling for €4.5 billion in savings this year to be followed by similar cuts before 2014. The party has refused to commit itself to overturning any of the cuts that the outgoing Fianna Fáil-Green Party government implemented prior to the dissolution of the Dáil (parliament).

By the last week of the campaign, Labour leader Eamon Gilmore's main message was the need for voters to support his party in order to guarantee a coalition. In his final election press conference he stated, "Our message now is that if you don't want single-party government you should vote Labour."

Fine Gael are pushing for cuts of at least €6 billion this year. Over a four-year period, the party aims to cut the public sector by 30,000 jobs. They plan to raise money through the privatisation of the remaining state-owned companies, including energy providers for gas and electricity.

The inability of any of the so-called "left" parties to

break through during the campaign brought frustration from media commentators. Fintan O'Toole, who was involved in the organisation of last November's demonstration in Dublin against cuts, sought to foist the blame onto the Irish population.

In an exasperated tone in the *Irish Times*, O'Toole complained, "Up until February 25, there will have been no popular mandate for turning bank debt into public debt and imposing another four years of austerity. After Friday, unless all the polls are completely askew, there will be a popular mandate for the bank bailout, the EU-IMF deal and the cuts."

"Come Saturday morning, like every morning after every election in the history of the State, right-of-centre establishment politics will be triumphant."

Aware of the savage cuts a new government will have to make, support is increasing within ruling circles for a coalition deal to be reached. As former Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Garret Fitzgerald wrote in last Saturday's *Irish Times*, "What we most desperately need to emerge is a new government endowed with a sufficiently clear and stable majority to be able to take and thereafter sustain the many unpopular measures now needed to enable us to emerge at the end of the next five years with our financial problems behind us."

The *Financial Times* was more explicit still, writing February 22, "As in Greece ... it is unclear how long the social and political peace necessary to implement €10 billion in spending cuts and €5 billion in tax rises will hold."

The principal responsibility for enforcing such a "peace" after the election will fall to Labour, in collaboration with its trade union allies. As part of a coalition with Fine Gael, Labour will act to provide a degree of legitimacy to the policies of the government, attempting to mask its character through the use of

florid rhetoric.

During the campaign, the party has called for “change,” for the ending of “a culture where money can buy access to power,” and the renegotiation of the EU-IMF deal. But behind all of this, Labour seeks to reduce the budget deficit to below 3 percent of gross domestic product within five years, something that can only be achieved at the expense of the working class.

Labour will have the aid of the union bureaucracy. Union officials have urged workers to “vote left”, to oppose both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. SIPTU, the largest single union, has called for its members to support Labour, or parties that defend “principles of social solidarity”, while Irish Congress of Trade Unions head David Begg has backed a Labour vote. This move was taken reluctantly, after comments by Fine Gael leader Enda Kenny describing the unions as vested interests. Responding, Begg declared his surprise at the tone of Kenny’s remarks, commenting that the unions had enjoyed “good relations with the party (Fine Gael) for many years.”

At a recent conference, SIPTU leader Jack O’Connor stated that a government involving Labour would be a significantly better result than one containing only Fine Gael. The reality is that, like all of the major parties, Labour will work tirelessly to impose the full burden of the economic crisis onto working people.

The Irish ex-left groups have come together in the United Left Alliance (ULA) to contest the poll. The three-week campaign has confirmed their subordination to Labour and the unions, and their inability to offer a viable way out of the crisis for the working class. Their founding programme, which opposed forming coalitions with “right-wing” parties, set a course for a possible coalition with Labour or Sinn Fein. In practice, this meant appealing to voters not to return a single party government. As ULA candidate in Dublin Annette Mooney said, “As we enter the last week before the most important election in a generation, I am urging voters not to hand running of our country over to Fine Gael. It would be disastrous for us all. Fine Gael are promising a raft of spending cuts including €10 off unemployment benefit and the scrapping of Child Benefit.”

According to recent estimates, up to six ULA members could win seats in the Dáil. Earlier this month ULA members shared a platform at a conference with

Sinn Fein, Labour and union heads to discuss future plans for coalition building between political parties and civil society. While the Alliance’s manifesto is filled with the usual verbiage about making speculators pay, taxing the rich and ending the bank bailout, its orientation to the unions and Labour reveals its true character. It accepts fully the existing capitalist system, and will aim to prevent any movement from developing independently in the working class in opposition to these organisations.



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