

Massive anti-government vote in Ireland

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Friday's election in Ireland saw huge popular rejection of the outgoing Fianna Fáil-Green Party government. But at the same time, it confirmed that the sentiments of the vast majority who oppose the vicious austerity measures being implemented can find no genuine expression within official politics.

With some counts continuing, both governing parties suffered heavy losses. Fianna Fáil support collapsed by two thirds. The party is predicted to win between 19 and 24 seats, compared with 77 in the last Dáil (parliament). The Green Party, in coalition since 2007, was wiped out entirely, as its vote collapsed across the country.

Many high-profile figures in the outgoing government lost their seats, including Deputy Prime Minister Mary Coughlan and former minister Mary O'Rourke of Fianna Fáil, and Green Party leader John Gormley. Fianna Fáil has just one seat in the capital, Dublin.

The major opposition parties all achieved a record number of seats. The main beneficiary of this anti-government backlash was Fine Gael, which according to estimates will have 76 seats in the Dáil. Far from demonstrating widespread support for its programme, which is as right-wing as the outgoing administration's, Fine Gael's increased vote points to the sentiment of many that anyone besides the government would be an improvement.

This was confirmed by Fine Gael's failure to achieve an overall majority—something that the mainstream media had been speculating on for several weeks. It will now have to seek a coalition partner to reach the necessary 83-seat majority in the Dáil.

Party leader and incoming Taoiseach (prime minister) Enda Kenny has committed the party to a savage programme of cuts, in line with the European Union (EU)-International Monetary Fund (IMF) programme agreed to by Fianna Fáil and the Greens. This year, it

will seek savings of €6 billion, as part of plans to cut €15 billion by 2014. Kenny has also called for the privatisation of some remaining state assets, a health care plan to increase the involvement of the private sector, and 30,000 public-sector job cuts.

The failure of Fine Gael to achieve the clear victory that had been predicted was due to the search by a large number of voters for a left alternative to oppose the cuts. This was given distorted expression in the doubling of the vote for Labour, which may end up with a record 36 seats in the Dáil. There were also increased levels of support for Sinn Fein, which had won 13 seats by Sunday, some in areas that were unexpected.

At least 3 seats were taken by the United Left Alliance (ULA), an electoral coalition of the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party. An additional 11 seats were won by independent candidates.

None of these parties offer an alternative in any sense for Irish workers. Labour campaigned for voters to back it, in order to ensure it was strong enough to form a coalition with Fine Gael. In the event it does enter the government, Labour will play a key role in facilitating the implementation of the EU-IMF austerity programme. Its election programme committed the party to cuts of €4.5 billion this year, and 18,000 redundancies over the next four years.

Sinn Fein has sought to present itself as the main opposition to austerity, denouncing the three establishment parties for their refusal to challenge the EU and IMF. But the party is in no position to make such a boast. In Northern Ireland, where it sits in coalition with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in the Assembly, Sinn Fein is pushing through a package of cuts at the behest of the Tory-Liberal government in London.

The party is preparing to play a similar role in the Republic. After winning a Dáil seat in the border

constituency of Louth, Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams expressed his support for Kenny as Taoiseach. Adams told the press, “If Enda becomes Taoiseach, I wish him well. We will support him when he is doing things that we think are good and progressive, and we will oppose him tooth and nail when he is doing things that are not in the common good.”

The ULA must be held responsible for helping to contain the population’s opposition to cuts. Since its formation, it has sought to gain support from sections of the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy, claiming that a handful of nominal dissidents lends these discredited, widely hated organisations a working class character. Through the Labour and trade union “lefts”, the ULA aligns itself with the rest of the bureaucracy as its apologists.

The unions have worked with governments of all political parties for more than three decades. Since 2008, the so-called “social partnership” relations have been used to implement swingeing cuts, in collaboration with Fianna Fáil and the Greens. The unions have signed strike bans and wage freezes and worked to isolate and shut down any struggle of workers that has broken out.

Nonetheless, the main thrust of the ULA’s campaign was that these rotten organisations could be reclaimed for the purposes of working-class struggle. The ULA combines this with attempts to present Labour as a lesser evil. ULA candidates repeatedly stressed that the only barrier to forming coalitions was their refusal to work with “right-wing” parties, a designation that supposedly does not cover Labour and Sinn Fein!

At the beginning of February, a gathering was organised with representatives from Sinn Fein, Labour, the ULA, and the unions to discuss coalition building. As the results continue to emerge, some are speculating that the ULA might seek to cut a deal with Sinn Fein and some independents, to allow it to form an official opposition grouping within the Dáil.

These manoeuvres will do nothing to advance the struggle of working people against austerity. A successful fight against the cuts can take place only through a complete break from such organisations, the formation of rank-and-file committees of action to conduct the struggles of workers independently, and above all, the building of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Ireland to

provide socialist and internationalist leadership to these struggles.



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