

United Left Alliance responds to Irish austerity programme

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At a conference February 5 entitled “New political possibilities in Ireland for all left-wing parties in alliance with civil society”, Ireland’s pseudo-left groups came together to discuss policies to deal with the economic crisis.

The gathering was a concerted effort to secure collaboration between the United Left Alliance (ULA), a coalition of the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party, with representatives of Labour, Sinn Fein, and trade union heads. Also present were delegations from the Communist Party of Ireland (CPI), Workers Party, as well as a number of community groups.

Its theme of unity with the labour bureaucracy was epitomised by sessions such as “Building alliances in our common interest: unions and communities working together”.

In his remarks to the conference, leading ULA and Socialist Party member Joe Higgins combined radical sounding rhetoric with attempts to accommodate to Labour. He provided an account of the capitalist crisis, criticising Labour and the other major parties for accepting fully the framework of the European Union-IMF imposed bailout. But after declaring that Labour would play “no role whatsoever in the Irish labour movement,” he proceeded to state that the ULA would be willing to negotiate with Labour if it altered its position towards the demands of the EU and IMF.

In keeping with the ULA’s founding statements, he added that the only restriction the alliance would place on possible coalition partners was a refusal to work with “right-wing” parties.

Another feature of Higgins’ remarks was an attempt to win support from Sinn Fein. While Sinn Fein activists have expressed opposition to the cuts, the party leadership is unwilling to do the same, Higgins complained. Making reference to the party’s role in the north, where it is imposing cuts in coalition with the Democratic Unionists,

blame was again attributed solely to the party’s leadership so that the ULA can justify working with lesser-ranking Sinn Feiners while concealing the pro-capitalist basis of its politics.

In concluding his speech, Higgins turned to the trade unions, asserting that a new left formation would focus on “reclaiming” the unions for working class struggle. In practice, this amounts to attempting to subordinate any independent action taken by working people to these rotten organisations.

This strategy has been on full display in recent weeks with the response, or lack thereof, of the ULA to the unions’ betrayal of Aer Lingus cabin crew. After several hundred airline workers refused to work new rosters and over 200 had been struck from the company payroll, the unions concluded a deal with management that facilitates the implementation of all of the airline’s demands.

The ULA has maintained a shameful silence on the union’s action, with the Socialist Party (SP) publishing just one article to urge “support” for the cabin crew, while the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) has yet to comment on the dispute that broke out on January 17.

With national elections on February 25, the ULA has entirely ignored the struggle at Aer Lingus in its campaign.

This is only the latest in a long line of betrayals carried out by the union bureaucracy, which has collaborated fully with the savage austerity measures already implemented by the Fianna Fáil-Green Party government since 2008. They have ensured that any emerging struggle with the potential to gain broad-based support is isolated and shut down as quickly as possible. In spite of the urgings of the ULA for the unions to call a general strike, all their efforts have been to prevent such an eventuality. Even when a general strike was scheduled in April last year, the unions called it off at the last moment.

Notwithstanding this record, the organisers of the

conference thought it reasonable to invite several top union leaders to participate in the discussions. Jack O'Connor of SIPTU and Jimmy Kelly of Unite both spoke in the afternoon session. O'Connor appeared visibly surprised to have been invited, declaring that he had not been expecting to get an opportunity to speak. He firmly defended the role of his organisation, declaring contemptuously, "I do not have the luxury of deciding policy with my heart. I have to decide it with my head."

He continued that the only hope for working people in the immediate future was to vote for Labour in the general election, maintaining that even in coalition with Fine Gael they would act as a check on austerity measures. He went so far as to claim that Ireland would not have suffered financial meltdown if only Labour had been in power during the last decade, because "the reign of the speculators would not have come about."

According to O'Connor, Labour was seeking to build "a sustainable capitalism ... an indigenous capitalism", which was something he believed a united "left" should strive for.

Kelly spoke along similar lines, asserting, "We can't blame anyone else for what happens over the next four to five years ... we are responsible."

It was all very well to quote principles or ideals, he said, but that the crisis had taken place on "our watch".

He made rhetorical calls for "strike action" against the cuts, but Unite has not resisted any of the attacks from employers like Aer Lingus. Kelly views the threat of strike action as a means of putting pressure on Labour, whom he regards as the government in waiting. He wants Labour to reject the IMF/EU plan and pursue an Alternative Economic Policy. Such a Labour-led programme would amount to a policy of national isolationism which would entail austerity measures that are no less severe in their consequences for the Irish working class than the present package of measures.



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