

Sinn Fein's McGuinness stands for Irish presidency

Steve James
27 October 2011

Ireland goes to the polls today to elect a new president. Alongside the minor celebrities and political nonentities putting themselves forward for the largely ceremonial role is Sinn Fein's Martin McGuinness.

McGuinness, assumed widely to have been the leader of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), is currently the deputy first minister in the British devolved government of Northern Ireland.

His candidacy shocked the Irish political establishment. Although sharing power in the North, Sinn Fein currently only holds 14 seats out of 166 in the Irish parliament with 9.9 percent of the vote in the last general election. Nevertheless, McGuinness, a well-known figure internationally, was immediately viewed as posing a serious challenge to the lightweights ranged against him.

Alarm was all the more intense because of the decay of the major parties, particularly Fianna Fail, which is in a state of political meltdown and has been unable to put forward its own candidate for the presidency. Dominant since the earliest days of the Irish Republic, Fianna Fail is widely seen as the party of corporate thievery and criminal self-enrichment by the few at the expense of everyone else. A recent opinion poll put Fianna Fail at as little as 5 percent of the vote in Dublin West, where a by-election is also due today.

Presidential candidate Sean Gallagher, a businessman, minor TV star and former member of the Fianna Fail national executive and youth organiser, is currently leading opinion polls. His main political task has been to distance himself from the party, from which he only resigned last year, and present himself as a man of the people.

Fine Gael placed a candidate on the ballot, but Gay Mitchell, a longstanding Fine Gael functionary, member of the European parliament and former Lord

Mayor of Dublin, is unlikely to garner more than 10 percent of the vote. Labour's candidate is Michael D. Higgins, a former Member of Parliament, Labour president and occasional broadcaster. Higgins is currently standing second to Gallagher.

To date, despite continuing the brutal austerity policies initiated by Fianna Fail, the Labour/Fine Gael coalition under Fine Gael leader Enda Kenny has not yet acquired quite the same level of popular contempt as its predecessors. But this is only a matter of time.

The new government has put off announcing its updated list of future budget cuts until after the presidential election. Cuts already announced of €3.6 billion in annual spending are likely to be sharply increased. Numerous business figures have demanded ever-greater cuts to sustain Ireland's current favour with the "troika"—the European Union, International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank—as a model patient in imposing austerity on the working class.

A recent OECD economic survey demanded, "Ireland should consider reducing the budget deficit faster than required by the programme, to help gain credibility in financial markets." The OECD called for accelerated welfare cuts to force down labour costs.

Sinn Fein has no objections to this at all. It trades off its past credentials as an anti-imperialist movement and advances itself as socialist. But in power in Belfast, Sinn Fein has repeatedly proved its hostility to working people. Far-right Democratic Unionist Party First Minister Peter Robinson and his deputy, McGuinness, are imposing budget cuts in Northern Ireland, as requested by the Cameron administration in Westminster. Ninety-three percent of Northern Ireland's budget comes from London.

By 2015, cuts of 8 percent in real terms will have

been imposed on annual spending, while capital spending will be down by as much as 40 percent. Both parties uphold and rest upon the continuing sectarian divisions in the working class—between Catholic republican nationalists and Protestant British loyalists—while servicing the interests of an upper middle class and business layer in their respective “communities”.

In the republic, Sinn Fein remains in opposition and has been able to gain some support in working class areas. It positions itself as the sole all-Ireland party. Party President Gerry Adams recently abandoned his West Belfast Westminster constituency to take up a seat in Louth—a republican stronghold just south of the border—in the last general election. Since the Good Friday Agreement of 1999 and the establishment of a power-sharing executive at Stormont, Sinn Fein has eclipsed the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in the North as the leading nationalist party. They see an opportunity to mete out the same treatment to Fianna Fail in the republic.

Sinn Fein quickly made clear that the basis on which it hopes to achieve this is through championing the revival of capitalism in Ireland.

Prior to the last Irish general election, which Sinn Fein had no chance of winning, Adams repeatedly condemned the “sins of the bankers” and opposed a “red cent” being spent on the bank bailouts. This time around, Adams explained that “because of the economic recession created by the establishment, there is a need for us to give hope to people, there is a need for authentic politics.”

McGuinness’s campaign has focussed on his success in attracting investment. He told an Employment Forum, speaking of his investment trips across the Atlantic, “The boardrooms of the USA were open to us and we reaped rewards in terms of jobs in Ireland. These boardrooms remain open to me now and as President I believe I can replicate the success of the north across the 32 counties.”

McGuinness took the opportunity to reassure the Irish and British government that as titular head of the Irish Defence Forces, he would brook no other armed group in the state. On walkabout, he stated, “As far as I am concerned the Irish Army are *Oglaigh na hEireann* [Irish defence force] and I stand by the forces of this State.”

He insisted that he would play host to the British queen, should she decide to visit Ireland again.

McGuinness was endorsed by former British Northern Ireland Secretary Shaun Woodward, who described him as a “fit and proper” candidate for high office.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact