Irish ex-left reaches out to Labour and Sinn Fein

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The United Left Alliance (ULA), a coalition of the Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP), has formed a new campaign group to build alliances with Sinn Fein, Labour "dissidents" and various independent members of parliament.

Behind this latest manoeuvre, the ULA continues to promote the Labour Party even as the latter sits in government and takes the axe to social services and public spending.

The "Alliance against austerity", founded less than a year after the launch of the ULA, is aimed at drawing in forces within Labour and Sinn Fein behind a deliberately vague message of opposition to cuts that commits no one to very much at all. The alliance was brought together on three demands: reverse the cuts; tax the wealthy; and public investment in jobs. As Michael O'Brien of the SP wrote, "Around these three simple demands it is possible to involve unions at rank and file level, hospital campaigns, Special Needs Assistant campaigns, Occupy Dame Street, the emerging Campaign Against Household and Water Taxes and many others including individuals belonging to no particular organisation under the broad banner of an Alliance Against Austerity."

The phrase "individuals belonging to no particular organisation" would cover the vast bulk of the working class that is hostile to Labour and the entire political establishment. But this is not the target audience for the SP and SWP. They have set their sights on various "independent" Members of the Dáil (parliament), some of whom made deals with the previous Fianna Fáil-Green party government to support austerity measures in exchange for funding for local projects. Ever since the election of five ULA members of parliament at last February's elections, they have worked together with a number of independents to form a "technical group" in the Dáil, giving them extra speaking rights and allowing participation in various committees.

The ULA's appeal to unite under a "broad banner" of opposition to the government's austerity opens the way to alliances with organisations hostile to the working class. The role of Labour parliamentarians who directly support the government speaks for itself. But the presentation of Sinn Fein as a "left" party committed to social reforms is equally grotesque, given the party's record in government in Northern Ireland. In coalition with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), they have slashed budgets in line with the austerity measures adopted by the Conservative-Liberal coalition in London. In the Republic, Sinn Fein has made no commitment to oppose public spending cuts. Its proposals merely differ on the length of time required by Ireland to implement the dictates of the financial elite.

One of the first acts of the ULA's new alliance was to call a pre-budget demonstration on November 26, which attracted no more than 2,000 people. The ULA promoted the march by holding a joint press conference with Sinn Fein and various trade union representatives. The platform was dominated by union bureaucrats, who are the avenue through which the ULA insists workers must conduct their struggles.

The trade unions have collaborated over the past four years in the implementation of billions of euros in cuts targeting working people, regardless of which party was in power. With Labour and Fine Gael implementing identical policies to Fianna Fáil, union leaders continue to work with the government. Recent weeks have seen the possibility raised of the renegotiation of the "Croke Park" agreement between the unions, government and employers, involving a strike ban, wage cuts and job losses.

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The ULA covers for this treachery by blaming workers for their supposed inability to resist the onslaught of the ruling class. SWP leader Kieran Allen claimed in a recent interview, “Irish workers entered the crisis in ways which predisposed them to be dumb-struck—rather than respond militantly. The Celtic Tiger years produced a virulent pro-capitalist culture where entrepreneurs acquired the status of the republican heroes of the past. Business values were systematically instilled in the population through media outlets run by the two tax exiles, Denis O’Brien and Tony O’Reilly. The constant message was ‘private-good’ and ‘public-bad’. This got a hearing because many workers saw their living standards increase with little need for a collective fight. Few noticed that the share of the economy going to workers declined compared to that which went to profit and dividends.”

Having written off the working class’s ability to resist the attacks from the ruling elite, the ULA seeks to utilise protest actions as a means to pressurise the government. As O’Brien wrote, “[I]t is the intention of the groups initiating this protest that it will go on to be a sustained campaign against austerity that will work to build up the necessary pressure from below in society to stop the government in its tracks.”

The essential task of bringing the government down is omitted, so as not to embarrass trade union bureaucrats that are firmly in Labour’s orbit—including members of the SWP and SP.

ULA MPs have focused their anger on Labour ministers who have supposedly “broken their promises” to the electorate. SP leader Joe Higgins remarked in the Dáil on December 9 that he was “bewildered by this massive about-face” by Labour, which he stated had opposed the cuts imposed by Fianna Fáil and the Greens in previous budgets.

Higgins still claims in Sunday speeches to be a revolutionary Marxist and a Trotskyist. Yet he is “bewildered” by the actions of a party that unflinchingly defends Irish capitalism. The first budget of the Labour-Fine Gael coalition sees spending reduced by a further €2.2 billion and taxes rise by €1.6 billion for a population of just under 4.5 million. In the election campaign earlier this year, Labour committed itself to work within the framework imposed by the European Union (EU) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) and stated that it would not attempt to reverse any of the cuts already implemented by Fianna Fáil and the Greens.

The ULA’s budget response contained several mild demands, including a 5 percent wealth tax and investment in a jobs programme. All that the ULA could muster in opposition to the vicious austerity measures of the past four years was the claim that “The only way out of the current crises is to generate real economic activity and create jobs.”

The statement puts forward an agenda based entirely on restoring the fortunes of Irish capitalism. Significantly, no mention is made of the 12.5 percent corporate tax rate that is supported universally within Ireland’s political parties. Nor is there any mention of the multinationals that invest heavily in the country, indicating that this would be the source of the “real economic growth” for which the ULA is fighting.

It is on such a basis that the ULA has sought to champion the call for “debt audit commissions.” In line with similar campaigns across Europe, these commissions aim to direct public anger against the banks into the establishment of “commissions” to decide what components of the public debt are “legitimate” and should be repaid. Essentially an advisory body to the state, the commissions will no doubt offer opportunities for the well-heeled bureaucrats and petty-bourgeois elements that predominate within the ULA.

Genuine opposition to the devastating attacks on the working class being carried out must develop independently of and in opposition to organisations like the ULA, which act as the last line of defence for capitalism and its political defenders on the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and the nationalists of Sinn Fein.

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