

Irish Labour Party in deep crisis

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Support for the Labour Party in Ireland has fallen to an historic low, as the party continues to play a leading role in the implementation of austerity measures in coalition with the right-wing Fine Gael.

The collapse in support has led to several high-profile resignations over recent months and growing concerns that Labour could be wiped out at the next elections in 2015.

The crisis escalated following a by-election held in Meath at the end of March, in which Labour finished fifth with just 5 percent of the vote. A series of newspaper polls have given the party similarly low numbers nationally.

Several parliamentarians expressed various tactical disagreements with the present leadership. On April 5, Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Nessa Childers announced her resignation from the parliamentary party, citing Labour's role in government as having led to the sharp decline in its support. "I was one of the ones that knew what would happen to the party. I felt they should've stayed in opposition and formed an alliance on the left," she told the *Irish Times*.

Childers is the seventh member to have left the parliamentary Labour Party since the coalition took office in February 2011.

Phil Prendergast, a fellow MEP, warned that Labour was in danger of "writing its own obituary."

Local councilor Sian O'Callaghan commented that the party had been given a "sharp wake-up call.... If the Labour Party does not pursue a broad progressive social democratic agenda in Government its days are without doubt numbered."

On April 20, at a charity event in Dublin, Labour's social affairs minister, Joan Burton, noted in a speech that she felt the population had reached the "limit" of tolerance of austerity measures. She added that such policies could only be continued for so long without

generating opposition.

None of these remarks reflect any genuine opposition to the party's present course, but are rather over how best to package Labour's reactionary right-wing agenda. Since entering government with Fine Gael in 2011, after it had performed well in parliamentary elections with the promise to scale back on the previous government's austerity measures, Labour has taken the lead in wielding the axe to public spending. The austerity measures initiated by the Fianna Fáil-Green Party coalition were vastly expanded under Labour and Fine Gael.

Labour ministers have led the implementation of some of the most brutal attacks on working people in a number of areas. As minister of public expenditure and reform, Labour's Brendan Howlin has made harsh cuts to social services and workers' wages. Together with Finance Minister Michael Noonan (Fine Gael), he has presented two budgets containing €7 billion of spending cuts, and he will be closely involved with Noonan, Taoiseach (prime minister) Enda Kenny, and Labour Party leader Eamon Gilmore in planning next year's budget due in October.

Labour has used its links to the trade unions to ensure that austerity measures have been implemented. The unions continue to enforce the Croke Park Agreement outlined in 2010, which led to billions of euros in savings from the public pay bill and a reduction in public sector employment of 10 percent. In the negotiations over a follow-up agreement, which have stalled in the face of widespread opposition within the working class, Labour ministers have led demands for even deeper cuts to pay for the bailout of the banks. Howlin has insisted that failure to agree on a renewal of the Croke Park deal will result in an across-the-board pay cut of 7 percent, on top of estimated pay reductions of 14 percent in the public sector since 2008.

Minister of Justice Alan Shatter recently introduced a

reform bill on property ownership that removes a loophole in Irish law making repossessions of homes difficult. The new law, which will give the banks expanded powers to seize the homes of thousands of families who have fallen behind with mortgage payments, was described by Shatter as “unpalatable but necessary.”

None of those raising concerns about Labour’s declining support have in any way repudiated the party’s role in imposing these policies. They have only meekly expressed doubts about the feasibility of continuing with harsh austerity policies when confronted with mounting public opposition that the unions are increasingly unable to control.

In response to these concerns, Gilmore warned against any attempt to slacken the pace of austerity, noting the deep crisis still facing Ireland. “What kind of conditions do people think would be attached (to a second bailout)? What kind of money do people think would be available? Do people want this period of austerity to continue for another 10 years, another 20?” he commented to the *Irish Times* .

In reality, Gilmore knows full well that the deals struck by the current government will ensure the continuation of austerity for decades to come. Dublin’s latest agreement with its lenders in the European Union, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund for the repayment of funds for just one of its bailed-out banks will see repayments stretch over the next 40 years. The extension of the timetable for the rest of the €85 billion bailout for an extra seven years will secure the full repayment of these funds with interest to the financial elite.

Gilmore is typical of a layer of the current Labour Party leadership whose roots are in the pseudo-left of Irish politics. He began his career in the Workers Party in the 1980s, which sought to exploit Marxist phraseology to promote Irish republicanism. He played a leading role in the right-wing split in 1992 to form the Democratic Left, and together with Howlin facilitated the merger of this organisation with Labour in 1999. This created the conditions for the integration of a number of formerly “left” radical figures into the highest echelons of Irish politics. They have all been critical to the implementation of the attacks launched against the working class under conditions of the greatest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s.

The collapse in support for Labour that has taken place is by no means a uniquely Irish phenomenon. Across Europe, support for nominally “left” social democratic parties has dropped as they have all implemented the dictates of the ruling elite without exception. In Greece, where the most brutal cuts to date have been imposed, support for PASOK has dropped to just 6 percent. In Portugal, Spain and Britain, backing for social democratic parties is declining. In the recent elections in Iceland, the social democrats barely surpassed 10 percent of the vote after governing over four years of austerity measures and bank bailouts.

The task before Irish workers, like their class brothers and sisters internationally, is to break politically from these organisations, and the pseudo-left groups that offer them much-needed support. The building of an independent political party of the working class, based on the programme of socialist internationalism upheld by the International Committee of the Fourth International, is the only viable way out of the deepening social and political crisis.



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