

Ireland's governing parties punished in local and European elections

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Voters across Ireland in last weekend's European and local elections, as well as by-elections in two parliamentary constituencies, expressed bitter opposition to the ruling Fine Gael-Labour coalition in Dublin and its austerity policies.

The most significant result was the collapse of the Labour Party's support, prompting the resignation of its leader, Deputy Prime Minister Eamon Gilmore. In local elections, the party lost more than half its support compared to 2009 and almost two thirds of its local councillors. It lost all representation in Cork, and in many working class areas of Dublin it had no representation, as its vote collapsed from 14.5 percent to just 7.2 percent.

In the European elections, Labour lost all three of its MEPs.

Fine Gael, the party of Prime Minister Enda Kenny, lost more than a third of its vote compared to the general election in 2011 and a quarter compared with the last local elections in 2009. In Dublin it only received support from 14 percent of the electorate, and 22.3 percent nationwide.

Taken together, the governing coalition received the support of less than 30 percent of the electorate.

The results demonstrate widespread hostility among working people to the entire political establishment, which has implemented billions of euros in devastating cuts. This has produced one of the largest drops in average wages across Europe, the undermining of public services and high rates of unemployment. Including the measures taken by the current coalition and the previous Fianna Fail-Green Party administration, austerity measures equivalent to more than 20 percent of economic output have been imposed since 2008.

Gilmore was unrepentant about this record, asserting

at the press conference announcing his resignation that it had been an honour and a privilege to lead Labour into power in 2011. "I still believe that was the right decision, and I am proud of the progress we have made in achieving those objectives," he said.

The chief beneficiaries of the anti-government swing were Sinn Fein and "independent" candidates, who all sought to portray themselves as a left alternative.

The largest groupings on Dublin and Cork city councils were Sinn Fein and independents, and Sinn Fein even won a European parliament seat in Dublin. The party picked up three seats from Ireland's total of 11, while two were won by independents.

In the European elections, 19.8 percent voted for "independents." Although this group contained individuals from a diverse range of political backgrounds, including ex-politicians from the major parties, they all campaigned as an alternative to the existing set-up. In Dublin, Nessa Childers, an ex-Labour Party member who left the party last year after a dispute with the leadership, won a seat.

In the Dublin West constituency, where a parliamentary by-election was held following the resignation of the local MP, the pseudo-left Socialist Party candidate Ruth Coppinger won the seat. However, the SP's MEP Paul Murphy failed to retain his seat.

Despite its posture as an anti-establishment force, Sinn Fein has proven during its time in the power-sharing government in Northern Ireland that it is fully willing to collaborate in the implementation of austerity measures in line with the programme of spending cuts led by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government in London.

In the south, it defends the Republic's extremely low corporate tax rate of 12.5 percent and advances a

programme of minimal national reforms to tackle the crisis. It is an indication of how right wing and discredited the entire political establishment is that such a party can even portray itself as a left alternative.

In its vote in the north Sinn Fein also benefited from its anti-establishment pose and demographic trends, which have resulted in the increase in the party's Catholic support base. This will be an additional source of concern for the ruling elite at a time when the constitutional future of the British state is open to question with the referendum in Scotland on independence due in September.

Although Gilmore tried to put a brave face on the situation after his resignation, claiming that the government in Dublin could survive his withdrawal, the coalition is facing a deepening crisis. There is a good chance that it will not last until the next election, which is scheduled to be held in two years.

Only a day prior to announcing his resignation Gilmore insisted he would remain as leader even though by then it was already clear that Labour would lose its European parliament seats. He was forced out after eight parliamentary deputies threatened to put forward a no confidence vote in his leadership.

One Labour deputy called for clearing out the entire leadership and replacing it with a new generation, while others expressed fears about being wiped out at the next general election. Its current share of the vote was only marginally better than the Green Party, which continues to struggle following its role in the previous Fianna Fail government in implementing the bank bailout.

Kenny responded by insisting that the government would stay its course. It plans to make a further €2 billion in spending cuts in the budget due in October. He stated in parliament, "We have set out targets and objectives and they must be achieved."

Kenny's coalition has been hit in recent months by a scandal over police spying, which forced justice minister Alan Shatter to leave his post on May 8. His exit from the government was a desperate attempt to put the lid on a scandal, which is threatening to engulf the entire political establishment, including Kenny.

The systematic surveillance by the Gardai of telephone calls coming in and going out of all police stations throughout the country since the early 1980s triggered the resignation of police chief Martin Callinan at the end of March. At the time, Shatter absurdly

claimed that he had only found out about the existence of the surveillance programme a day prior to Callinan's resignation.

According to Kenny's diary, obtained by way of a freedom of information request, the Taoiseach (prime minister) met with Shatter in the early morning of March 23, a full day prior to the alleged time when the government became informed. Later that day, Kenny held talks with the attorney general on the phone taping scandal and less than two days later Callinan left his post.

Another major cause of the government's unpopularity was the recent agreement between Fine Gael and Labour to introduce water charges amounting to more than €200 per year. Labour campaigned in the 2011 election in opposition to such charges. On top of the property tax and the universal social charge, it will spell disaster for thousands of families and workers already struggling to make ends meet.

Under conditions where all of the major parties are discredited for their role in plundering public services and where the working class is shifting to the left, as indicated by the election results, it will be the task of Sinn Fein to come to the defence of Irish capitalism.

Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams made no secret that his party was prepared to go in to government if necessary, stating merely that it would only do so if given a "mandate." He called on the government to bring the general election forward, declaring, "They've been given notice to quit. So rather than speculate about whether it would be a contest at the next election let's have the election now. Let the people speak."



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