

Irish Labour Party members hold ballot for new leader

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The Irish Labour Party is balloting its membership to determine who will be the party's new leader after it was all but wiped out in last month's European and local elections. The party received just 7 percent of the vote, down from 14.5 percent, and failed to win a seat in the European Parliament.

Like other nominally social democratic parties across the continent, Labour has played an indispensable role for the ruling class in imposing vicious austerity measures to pay for the bailout of the banks. The contest was triggered by the resignation of Tanaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) and Labour leader Eamon Gilmore last month. In his resignation speech, he wholeheartedly defended his party's participation in government since 2011, during which time Labour has helped impose over €20 billion in austerity measures.

Alongside Gilmore, Labour's Brendan Howlin has served as Minister for Public Expenditure. In this capacity, he has drafted drastic cuts throughout the public sector, including wage cuts for workers that have been imposed through the enforcement of a strike ban.

The two leading candidates to replace Gilmore have proven their willingness to implement the dictates of the financial elite in the face of broad-based popular opposition. Joan Burton, minister for social protection in the Fine Gael/Labour coalition government, is tipped as the most likely to win majority support from the 5,000 ballots that have been distributed.

Burton began canvassing backbenchers for support almost immediately after Gilmore resigned last month on the back of the worst election result for the party since its foundation in 1922. She has built up her political career and secured the confidence of the Irish elite by imposing welfare cuts on the unemployed and others receiving benefits. Burton slashed welfare by €290 million last year and cut the jobless benefit to

€100 a week for those under 25.

Department inspectors say they saved €613 million last year by carrying out reviews of welfare payments. Burton's department managed to force 5,000 off the dole in 2013, with the number receiving penalties sharply increasing. The effect has been to dragoon many into exploitative work for dole schemes or to emigrate. The European Commission at the beginning of June demanded another €2 billion in austerity measures in next October's budget.

On top of this, Burton has propagated the myth that there are a huge number of fraudulent claims on welfare in order to soften up the population for further cuts—even though the Department of Social Protection was forced to admit that the actual level of fraudulent payments amounted to €26 million (0.1 percent of the entire welfare budget). There has been a witch-hunt in the media and the setting up a special police force of 20 Gardai with powers of arrest. The police unit is to operate in every major city across the country, focusing particularly on working class areas. Burton has stoked the fire by claiming that tens of thousands of welfare recipients are “potentially” cheating the system.

The other main contender is barrister Alex White, Junior Minister for Health in the coalition government. White has been responsible along with Fine Gael Health Minister James Reilly for severe health cuts targeted at €666 million for this year, including €341 million in savings on the medical card scheme. This allows people on very low incomes or with an ongoing debilitating illness to access medical services at a minimal cost.

Along with other austerity measures, those introduced by the coalition, such as the €200 water charge and the cutting of medical cards, provoked public outrage as thousands of elderly, disabled and chronically ill people

suddenly have no access to vital treatments and medicine.

Parents of children with Down Syndrome and others with Motor Neuron Disease were questioned by the Health Service Executive (HSE) over their need for a medical card. In some severe cases they were informed by text message that they would be losing the card. Dr Matt Sadlier, president of the Irish Medical Organisation, denounced the witch-hunt against cardholders. Last year, almost 50,000 medical cards were withdrawn from patients.

The latest public outcry against the hardship caused by such cuts forced Reilly and White to do a u-turn, declaring after last month's elections that previously withdrawn discretionary medical cards would be reinstated "with the minimum of upset or interference."

In launching his bid for leadership of the Labour Party, White was unrepentant about his part in devastating the lives of thousands of sick and elderly people, declaring, "The Labour Party from its inception, more than any other party in this State, has single-mindedly, consistently and without fear or favour, promoted the ideals of equality and justice for all. Speaking for myself, I am proud of that achievement and I stand over many of the choices we have had to make in getting to this point. That patriotic duty is now done."

White and Burton debated the future of Labour last weekend at the Communications Workers' Union offices in Dublin. Present was Jack O'Connor from the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU), who spoke prior to the candidates' debate. Under O'Connor's leadership, SIPTU and the trade union bureaucracy as a whole has loyally collaborated with every government attack on working people, while demobilising all opposition that has emerged in the working class. SIPTU's leading role last year in forcing through the Haddington Road Agreement, in the face of broad hostility from workers, helped the government achieve a further €1 billion in savings in the public sector.

In the latest betrayal, the Impact union called off strike action at national airline Aer Lingus over a pension dispute.

O'Connor urged the new leader to reject "unnecessary austerity" if government finances allowed. There was no explanation as to why anyone

should expect a party that has led many of the most brutal attacks on working people to follow such a course.

The latest polls show a continuing trend of widespread hostility to both governing parties, with Fine Gael on just 22 percent and Labour falling again to only 4 percent. In the leadup to May's European elections, polls showed over 70 percent of respondents disapproved of the government. Should there be an early election, many commentators are now predicting a wipeout for the Labour Party like that suffered by the Green Party, which collaborated at every turn in bailing out the banks and implementing vicious austerity measures as part of the previous Fianna Fail/Green coalition.



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