

Irish voters overwhelmingly support legalisation of same-sex marriage

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The Irish electorate voted by a margin of almost two-to-one last Friday to support a constitutional amendment legalising civil marriage services between same-sex couples. After all votes were counted, 62 percent voted in favour and 38 percent against.

The strong support received reflects the recognition among wide sections of the population that allowing gay couples to marry is a question of basic democratic rights. News reports spoke of many Irish citizens living abroad making the trip home to cast their vote.

The vote demonstrated the sharp decline in the influence of the Catholic Church, for centuries the dominant ideological influence in Ireland. However, the ruling elite continues to defend the Church as a crucial part of bourgeois rule in Ireland. Politicians even claimed that the referendum had nothing to do with the Church.

In addition, the reform affects only civil ceremonies, with the Church exempted from an obligation to conduct same-sex marriages. Some officials within the Church suggested that priests may be ordered not to conduct civil marriage services between same sex couples.

The Fine Gael-Labour Party coalition engineered this compromise following the calling of the referendum vote by the government in late 2013. In return, the church kept a relatively low profile in the campaign, leaving the leadership of the No side to organisations like the Iona Institute, a Catholic think tank.

Despite having its reputation discredited by a series of damaging child abuse scandals, the Catholic Church still plays a major role in areas such as social care and education. This was acknowledged in comments by Diermuid Martin, Archbishop of Dublin, on the referendum result. He complained, “Most of these young people who voted Yes are products of our Catholic schools for 12 years. There’s a big challenge there to see how we get across the message of the church.”

The most telling example of the church’s continued

malignant influence on public policy is that abortion remains illegal in Ireland under any circumstances, except when there is an imminent danger to the life of the mother.

The discredited Irish political establishment sought to exploit the same-sex marriage issue for its own political agenda. All of the major parliamentary parties gave their backing to the referendum proposal, hoping thereby to use their support for gay marriage as evidence of their “progressive” credentials.

This was summed up by the Irish government’s health minister, Fine Gael’s Leo Varadkar, who claimed on television that the referendum was a “social revolution.” Fine Gael’s junior coalition partner, the Labour Party, emphasised the messages of “equality” and equal rights for all in its “Make It Happen” campaign.

Such posturing regarding a commitment to equality is obscene coming from parties that openly defend the grossest forms of economic inequality. This contradiction cannot be understood outside of current social and political conditions.

The gay marriage measure was proposed by Labour in its manifesto for the 2011 elections, following which it entered a coalition with Fine Gael, committed to imposing the dictates of the European Union-led troika. The EU, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Central Bank (ECB) arranged an €85 billion bailout in 2010 for the Irish financial elite to avoid the collapse of the major banks.

Continuing where the previous Fianna Fail-Green Party coalition left off, Fine Gael and Labour imposed crippling attacks on public services, oversaw a strike ban in the public sector while slashing wages, and increased taxes for working people. Labour abandoned its pre-election posturing as a progressive force, resulting in the collapse of its support to around four percent of the electorate.

The assault on jobs and living standards was enforced

with the full support of the trade unions, which signed on to the Croke Park Agreement banning strikes in 2010 and prevented the emergence of any serious challenge by the working class to the government's austerity agenda. As with Labour, the unions played a prominent role in the Yes campaign for the referendum in the hope of winning back some cheap credibility.

Meanwhile, the result of the pro-capitalist policies of austerity pursued by all these parties for the vast majority of the population have been disastrous. While a tiny elite of the super-rich have seen their wealth explode, and Dublin has been able to re-enter the bond market with the completion of its bailout programme, average earnings for working people have dropped drastically—in some cases by as much as 20 percent—since 2008.

All of the high-sounding commitments to equal rights made by government ministers during the marriage referendum campaign cannot disguise the fact that they head a coalition which has presided over an unprecedented acceleration in social inequality.

Labour leader Joan Burton, who launched her party's referendum campaign by pledging to fight for equal rights for all, slashed billions from the social welfare budget during her time as social affairs minister, impacting some of the most vulnerable in society.

For his part, Varadkar, the self-proclaimed advocate of a "social revolution," has repeatedly made headlines for his aggressive and inflammatory comments towards striking workers and protesters, like bus workers in Dublin in 2013 and anti-water-charge demonstrators earlier this year. In truth, what has happened in Ireland over recent years should more properly be understood as a social counter-revolution—one implemented by Varadkar's government and the ruling elite as a whole, by clawing billions from working people to pay to the financial speculators and criminals who crashed the economy.

Fine Gael initially resisted the proposal for a marriage referendum, and it did not formally appear in the programme for government following the 2011 election. Instead, Fine Gael agreed to a compromise in which the issue was sent to a constitutional convention. After the specially-created body overwhelmingly backed the holding of the referendum, Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Enda Kenny leant his full support to the Yes campaign.

However, even in the midst of the referendum campaign, Fine Gael was far from firm in its commitment to push for the new measures to be implemented. As one anonymous senior party member told the *Irish Independent* on 19 May, "It is one thing to back the same

sex referendum, quite another to go out and actively advocate for it."

The government was not obliged to hold a referendum. It could have decided to adopt the measure into law via a parliamentary bill. While in Ireland, constitutional amendments do need to be put to a vote, the constitution as it existed prior to Friday's vote did not specify that marriage had to be between a man and woman. The need for a constitutional amendment was thus disputed.

In the end, the same-sex marriage referendum was seen as a useful measure to partially restore Labour's tattered credibility ahead of elections early next year. Fine Gael, too, hoped to gain politically from its formal support for the bill. In the most recent polls, Fine Gael is securing around 28 percent of the vote, while Labour is on a mere seven percent.

The attempt by the political establishment to present itself as supporters of equality and human rights was seen as necessary, so as to convince an increasingly hostile population that their democratic and social aspirations can still be met by the Irish capitalist state.

But if equal rights for all are to mean anything more than hollow rhetoric, it must be linked to the struggle to transform society along socialist lines. This is the only way that the inequities of the capitalist system can be abolished. This will create the conditions for everyone, regardless of their sexual, gender, racial or other personal characteristics, to enjoy both full democratic rights and the essential *social* rights—to a decent education, health care, well-paid employment and a comfortable retirement—to which they are entitled.



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