

Left and anti-austerity sentiment produces political earthquake in Ireland

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Counting is concluding in the general election in the Republic of Ireland held on February 26, which has resulted in major losses for the Fine Gael/Labour Party coalition government.

With a handful of recounts taking place, Enda Kenny's centre right Fine Gael (FG) has lost 30 seats in the 138 seat Dail Eireann (Irish Parliament)—gaining just 47 seats. His party slumped from 36 percent of the national vote in 2011 to 25.9 percent. The minority partner in the coalition, the Labour Party, whose leader Joan Burton is Minister for Social Protection, was decimated—receiving the lowest vote in its history slumping from 19.5 percent in 2011 to 6.6 percent. Burton herself scraped in on the fifth count under the proportional transfer vote system. The party was reduced to six seats from 33.

Overall, the coalition vote of FG/Labour combined slumped from 55 percent to 32.5 percent. Before the final results were in, the knives were out within Fine Gael to replace Kenny because of the severity of the party's losses.

The other main centre right party, Michael Martin's Fianna Fail who were in government when the banks were bailed out in 2008 and presided over the country's initial descent into recession, doubled its share of seats to 43, but secured just 24.3 percent of the vote.

Fianna Fail came back from an all-time low of 20 seats in 2011 by portraying itself as an opponent of the worst features of the coalition's continuing austerity measures and stealth taxes. Particularly in the rural areas, it was able to tap in to issues like the closure of Garda [police] stations and post offices and to paint the present coalition as “uncaring” in its implementation of social cuts in health and education. One of its election promises was to postpone the collection of the hated

water-charges introduced by FG for five years. The implementation of water charges along with spending cuts to health and education led to huge protest demonstrations over the term of Kenny's government.

The most significant development has been the increase in the popular vote for parties that have painted themselves, however moderately, as a “left” alternative to the two main parties of the Irish bourgeoisie.

In many working class constituencies, there was heavy voting for Sinn Fein, whose vote increased from 9.9 percent to 14 percent. The party doubled its seats from 14 to 28. Smaller parties such as the Anti-Austerity Alliance/ People Before Profit (AAA/PBP)—a front led by the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party—and the newly formed Social Democratic Party (SDP) also increased their share of the vote. The AAA/PBP secured five seats with 3.9 percent of the vote, while the SDP took three.

A majority of the independent candidates who had stood in opposition to the continuing austerity measures of the government also gained seats with independents securing over 17 percent of the vote with 22 seats. In contrast, the Renua Party (Renewal), which was recently formed from a right wing split from Fine Gael, was wiped out, securing just 2 percent of the vote with Lucinda Creighton the party leader losing her Dublin seat.

Although Fine Gael will remain the largest party in the Dail, it is very unlikely that Enda Kenny, with just 47 seats, will be able to form a government when the Dail resumes on March 10. Leo Varadkar, who as Minister for Health, has taken €4 billion euros out of the health budget in the past four years, admitted the game was up for the coalition when he remarked to the press, “It's up to the Opposition to see if they can form

a government. We've been rebuffed.”

Media speculation has centred on a possible Fianna Fail/Fine Gael coalition. The increase in the Fianna Fail vote has put it in a position to bargain with Fine Gael for a grand coalition of the two main traditional capitalist parties. If this materialises it will be the first time in the history of the state that the two have come together since they violently split in 1922 over the terms of settlement when Britain withdrew from the 26 counties and implemented partition.

The two parties have always been known as “the civil war parties” and both have always represented the local ruling elite from the earliest days of the foundation of the Irish Free State. Up to the present economic crisis and bank bailout programme, Fianna Fail has been able to portray itself as moderately anti-partition and populist especially in the rural areas, while Fine Gael advanced itself as “the law and order party” and guardian of the corrupt and Catholic church-dominated state it brought into being. When in government, both parties have always acted in the interests of their financial backers among the very rich.

It is likely now that the paper-thin difference in economic and social policies between the two parties will be put aside, in order to confront the working class as it seeks to oppose austerity and social depredation. The low 65 percent turnout compared to other elections also reflects the continuing alienation of a large section of the population from the political establishment. But any such coalition will only underscore the fact that the essential divisions in Ireland are those between the classes, not rival bourgeois factions.

Kenny, who came to power in 2011, co-opted the Labour Party to oversee a series of devastating austerity measures with the aim of paying Ireland's €85 billion bailout of the banks. Ireland, under the programme negotiated with the European Union, now has debts of €203 billion and is paying €7 billion a year in interest payments.

Ireland is now among the most unequal countries in the EU. More than ten percent of people suffer from food poverty, with upwards of 1,100 children living in emergency accommodation. Latest figures show that 63 percent of lone parents are experiencing material deprivation due to cuts in support benefits. Fully 36 percent of children are experiencing multiple deprivations, with up to 40 families becoming homeless

every month.

Over 300,000 have emigrated since the current government took power and there are 272,000 fewer full-time jobs today compared to before the financial crash, with many of the “job creation” schemes shovelling the unemployed into low paid, temporary work. Then result is that Ireland now has the second highest prevalence of low pay in the entire OECD.

The deepening crisis in the health service and the promotion of private medicine and healthcare means that record numbers of people (600) wait on trolleys in public hospitals for attention. Poverty levels have increased, with almost half a million people having nothing left to spend after essential bills are paid and 1.7 million living on less than €100 after essential bills have been paid. The government gave a €405 million tax cut to the top 20 percent of earners in the most recent budget and introduced water charges worth approximately €300 million. Meanwhile, the number of millionaires in Ireland has increased from 16,000 in 2008 to 91,000 in 2014.

The coalition parties stood on a platform based on the claim that there was a recovery in the Irish economy, but voters in working class areas concluded it is only a recovery for the very rich. The beneficiaries of this sentiment may have been Sinn Fein and the pseudo-left groups, but they will prove to be offering only a false hope of an alternative. The leftward movement of the working class will create the conditions for the building of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Ireland, the only genuine socialist alternative.



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