

Last-minute efforts to form a government in Ireland before parliament resumes

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Ireland's two main parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fail, have each been holding talks with Independent TDs (members of parliament) in an attempt to garner support for the formation of a minority government when the Dail (Irish parliament) meets on April 6.

Fine Gael leader Enda Kenny was forced to cut one day from his planned two-day visit to Washington to mark St. Patrick's Day because of the political crisis. He has warned Independent TDs that the only two options now available are supporting a Fine Gael government or facing another general election.

Ireland has been without a government since the February 26 general election, which saw a repudiation of the right-wing policies of the ruling Fine Gael/Labour coalition. It represented a more general shift in electoral preferences away from the traditional nationalist parties that have dominated the Irish parliament since the foundation of the state in 1922.

This has been fuelled by a deepening social crisis and resulting class polarisation due to the imposition of austerity measures. The world financial crash of 2008 and ensuing crisis in the banking sector forced the then-Fianna Fail government to borrow billions of euros from the European Union and the International Monetary Fund to prevent total collapse. Running of the state's finances was taken over by representatives from the "troika"—the European Central Bank, the European Commission and the International Monetary Fund.

Unemployment reached 15 percent as, with the collaboration of the trade unions, wages were held down and the percentage of people living in consistent poverty doubled between 2008 and 2014. The state was left with an €8 billion a year national debt repayment.

The incoming Fine Gael/Labour government of 2011 introduced five budgets with austerity measures

targeting the unemployed, hospital services, and other social spending areas, which alienated and angered those who depend on social services. Cuts to young people's benefits accelerated a major increase in youth emigration.

The "recovery" on which the coalition based their campaign for the February election was based on a modest increase in jobs, but the majority of jobs on offer are at much lower rates of pay than in 2008—with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reporting that 23 percent of the workforce is now officially on low pay.

When the 158-member Dail met on March 11 to nominate a taoiseach (prime minister) who could form a government, neither Kenny's centre-right Fine Gael or Micheal Martin's nationalist/conservative Fianna Fail could secure an overall majority. Fine Gael lost 26 seats, ending up with 50, while Fianna Fail recovered from its total wipe-out in 2011 to take 44 seats. The Labour Party, whose leader Joan Burton was minister for social protection during the coalition's term in office, suffered its worst result ever and lost 25 seats, returning just seven TDs.

Parties such as Sinn Féin and the pseudo-left Anti-Austerity Alliance/ People Before Profit (AAA/PBP), on record as opposing austerity and the introduction of the hated water charges, increased their votes. Gerry Adams of Sinn Féin, which doubled its representation to 23 seats, ruled out any coalition arrangement with either of the centre-right parties. As a result, pressure has been mounting for Fianna Fail and Fine Gael to form a broad coalition, with political commentators talking about a permanent shift in electoral preferences away from the establishment parties.

Whether Fine Gael can muster sufficient support from Independent TDs by April 6 is unclear. But it is focused

on rural TDs who, to keep their base in their constituencies, were forced to at least verbally oppose the coalition's worst austerity measures and cuts to rural services.

The outgoing government, Fianna Fail and Sinn Fein all took part in the commemorations over the Easter weekend to mark the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin. Despite the pomp and ceremony, however, Irish society is more divided than ever, with the richest 300 people now worth almost €88 billion. Even as the centenary ceremonies were underway, a strike was taking place by drivers, which brought the Dublin Luas light rail system to a halt.

The Anti-Austerity Alliance, led by the Socialist Party (SP), and People Before Profit, led by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), jointly took six seats. They both made clear before the election that they would be willing to support a “left unity” or “progressive government” led by Sinn Fein. Paul Murphy, TD and SP spokesperson, declared, “If the numbers were there, for example, for a Sinn Fein, left independent, AAA, PBP majority in the Dail we’d have to sit down and talk about a programme.” He would support Adams for taoiseach if a coalition deal could be reached.

The politics of both groups have become increasingly indistinguishable from the radical nationalism of Sinn Fein. They all champion the cause of small and medium business owners and the “Irish People” in their literature, while integrating themselves into the structures of the state by participating in the multitude of inter-party committees in the Dail. This assumed its most naked form in the participation of Joe Higgins of the SP in the cross-party “inquiry” into the banking crash, which, after 10 months of hearings on how Ireland’s wealthiest milked the system and crashed the economy, found no individual guilty in what turned out to be a €6 million farce.

The cynicism and opportunism of the pseudo-left is illustrated by an article written by Kieran Allen, People Before Profit’s director of elections. Writing in the Socialist Worker, he criticised Sinn Fein’s lack of “left” policies, boasting that, despite “gross inequality, only the genuine left in AAA-PBP focused on a distribution of wealth.”

However, this focus amounted to what Allen described as “relatively modest measures designed to

take the tax burden off workers who had paid the cost of the crash.”

In reality, the SWP/PBP endorsed a 14 percent corporation tax—one of the lowest in the world and the same rate set by the outgoing right-wing government—merely urging that the tax be collected.

Sinn Fein and the AAA/PBP have jointly been the main political forces in the anti-water charge campaign (Right2Water). They used this as a springboard for creating the pre-election voting pact, Right2Change, which focused mainly on securing voting transfers for Sinn Fein.

Whatever occasional criticism they make, the SP and SWP want to utilise their relations with Sinn Fein to secure their own positions within the political structures of Irish capitalism—acting as a left cover for the continued imposition of austerity.

Their model is Syriza in Greece, which began its life as a coalition between the Euro-Stalinists of Synapsismos, led by Alexis Tsipras, and various pseudo-left groups. The working class paid a heavy price for this rotten arrangement when Tsipras capitulated to the dictates of the troika, imposing even more devastating austerity than the measures agreed by its predecessors.

Last year, Tsipras enthusiastically predicted a Sinn Fein victory in the Irish elections, claiming that Syriza’s electoral victory would “pave the way for other left-wing parties to benefit across Europe.” The “Right to Change” electoral platform also invited former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis to participate by video link in a conference on the Irish economy they organised in Dublin before the election.



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