Ireland’s Fine Gael forms minority government after pact with Fianna Fail

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Enda Kenny, the leader of Fine Gael in the Irish Republic, formed a minority government May 6 after securing a guarantee by Fianna Fail that they would abstain from voting against him as Taoiseach (prime minister).

After weeks of negotiations with independent members of parliament (TDs), and a pledge by Kenny’s negotiating team that his programme for government would address the continuing social crisis of homelessness, poverty, and lack of hospital beds, he was elected prime minister with 59 votes in favour and 49 votes against, in the fourth attempt in 10 weeks to elect a government.

Since the beginning of March, pressure had been built up by the establishment press for Fine Gael and Fianna Fail, both right-wing bourgeois parties, to come together in a coalition.

The two parties’ origins can be traced back to the Irish Civil War and the treaty settlement of 1922, which ratified partition. This has made for tribal loyalties spanning generations, particularly outside Dublin that militates against a formal coalition. But the major obstacle is based upon contemporary political calculations.

A coalition means that the two-party system that allows for one unpopular government to be replaced, only for the new regime to continue the essential policies of its predecessor, would have broken down irrevocably. This is particularly true when the agenda to be pursued is one of savage austerity measures against the working class.

Kenny, after losing a second vote on April 6 even made a direct appeal to Fianna Fail leader Micheal Martin for a grand coalition, saying, “Ending civil war politics is the best thing for our country now.” But this poisoned chalice was rejected.

In the February 26 general election, the former coalition government of Fine Gael and Labour and Fianna Fail collectively polled just 56 percent of the vote. Fine Gael took 50 out of 158 seats in the Dail, or parliament. The Labour Party, under the leadership of Joan Burton who has just resigned as leader, had cooperated with brutal social attacks and ended up losing 30 seats, returning just seven TDs.

While Fianna Fail recovered slightly with 43 seats, it remained under 25 percent of the vote, down from almost 40 percent before the economic and banking crash of 2008. This left Kenny needing the support of eight independents and, most importantly, a guarantee from Fianna Fail’s 43 TDs that they would not oppose his appointment.

The “stumbling block” to such an arrangement, according to Fianna Fail’s Micheal Martin, was the widely-hated water charges which almost 50 percent of the population have refused to pay.

Mass opposition to water charges has seen large marches and other protests, together with the arrest of 188 people in the past year by the Gardai (police).

The previous Fianna Fail/Green coalition had planned to introduce water charges, and drafted legislation just two weeks before the European Union/International Monetary Fund bailout of Brian Cowen’s government in 2010. Fianna Fail this time around called for a five-year suspension of Irish Water, while insisting that those who refused to pay are breaking the law and could still be prosecuted.

The deal agreed between Fianna Fail and Fine Gael kept the utility in existence, while suspending the charges and penalties for non-payment for just nine months. The programme for installing domestic water meters is under review.

Fine Gael also plans to set up a commission to

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examine the "whole issue of Irish Water," which would then be brought to a Dail committee. Other measures in the agreement include an increase in rent supplement by 15 percent, recruitment of thousands more police and modest measures to alleviate child poverty.

This thin gruel provides Fianna Fail with cover for its agreement to prop up Fine Gael, but does nothing substantially to alleviate the suffering of millions of working people. There is every possibility that water charges will still go ahead, possibly in an amended form.

Despite the absence of a formal coalition, the pact between Ireland's two main parties effectively disenfranchises the working class. There is a de facto coalition between the two parties that will enable the government to continue with policies that were decisively rejected in February. And whatever vain efforts are made by Fianna Fail to distance itself from Fine Gael, both will be held responsible for the attacks on the working class that are set to continue.

Ireland's ruling elite face growing opposition from the working class to the impoverishment of whole sections of the population. Repayment of the €67 billion bailout, which was led by the International Monetary Fund, has torn apart the very fabric of society. This has taken the form of a chronic housing shortage, rising rents, mortgage debt, rack renting landlordism, and a crisis in the health and other public services such as special care needs. Fine Gael also regards the exit by Britain from the European Union as a "strategic threat" to the Republic, with damaging consequences for trade and even the political settlement in Northern Ireland.

There is also growing opposition by workers to the pay freezes and wage cuts imposed by the Haddington and Lansdowne Road Agreements, under various governments in cooperation with the trade unions. Dublin Luas Transport drivers are to strike on six occasions over the next weeks and anger is building among shop workers and health workers.

The electoral benefactors from the anger and frustration of working people over years of austerity have been Sinn Fein, who gained nine extra seats in the new Dail and the Anti-Austerity Alliance/People Before Profit (AAA/PBP), an electoral stitch-up between the pseudo-left Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party, which took six.

Sinn Fein benefited from years of being cultivated by the pseudo-left and portrayed as a left and progressive alternative. The SWP and its PBP front even formed the Right2Change electoral pact with Sinn Fein before the February election. In the elections, given its record of colluding with the Democratic Unionist Party in the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Socialist Party and its AAA front felt obliged to make some faint criticisms of Sinn Fein, which it said "verbalised the anger felt by those who've suffered under austerity, but accepted the economic parameters of the establishment and proposed quite minimal reforms."

The truth is, however, that the majority of the mild economic policy adjustments proposed by Sinn Fein differ little in substance from those of the AAA/PBP, which also accept the "economic parameters of the establishment."

While the crisis-ridden system has bitten hard into the working class, the unprincipled hype which AAA/PBP feed to workers is a million miles away from having any actual socialist content and also contains policies on taxation with which the main bourgeois parties are in full agreement. AAA/PBP spokespeople Richard Boyd Barrett and Brid Smyth of the SWP, for instance, have argued consistently for the same 12.5 percent rate of corporate tax agreed by Fine Gael and Fianna Fail in their negotiations on the new minority government, demanding only that it is properly collected.

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