

Greens make gains in Ireland's European and local elections

Dermot Byrne**10 June 2019**

After a series of recounts, the final result was announced on June 5 in the Republic of Ireland for the May 24 European elections.

The constituency of Ireland South returned Grace O'Sullivan of the Green Party for the fourth and final seat.

O'Sullivan knocked out Liadh Ni Reid, the Sinn Fein candidate and sitting Member of the European Parliament (MEP). The outcome reflected a nationwide pattern that suggests that the Green Party is displacing Sinn Fein as an electoral force, particularly in middle class voting areas.

The continuing alienation and exclusion of tens of thousands of working people is reflected in the fact that the turnout to vote for the European and local elections was less than 50 percent of the electorate.

The two main bourgeois nationalist parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fail, received barely 50 percent of the popular vote between them. Leo Varadkar's ruling Fine Gael got only 25.3 percent of first preference votes. There is widespread anger among large swathes of the working class against continuing austerity and the right-wing policies of Varadkar's government. This has recently manifested itself in major strikes in the health service and transport.

Another poll June 5 showed the continuing weakening influence of the Catholic Church. A massive 82.7 percent voted to remove the minimum five-year waiting period for a divorce and instruct the government to legislate to allow foreign divorces.

The European election took place amid an intensifying housing crisis. Just two weeks before the elections it was reported by the *Irish Examiner* that 94 families had become newly homeless in Dublin.

Property prices nationally have increased by over 80 percent since their lowest point in 2013. In Dublin

prices have risen over 92 percent. Lack of social housing is pushing more and more people into the rental market and, facing rack-renting landlordism, they are forced to pay much more than they can afford. There are over 10,000 people now homeless. The crisis has witnessed thousands caught in a rental trap—unable to save while paying extortionate rents. Many new parents have been forced to share a single room in their own parents' home.

The polls were a major setback for Sinn Fein and the pseudo-left. Two years ago, mass protests by tens of thousands of workers forced the Fine Gael government to abolish water charges. The organisations involved in the water charges campaign, such as Sinn Fein, Solidarity and People Before Profit (PBP), used the anger and frustration of the tens of thousands of working people who refused to pay the charges to build their electoral base.

This time around many workers did not bother to vote and many more spoiled their ballot, while Sinn Fein and the pseudo left have further integrated themselves into the establishment through parliamentary committees and countless media appearances. Sinn Fein hemorrhaged seats right across the country, losing 78 council seats and three MEP seats. The party also lost seven seats on Dublin City Council.

The pseudo-left groupings Solidarity and PBP, which had 28 local councillors between them, lost 17 of them. Their election manifestos and demands were little different in substance to that of Sinn Fein. Gillian Brien of PBP, for example, who contested an EU seat in Dublin, avoided any mention of socialism or any substantial criticism of the capitalist political elite to which she was hoping to get elected.

There was no mention of the need for workers to oppose capitalism and the threat of war. Instead,

articulating the requirements of the establishment and its fear of the threat of a return to a hard border on the island due to Brexit, the PBP demanded “a referendum on Irish unity.”

When PBP was founded by the Socialist Workers Party, one document stated, “The Irish economy needs a major stimulus package now to develop our indigenous industries. We need to develop new strategic industries, which take Ireland’s industrial development forward.”

In line with this explicitly pro-capitalist perspective, PBP’s EU election manifesto even championed Ireland’s 12.5 percent corporation tax, which is one of the lowest in Europe.

In Dun Laoighaire, local PBP members demanded, “Regenerate Dun Laoghaire Town,” emphasising it was fighting for “small local businesses” and praising the council for offering a rent rebate for small business.

By integrating themselves into the structures of the establishment, and loyally participating on the numerous inter-party state committees, groups such as PBP have earned the admiration of right-wing parties and the media. They function as a loyal and token opposition, which offers no threat whatsoever to the rule of capital and its financial institutions.

For their part, the Socialist Party and its electoral alliance Solidarity only won four council seats, compared with 11 last time around, losing seats in Limerick, Cork and Dublin.

The party’s European election candidate, Rita Harrold, won 4,967 votes in the Dublin constituency once held by the party’s Joe Higgins, who in 2009 won over 50,000 first preference votes. Paul Murphy took over the seat in 2011 when Higgins won a seat in the Irish parliament. Murphy himself won nearly 30,000 votes in 2014, although he did not win the seat.

Harrold campaigned as a “Socialist Feminist Voice for Workers, Women and the Planet” and called for the trade unions, who have imposed a decade of austerity imposed on workers in Ireland, to “campaign against precarious work conditions” and sexual harassment in the workplace.

The main beneficiary from the electoral debacle suffered by Sinn Fein and the pseudo-left was the Green Party, which gained two MEPs and 37 new councillors. The party picked up council seats across Dublin, Galway City, Cork City and Kildare, tripling its

share of council seats.

The increase in the Green share of the vote expressed the growing protest throughout Europe over climate change and the growing demand from working people for political change and an alternative to Fianna Fail and Fine Gael.

The Green Party is, however, no alternative for Irish workers. Representing the aspirations and interests of the upper-middle classes, it pursues policies indistinguishable from Fine Gael and the establishment parties.

In Germany in the 1990s, in unison with the establishment parties, the Greens supported the devastating NATO wars in the Balkans.

In 2012 in Ireland the coalition government of Fianna Fail and the Greens collapsed amid popular outrage after the government gave unprecedented hand-outs from the state to the Irish banks, while simultaneously imposing austerity budgets to cut pensions, public sector wages, benefits and all areas of social spending. The Greens sanctioned the transfer of billions of euros from the working class into the hands of a criminal financial elite. That the Irish Greens should recover at all is the most damning exposure of Sinn Fein and the pseudo-left.

The main political thread which unites the nominal opposition parties such as the Greens, Sinn Fein, and the pseudo-left groups to Varadkar’s Fine Gael government is their opposition to any independent workers’ struggle against the ravages of capitalist exploitation.

Amid the explosive geopolitical and economic conflicts now undermining European capitalism, workers in Ireland must take up the strategy of the International Committee of the Fourth International. This is the sole movement based on the international mobilisation of the working class—the only social force that can offer an alternative to austerity and war, through the struggle for a united socialist Europe.



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