

Social inequality main issue in the Irish general election

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The general election in the Republic of Ireland takes place February 8. There are 531 candidates running to fill 159 seats across 39 constituencies. The election campaign takes place in conditions of immense anger felt by working people against Leo Varadkar's outgoing right-wing Fine Gael Party.

Varadkar's government has been kept in power over the past four years with the cooperation of Fianna Fáil, the main opposition bourgeois nationalist party. Under the leadership of Micheál Martin, Fianna Fáil signed on to a "confidence and supply" agreement with Fine Gael has fuelled resentment against the entire political establishment.

Growing social inequality, declining living standards culminating in the worst housing crisis in the country's history, and a severe deterioration in the healthcare system and major aspects of social care stand alongside a concentration of extreme wealth in the hands of very few individuals.

A new study by the charity Oxfam has shown that the Republic of Ireland has the fifth largest number of billionaires relative to its population of any country in the world. Ireland is mirroring the global trend in wealth inequality with only Hong Kong, Cyprus, Switzerland, and Singapore having more billionaires per capita.

For the past three weeks the central issues have been homelessness and the housing crisis along with the scandal of patients forced to wait on trolleys in overcrowded and understaffed hospitals.

There has been a public outcry at the introduction of measures to raise the state pension eligibility age from 66 to 68 years. It was already increased in 2014 from 65 to 66, but under the terms of the bank bailout conditions imposed by the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary

Fund in 2011, the then Fine Gael/Labour government legislated to raise the pension age in three stages by 2028 to 68. This has inflicted significant hardship. Workers contracted to retire at 65 now find themselves forced to sign onto unemployment benefits for a year after working all their lives.

The trade unions have cooperated fully with the government in brokering deals via the pro-employer state sponsored Labour Court. Bus workers, for example, have experienced the privatisation of large slices of the national bus service, while strikes have been discouraged or called off.

Last year, as the crisis in the Irish health service reached a tipping point, union leaders imposed a deal brokered with the Labour Court on 40,000 nurses and midwives. The deal was widely opposed by health service workers because the unions had tied nurses to "work performance" schemes that increased workloads.

The working class, as well as bearing the consequences of crumbling public services, has seen a general deterioration in its quality of life. Figures published recently show that Irish workers have seen their living standards plummet by 14 percent since the banking and financial crash of 2008.

Workers often find they must travel in congested traffic conditions a hundred miles or more to get to work in the major cities and larger towns. Ireland has the highest childcare costs in Europe and a soaring crime rate that is the product of growing inequality and an oppressive class system.

While official figures put the number of homeless people at 10,000, this does not include young people, many with children, who have been forced into living with their parents because of spiralling rents.

The political parties including Fianna Fáil, Labour, Sinn Féin, the Greens and the pseudo left People

Before Profit/Solidarity (PBP/S) have all been trading hollow election promises on the backs of these worsening social conditions since the election was called.

Brendon Howlin of the moribund Labour Party set it off, claiming at the launch of the party manifesto, “We will build 80,000 homes over five years.”

Mary Lou McDonald of Sinn Féin and the PBP/S grouping both “pledged” 100,000 houses and a return of the pension entitlement age to 65. The Greens, who while in government with Fianna Fáil in 2012 helped impose brutal austerity measures cutting pensions, workers’ wages, benefits and huge areas of social spending, pledged 200,000 new homes.

Fianna Fáil promptly matched the 200,000 figure but nobody believes a word of it.

Indicating the level of disaffection with both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and a radicalisation amongst broad sections of workers, the latest opinion polls show Sinn Féin winning more support than any other party. Sinn Féin are now potentially the largest party with 25 percent support against Fianna Fáil on 23 percent and Fine Gael on 20 percent, although their low number of candidates, 42, means they are unlikely to be the largest grouping in the next Dáil Éireann.

This makes a coalition involving one or other of the main parties with Sinn Féin a serious possibility.

Liberal commentator Fintan O’Toole mused on the utility of this in the *Irish Times* in a piece titled, “It is time for Sinn Féin to come in from the cold.”

O’Toole noted that the decision of the Labour Party to enter government with Fine Gael in 2011, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, to assist imposing crushing austerity on the working class destroyed the Labour Party. It meant that “Sinn Féin would occupy the space where a traditional social democratic party should be.”

O’Toole is aware of the great vulnerability of the Irish economy to global waves of instability, starting with—but by no means restricted to—the impact of Brexit. He sees the need for Sinn Féin to come forward to play the role as the Irish Syriza. Left talking Syriza came to power in Greece in 2015 and promptly reneged on all its pre-election promises, imposing new levels of brutal austerity on Greek workers.

The nominal left parties seek to attract support from the working class in order to tie the interests of workers

to capitalism and the political needs of the ruling elite. All of them, including the pseudo-left groupings, have made it clear that they seek some type of alliance with the main bourgeois nationalist parties.

Richard Boyd Barrett, the leader of the PBP/Solidarity Alliance with five TDs, has reassured those who vote for them that they “will not prop up a Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael dominated government,” but would seek “a broad left alliance to form a government” including Sinn Féin, the Greens and the Labour Party.

But both Eamonn Ryan of the Greens as well as McDonald of Sinn Féin have repeatedly made clear that their primarily goal is to enter government with either Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil.

Workers need a genuine socialist alternative to confront what is a worldwide crisis of the capitalist system, which brooks no national solution. No amount of auction block politics or reformist lies will make a blind bit of difference. Rather, the fate of workers in Ireland is bound up with that of workers across the world and demands a rejection of the capitalist system and the building of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Ireland.



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