Sinn Féin general election win reflects leftward shift in Ireland

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Sinn Féin President Mary Lou McDonald said Sunday evening that the party would try to form a government in coalition with other parties, following its unprecedented success in Saturday's Irish Republic general election.

With 96 percent of first preference votes counted Sunday evening, Sinn Féin was leading with 24.1 percent, with Fianna Fáil on 22.1 percent, Fine Gael on 22.1 percent and the Greens on 7.4 percent.

After winning nearly a quarter of first-preference votes, McDonald described the result as a "revolution," declaring, in a reference to the traditional bourgeois ruling parties—Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael—"This is no longer a two-party system."

As the party has only stood 42 candidates in the 39 constituencies, each of which returns 3 or 4 TDs (Teachta Dála, members of parliament), Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil will likely still hold the largest number of seats in the 160-seat Dáil Éireann. But Sinn Féin, the political wing of the disbanded Irish Republican Army (IRA), could win as many as 36 seats—up from 23 in the present Dáil.

Sinn Féin are the undeserving beneficiaries of an election dominated by rising opposition to deepening social inequality and of a search by workers and young people for a solution. The results attest to a sharp political shift to the left underway among broad layers of working people after a decade of brutal austerity.

Exit polls asked people which issue most influenced their voting decision. Nearly a third (32 percent) of respondents identified health as their most pressing concern, while 26 percent flagged housing/homelessness and 8 percent the change in pension age. Six percent identified both climate change and jobs as of greatest importance. Only 1 percent flagged Brexit and immigration. Some 80 percent considered the economy as important in their choice.

Sinn Féin's electoral pitch was a combination of social promises they have no means of keeping, calls for Irish unification and Republican flag waving. Their manifesto, "Giving workers & families a break—a Manifesto for Change," promised more houses, more health jobs along with criticism of the ruling parties.

But while having to make appeals to the growing social concerns of millions, Sinn Féin, as a bourgeois nationalist party, put forward an agenda aimed at servicing the transnational corporations and insurance companies that dominate the Irish economy. They also offered support to small- and medium-sized business impacted by the likely deeply damaging impact of Britain's departure from the European Union (EU).

Although constitutional questions were not primary among voters' concerns, Sinn Féin's manifesto proposed a poll on Irish unification—provision for which is made in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 which brought the civil war in British-controlled Northern Ireland to an end.

Brexit has completely destabilised both the Republic of Ireland, which remains part of the EU, and Northern Ireland, which is part of the UK. The withdrawal agreement negotiated between Boris Johnson's Conservative British government and the EU effectively creates some form of trade border in the Irish Sea and on the border of Northern Ireland. This will have a ruinous impact on the economy of both sides of the border on which Sinn Féin will seek to capitalise.

On these grounds, Sinn Féin picked up support among all age groups under 65. This is particularly pronounced amongst young voters where Sinn Féin has, according to exit polls, 32 percent support, compared to Fine Gael at 16 percent, and Fianna Fáil

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and the Greens both around 14 percent. Among 35- to 49-year-olds and 50- to 65-year-olds, Sinn Féin are tied with both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil at around 22 percent. Only among those over 65 does Sinn Féin's support fall far behind the establishment parties.

Significantly, among 18- to 24-year-olds, 75 percent supported a unification poll.

Entirely absent from Sinn Féin's manifesto was any reference to its record in Northern Ireland. For 10 years to early 2017, Sinn Féin ruled in Northern Ireland alongside the Democratic Unionist Party. The power sharing government in Stormont—only revived last month after three years—imposed all the spending cuts demanded by the British government in Westminster, ruthlessly attacking social spending while manipulating sectarian divisions in the working class. The word Stormont does not appear in their manifesto at all.

The election result is politically explosive on both sides of the border. Sinn Féin's manifesto notes, "The defence of the Good Friday Agreement and the issue of a referendum on Irish Unity is now centre stage. … It is totally inconsistent for the Irish Government, the Fianna Fáil leadership and others to laud and correctly seek support for the Good Friday Agreement, while resiling from elements of it, including the referendum. However, it is clear that despite resistance from the Irish and British Governments and the main unionist parties, a referendum on Irish Unity will be held in the next few years. Demographic trends suggest a nationalist voting majority in the North is close. Political unionism has lost its electoral majority in four consecutive elections and the exit poll conducted across the 26 counties [the Republic] in the wake of the Local Government and European elections in 2019 showed a huge majority in support of Irish Unity."

The document passes over the implications and impact in the North of their unification poll proposal. Northern Ireland remains deeply polarised on sectarian lines. While the recent British general election saw Unionist parties finally lose the majority they have held since Ireland's partition by British imperialism in 1920, a substantial proportion of the population, including most Protestant workers, are opposed to Irish unification.

These fractious circumstances, overshadowed by deepening world economic crisis, are set to dominate the horse trading over the terms of prospective coalition agreements over the next weeks. Both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have ruled out a coalition with Sinn Féin, but cannot simply go back into government with each other—on the basis of their existing "confidence and supply" agreement—as it would generate further social anger.

Some form of coalition involving Sinn Féin is therefore a real possibility, which would mean the party being in government on both sides of the Irish border.

Fianna Fáil leader Michael Martin has hinted that his party could be open to an agreement with Sinn Féin, while elements within Fianna Fáil have long seen Sinn Féin as a viable partner in government. Sinn Féin's McDonald has made clear that their red-line terms for a coalition deal would be the border poll within the lifetime of the government.

McDonald will also be able to bring some of the smaller parties along with her. She said as the count was ongoing that she had already been in touch with the Greens, the Social Democrats and the pseudo-left People Before Profit. The smaller parties have all indicated their willingness to, in the words of People Before Profit TD Richard Boyd Barrett, participate in a "a broad left alliance to form a government" with Sinn Féin.

The challenge facing workers in Ireland is stark. Sinn Féin is entirely incapable of fulfilling any of the urgent social demands that have driven its unexpected electoral success. To avoid being trapped behind the party's nationalist and pro-capitalist machinations, workers in Ireland, North and South, must adopt an independent socialist political strategy based on unity with workers in Britain, Europe and internationally to advance their interests.

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