

Irish pseudo-left groups back Sinn Féin-led coalition

Steve James
26 February 2020

Sinn Féin emerged as clear winners in this month's general election in the Republic of Ireland.

The party won 24.5 percent of first preference votes, against 22.2 percent for Fianna Fáil and 20.9 for Fine Gael. The result expressed deep frustration in the working class at extreme levels of social inequality in Ireland, with Sinn Féin benefitting from rhetorical pledges to implement reforms that won support among swathes of the working class, particularly young, people.

The outcome took Sinn Féin by surprise as much as anyone. The party only stood 42 candidates and therefore only won 37 seats in the 160-seat Dáil, 14 more than last time.

No party is anywhere near a majority and months of coalition negotiation and uncertainty lie ahead, or possibly fresh elections.

In the days after the election Sinn Féin leader, Mary Lou McDonald, made clear she was willing to enter coalition talks with Fianna Fáil. But McDonald's overtures were rebuffed.

This leaves the possibility of a coalition of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. Although Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, with smaller partners, have between them formed every government in Ireland since independence from Britain, the two parties have never ruled together.

Fianna Fáil suffered a catastrophic collapse following the financial crisis of 2008 and its imposition of austerity policies. Fine Gael took power in 2011, temporarily in alliance with Labour, but continued austerity. In 2016, Fine Gael lost one third of its seats. Since then a Fine Gael government has been held in place through a "confidence and supply" deal with Fianna Fáil. Today the combined weight of both parties is not enough for a majority and agreement with a third party would be required via a coalition or "confidence and supply" arrangement.

In this volatile situation, overhung by economic uncertainty and the impact of Britain's departure from the European Union (EU), the pseudo-left parties are playing the central role in agitating for a Sinn Féin-led coalition. They

unanimously present this as a government of "real change," to cover efforts to corral Irish workers behind openly bourgeois parties with long and proven anti-working-class records.

Days after the vote, People Before Profit demanded on their website: "The parties who gained from this upsurge, Sinn Féin, Greens, Social Democrats, People Before Profit, have a duty to carry through on this mandate by forming a minority left government."

Sinn Féin have been in power in Northern Ireland since 2007 where they, along with the hard-right Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), imposed austerity and slashed social spending.

Sinn Féin and the DUP recently agreed with the British and Irish government that the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly should be revived.

The Greens entered government in the South in 2007 along with Fianna Fáil. Two years later, amid the financial crisis, the Greens signed off on the Fianna Fáil government's €65 billion bailout on behalf of the EU-led "troika," which led to devastating levels of unemployment and welfare cuts.

The pseudo-left played a direct role during the financial crisis. In 2012, under the auspices of the United Left Alliance (ULA), Richard Boyd Barrett, then of the Socialist Workers Party, along with Clair Daly, then of the Socialist Party, met with the "troika" as part of efforts by the Irish bourgeoisie to legitimise the planned assault on living standards.

Only the Social Democrats do not have a record in government. But the party was formed in 2015 out of disgruntled former Labour Party members. The party's election manifesto states "we are committed to maintaining the 12.5 percent corporate tax rate which is an important factor in our competitiveness as an FDI [foreign direct investment] location."

Pseudo-left TDs (Teachta Dála—members of parliament) voted last week for McDonald for Taoiseach (prime minister). The TDs offered a selection of dishonest and evasive formulations for their lack of principle.

Mick Barry of Solidarity and the Socialist Party claimed he was voting for McDonald to increase pressure on her and her party “to deliver the change that people demand.” Barry was obliged to acknowledge that the policies needed in Dublin “are the complete opposite of the neo-liberal policies Sinn Féin has implemented in Belfast alongside the DUP.”

Paul Murphy, formerly of the Socialist Party, now with his own outfit, Rise, formed on the basis of seeking a closer accommodation with Sinn Féin, claimed that his vote for McDonald came with strings and should not be taken as support for a coalition between Sinn Féin and the establishment parties. By inference, McDonald, in Murphy’s view, can form a government that “prioritises the needs of people and our environment, not the profits of big business,” if only it maintains some distance from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

Richard Boyd Barrett was most explicit. In his view a “left Government is now possible” led by McDonald. Boyd Barrett reeled off a list of demands—reduction in pension age, cessation of public land sales, affordable housing, rent controls, climate change measures and increased minimum wage—that he suggested a McDonald-led minority government could introduce.

No one should believe a word of this. Notwithstanding its historic opposition to the British government, Sinn Féin is a capitalist party, as committed to attracting investment and extracting profit from the working class as the establishment parties it is seeking to supplant.

Why a prospective McDonald government should go back on the record of all its component parts, none of the pseudo-lefts can explain. Instead, they call for an extra parliamentary protest movement to prop up a Sinn Féin government and divert attention from its pro-business and anti-working-class character.

According to the Socialist Party, Sinn Féin “should use their enhanced position and resources to help initiate a new mass movement of ordinary working people and the young to fight on the issues and to push the establishment and their parties back.” Any mass movement with Sinn Féin in a leading role would, by definition, be a nationalist trap for the working class, subordinated to the interests of capitalism in Ireland.

The pseudo-left in Ireland, as with their peers internationally, represent a rightward moving layer of the upper middle class, heavily represented in the trade union bureaucracy, academia, the media and the state. Enriched through rising property and share prices, they view the class struggles developing in Ireland and internationally as a threat to their own material interests.

How they serve capitalism is underscored by the calculated support given to the prospect of a Sinn Féin government by

disparate sections of big business.

The *Financial Times* (FT), mouthpiece of the City of London, hailed the result as an “historic achievement.” An editorial stated, “Ireland’s left-wing nationalists are no opportunistic upstarts, but as much part of the fabric of Irish history as Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the two traditional centre-right ruling parties.”

The problem was that “Ireland’s political system ... has had a muted left-right,” a problem which must now be resolved.

Following recent referenda on abortion and same-sex marriage, the FT concluded this “election could pull the party-political system, too, into the 21st century.”

The FT view Sinn Féin’s entry into government as a party capable of peddling a certain amount of “leftist populism” as vital for maintaining the stability of capitalism in Ireland.

Brian Hayes, a lobbyist for the Irish banking system and former Fine Gael finance minister and chief executive of Banking and Payments Federation Ireland, encouraged his financier peers to be “relaxed.” Hayes wrote of Sinn Féin, “If people were talking about radical change to investment policy and free movement of capital, that would be a worry. But I don’t think they are. I’m confident of a stable government.”

IBEC, the employers’ group, concurred. Business could “absolutely” work with Sinn Féin, said the group’s director Danny McCoy. “We have seen them in action in the North. Their instincts are not mad when it comes to business,” he said.

Johnny Ronan, a major player in building office space for transnational corporations, described Sinn Féin’s investment policies as “sensible stuff.” Facebook recently took out a 25-year lease on Ronan’s Fibonacci Square office development, described in the *Irish Times* as “the largest single office letting in the history of the State.” In addition to Facebook, Google and Amazon, LinkedIn and Salesforce are all establishing new campuses in Dublin on top of their existing operations. Google employs 8,000 in Dublin and is intending to recruit many more.

These ringing endorsements of Sinn Féin and McDonald come from those responsible for maintaining Ireland, and its capital Dublin, as a primary investment hub for the world’s largest tech and financial services companies at the direct expense of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact