

Sinn Féin wins Northern Ireland Assembly election

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Sinn Féin have won the largest number of first preference votes in the May 5 elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly and will hold the largest number of seats.

This is the first time since Ireland was brutally partitioned in 1921-2 that an Irish nationalist party has won an election in the six counties, which remain part of the UK and whose political structures have been designed to ensure pro-British, unionist dominance. Sinn Féin, the one-time political wing of the disbanded Irish Republican Army, is committed to securing a border poll on Irish unification within five years.

Sinn Féin polled 250,388 first preference votes (29 percent) against 184,002 (21.3 percent) for the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Sinn Féin's vote increased by 1.1 percent from 2017, while the DUP's share fell by 6.7 percent. Sinn Féin won 27 seats in the 90-seat assembly, while the DUP took 24. Although Sinn Féin's final seat tally did not increase, the DUP's loss of 3 seats means Sinn Féin can nominate a First Minister to the Northern Ireland Executive. The party is currently led in Northern Ireland by Michelle O'Neill, the party's vice president, a republican since her teens.

Although Sinn Féin won the poll, the unionist share of the overall vote largely held up and much of the working population remains politically polarised along nationalist/unionist and Catholic/Protestant lines.

Under the sectarian rules of government power sharing in Northern Ireland, established by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, a new executive has to be agreed with the largest parties of both the unionist and nationalist "communities". Northern Ireland has not had a functioning government since the DUP's Paul Givan resigned as first minister in February as part of the party's attempt to undermine the Northern Ireland Protocol arrangement for Britain's departure from the European Union (EU).

Northern Ireland is currently ruled by caretaker ministers, who are not able to pass new legislation or budgets. Should a new government not be formed within six months, either new elections must be held, or some new arrangement cobbled together by the British government's Northern Ireland Minister, Brandon Lewis.

As well as hostility to its right-wing sectarian outlook, the DUP's losses are bound up with its support for Brexit. The DUP worked closely with Tory Brexiteers in Westminster to extract the most hardline Brexit terms, while propping up the government of Theresa May. After May's downfall and Boris Johnson's landslide victory of 2019, the DUP were dumped and the implausible promises made to them, the most ludicrous of which was a tunnel to Scotland, dropped.

The border between the north and the Republic of Ireland is now an EU frontier, albeit still invisible. To avoid a "hard border", under terms of the Northern Ireland Protocol negotiated with the EU, certain goods, particularly some foodstuffs and medicines being transported from the British mainland to Northern Ireland, are required to be checked and documented at considerable expense.

This trade barrier down the Irish Sea is viewed by unionists as a mortal threat to their position in the UK, despite their own role in creating it, and has forced a hardening of unionist opinion.

The DUP's current leader, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, who joined the Ulster Defence Regiment at the age of 18, has linked any revival of the assembly to the removal of the protocol and Irish Sea trade barriers.

Last year, DUP leaders, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the hardline Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) and the loyalist Progressive Unionist Party signed a joint anti-protocol declaration. Donaldson participated in a series of anti-protocol rallies and shared a platform with TUV leader, Jim Allister, far-right loyalist commentators

such as Jamie Bryson and leaders of the Protestant Orange Order.

Some election candidates were subjected to loyalist intimidation and violence. People Before Profit (PBP) candidate Hannah Kenny was grabbed by the neck and abused by three men in East Belfast. Elsie Trainer, a Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) candidate, was assaulted after she chased and filmed two youths who had ripped down her election posters.

The UUP lost 1 seat, leaving it with nine, winning only 11.2 percent of first preferences. The TUV still only won one seat, although its share of first preference votes increased to 7.6 percent, mostly at the expense of the DUP.

The Johnson government may yet include legislation to unilaterally scrap the protocol in its next Tuesday's Queen's Speech, as part of its ongoing feud with the EU over Brexit.

Other major shifts include a surge towards the Alliance Party, which took 116,681 first preferences, 13.5 percent, an increase of 4.5 percentage points. Unlike Sinn Féin or the DUP, the Alliance does not define itself as representing one or other of Northern Ireland's "communities" under the sectarian designation scheme built into the Good Friday Agreement. It appears to have picked up votes both from business and middle-class supporters of both main unionist parties and the nationalist SDLP, who also lost votes to Sinn Féin.

The Alliance opposed Brexit, puts forward a pro-business liberal image, and has more than doubled its representation in the assembly to 17 seats. The SDLP, with seven seats, has lost four. The Alliance also won at the expense of the Greens, who lost both their seats.

Sinn Féin's success also partially expressed the deepening class tensions gripping the entire island. Its election pitch was focused primarily on social questions. In this way, Sinn Féin benefited from profound hatred for the Johnson government in Westminster, intensified by the pandemic.

Sinn Féin, however, offers no way forward to any section of workers. It is increasingly viewed as a viable coalition partner of the main right-wing bourgeois parties in the South and was the largest party at the last election. In power in the North since 2007, Sinn Féin has worked closely with the DUP in imposing the austerity measures demanded by the British government. Its proposed border poll, a call for a united capitalist Ireland, provides no means of combating sectarian divisions between Catholic and Protestant workers, based on a socialist appeal to their

shared class interests and opposition to the bourgeoisie, north and south of the border.

Sinn Féin also gained at the expense of the pseudo-left People Before Profit. Although PBP stood their largest number of candidates, its share of first preference votes declined. Their manifesto was only a slightly more left version of Sinn Féin's own Stormont-oriented policy. In line with much of the pseudo-left in Britain, however, PBP supported Brexit while criticising the DUP's "Tory Brexit". Only their current assembly member, Gerry Carroll, was elected.

The last weeks in Northern Ireland have seen a dramatic intensification of the class struggle. Thousands of workers in transport, local government, manufacturing, education and the gig economy have recorded large strike votes. Many, including Caterpillar and education authority workers, have been on strike against sub-inflation pay offers, while the largest transport strike in 20 years, at Translink, was called off at the last minute by the Unite and GMB trade unions.

Council workers protested across the road from the Belfast election count centre against their miserable 1.75 percent pay offer. PBP's manifesto made no criticism of the trade unions' main role in suppressing the class struggle.

The strike wave shows that a powerful basis exists for the emergence of the working class as an independent political force. For this, however, workers in Northern Ireland must begin to break with all the pro-business parties—UK unionist, non-aligned and Irish nationalist—their sectarian policies, their devotion to either British imperialism or Irish capitalism and unify their struggles against every attack on living standards. Every group of workers is posed with forming rank and file committees in every workplace and building a Socialist Equality Party in Ireland to provide this vital struggle with the necessary political leadership.



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