

Northern Ireland elections deepen crisis of British imperialism

A new socialist leadership must be built to oppose sectarianism, trade and military war

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
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The debacle suffered by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in the May 5 elections to the devolved Stormont Assembly has plunged Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government into a political crisis of unprecedented dimensions.

The May 5 elections saw Sinn Féin top the poll. The former political wing of the Provisional IRA (Irish Republican Army) won 29 percent of first preference votes by consolidating its hold in Catholic/nationalist areas. This gave Michelle O'Neill the right to become First Minister, the first time an Irish nationalist politician has held the position since power sharing with the Unionists was established by the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

The elections not only deepen the destabilisation of Northern Ireland but also mean the unravelling of the post-Brexit trade agreement between Britain and the European Union (EU).

UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss responded immediately by threatening to unilaterally junk tranches of the Northern Ireland Protocol governing post-Brexit trade.

The protocol was advanced as a means of avoiding the return to a "hard border" between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, which risked undermining the 1998 Good Friday (or Belfast) Agreement that brought the decades-long "Troubles" to an end. It displaces external EU customs checks on trade from the North/South border, with ports in Northern Ireland and the UK functioning as the EU's external trade boundary. However, this required a series of complex and unwieldy mechanisms that still hampered trade, while what was a de facto Irish Sea border between the EU and UK was anathema to the Unionist parties and broad sections of the Tory Party.

The DUP has refused to take its place at Stormont unless the protocol is altered. Party leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson refused to nominate a speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly, bringing it to an immediate halt. Without Unionist participation alongside the Irish nationalist Sinn Féin, the assembly continues its longstanding collapse and the north is ruled by Westminster appointees. With no way of even drawing up budgets, a coalition of health unions warned that lives were being placed in danger. The same holds true for other essential services.

Johnson has baldly declared that the "institutions set up under the Good Friday agreement aren't functioning" because "there's one community in Northern Ireland that won't accept the way the protocol works at present". A Foreign Office statement described amending the protocol as "a matter of internal peace and security for the United Kingdom," threatening, "if the EU would not show the requisite flexibility to help solve those issues, then as a responsible government we would have no choice but to act."

The EU countered by warning unilateral action by the UK would compromise "our ultimate objective", the protection of the Good Friday Agreement, and would be met with legal action.

British, European and US warmongering

The working class in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and the entire UK are confronted with an eruption of imperialist nationalism—one that finds its most finished expression in the UK's leading role in the war drive against Russia. It is a turn that demands a savage assault on workers' living conditions that is incompatible with the preservation of even minimal democratic norms.

All sides of the dispute over the Northern Ireland Protocol are deeply reactionary, epitomised by the focus on the war in Ukraine in numerous rhetorical outbursts.

In an article for the *Telegraph*, Lord Frost, the former Brexit minister, wrote citing the UK's leading role in the US-led proxy war against Russia, "Boris Johnson and Liz Truss have shown they are leaders in Ukraine. They must now show the same determination in Northern Ireland, and finally re-establish self-government for the whole of the UK."

EU diplomats told the *Times*, "With war in Ukraine entering a new phase, now is not the time to undermine western unity just to play to Tory backbenchers in Westminster or the DUP gallery in Belfast."

The Republic of Ireland shares this militarist agenda. Speaking during a visit to Kiev last month meeting Ukraine's foreign minister and defence minister, Dublin's Foreign Minister Simon Coveney said that "even though Ireland is militarily neutral, let me be clear we are not neutral on this war and conflict and the future of your country. Ireland has contributed €20 million to Ukraine and committed €33 million euro in military assistance, and we are strongly advocating for a maximalist approach in sanctions against Russia..."

Johnson's exploiting of sectarian tensions is the most high-stakes gamble imaginable. It not only threatens an eruption of trade war with the EU, but also, despite Johnson's efforts to position Britain as the main ally of the US, brings London into sharp conflict with Washington.

A major delegation of US Congress representatives is due to arrive within days to make clear the Biden administration's opposition to tensions over the protocol destabilising constitutional arrangements in Northern Ireland and EU trade. The *Guardian* reported "at least half a dozen representatives" intending to organise "a series of meetings in Brussels, Dublin, London and Belfast," headed by the chair of the Ways and Means Committee, Democrat Richard Neal, who heads the Friends of Ireland caucus. He has threatened that any trade deal between the UK and US would not happen if the Good Friday Agreement was threatened.

The significance of the Assembly elections

The media generally acknowledged the symbolic significance of an Irish republican victory, after 101 years of a constitutional set up supposedly hard-wired to ensure a Protestant-Unionist ascendancy over what remains of Britain's oldest colony. But warnings of rising sectarian conflict provoked by Sinn Féin beginning a campaign for a united Ireland were dismissed as sensationalism. The *Financial Times* editorial, "A historic election that leaves Northern Ireland where it was," was typical.

The north's demographics have not changed fundamentally, which would be needed for a majority "yes" vote in a Border poll. But Sinn Féin's victory and the splintering of the Unionist/Protestant vote, with the Democratic Unionist Party dropping from 29 to 21 percent and losing votes primarily to the hardline Traditional Unionist Voice, has proved to be a major political shift with an explosive impact on British and world politics.

The dramatically increased vote for the liberal Alliance party, with 13.5 percent of first preference votes, which designates itself as neither republican nor loyalist, indicates a significant shift away from sectarian politics towards political pragmatism, particularly in some middle-class former Unionist and Catholic areas. But this cannot conceal the pronounced rightward shift within Unionism that is mirrored in the Tory Party.

This will continue to strengthen Sinn Féin and the already pronounced tendencies towards the break-up of the UK, epitomised by the ascendancy of the Scottish National Party. Sinn Féin already became the Republic of Ireland's largest party in the February 2020 general election with 24 percent of the vote but was excluded from any role in government by the formation of a coalition involving Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party. Its support in the south was largely won based on demagogic pledges to implement social reforms, defend workers and tackle burgeoning poverty. But its advantage over the Unionist parties has never been greater.

No return to sectarian conflict

The overwhelming majority of workers in Northern Ireland want no return to the Troubles but still face the coalescence of a hardline fringe, especially among the Orange Order and its ilk, that feel threatened as never before and are responding accordingly. The Unionist parties are stepping up efforts to galvanise their support base, centred on the threat posed to Northern Ireland's place in the UK and whipping up sectarian tensions on all issues. This danger is cynically employed by Johnson as a bludgeon against British imperialism's European rivals, but it is real.

The working class in the Six Counties, Catholic and Protestant, and in the Republic must adopt a perspective on which to combat the dangers they face.

This cannot be based on the nationalist policies advanced by Sinn Féin. The party advocates only a few paltry reforms in Stormont, an orientation to an EU that is ever more openly exposed as a vehicle for European protectionism and militarism, and the prospect of eventual unification with the south.

The partition of Ireland in 1921 by British imperialism was a crime for which generations since have paid a bitter price. Britain's grip on what remains of its oldest colony must be broken and its military and political presence ended. The years since 1998 and the end of the civil war have confirmed that rule from London over the northern statelet can never create the basis for any form of real democracy, let alone bring an end to the blight of sectarianism. Since devolution Stormont has in fact been without a functioning government for more than a third of its existence, subject to endless political manoeuvring for influence and position by the Ulster Unionist Party/DUP and Sinn Féin, even as they have jointly presided over the exploitation of the working class on behalf of the major corporations.

This does not mean unification with the south offers a viable alternative. It would hand over the fate of the working class to a deeply corrupt Irish

bourgeoisie, acting as a frontman for the US and European imperialist powers.

Imperialism and the Good Friday Agreement

The Northern Ireland Agreement was shaped by an attempted compromise between these same powers. Its aim was to create the basis for ending an enormously costly conflict that was blocking the north from emulating the south in becoming a major investment location for the transnational corporations and banks. The goal was to clear all obstacles to capital taking advantage of a pool of cheap and well-trained labour, positioned within the Single European market.

To accomplish this, while maintaining more regulated divisions in the working class, Sinn Féin was brought into a power-sharing constitutional arrangement making decision making dependent on agreement between designated "community" parties—loyalist and republican.

The Irish bourgeoisie by then functioned as a de facto partner of Washington in Europe. Today, a century after its creation, the Republic of Ireland is independent in name only.

The US Department of State's 2021 Investment Climate Statements boast, "There are over 900 US subsidiaries in Ireland... Industry leaders like Google, Amazon, eBay, PayPal, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Electronic Arts and cybersecurity firms like Tenable, Forcepoint, AT&T Cybersecurity, McAfee use Ireland as the hub or important part of their respective European, and sometimes Middle Eastern, African, and/or Indian operations."

It notes that "One of Ireland's many attractive features as an FDI [foreign direct investment] destination is its 12.5 percent corporate tax (in place since 2003). Ireland benefits from its membership of the European Union (EU) and a barrier-free access to a market of almost 500 million consumers... The United Kingdom's (UK) departure from the EU, or Brexit, on January 1, 2021, leaves Ireland as the only remaining English-speaking country in the EU and may make Ireland even more attractive as a destination for FDI."

The stock of American FDI in Ireland "stood at USD 355 billion in 2019, more than the US total for China, India, Russia, Brazil, and South Africa (the so-called BRICS countries) combined. There are approximately 900 U.S. subsidiaries currently in Ireland employing roughly 180,000 people and supporting work for another 128,000."

Even these figures underestimate the economic and political power exercised by Washington. FDI that year exceeded €1 trillion for first time, equivalent to an extraordinary 288 percent of Ireland's GDP. The US was the largest investor, accounting for nearly three-quarters of total FDI or €734 billion.

More than a third of the €1 trillion, €314bn, was "phantom" capital passing through Ireland to finance operations elsewhere. Almost half of Irish investment abroad originates from redomiciled PLCs, mainly from the US and UK, that relocated their group headquarters for tax purposes. Just €261 billion represented inward investment tied to tangible economic activity—related to Ireland's role as a production hub in Europe. This makes the republic a centre of criminal financial practices in Europe, alongside the UK.

To conceive of such a state ever representing the democratic and social aspirations of the working class in any meaningful sense is a chimera. Ireland is no less a playground of the super-rich than is the UK, while its still extant connection between the state and Catholicism acts as a recruiting sergeant for Unionism.

A socialist and internationalist programme is needed

There is no solution to the problems facing the working class that does not challenge the capitalist profit system and the division of the world into hostile nation states. In 1998, the Socialist Equality Party wrote of the Good Friday Agreement:

The bitter lessons of this century demonstrate that the Irish capitalist class and the petty-bourgeois nationalists are incapable of overcoming

imperialist domination and social and political inequality. The legacy of colonial and class oppression cannot be resolved through jerry-rigged agreements between the imperialist powers and parties that essentially function as their local representatives.

...The development of globally organised production and internationally mobile capital has rendered the perspective of independent national development inviable. Everywhere bourgeois nationalist regimes have abandoned strategies of economic self-sufficiency. Instead they seek to attract international investment by offering “their” working classes up for brutal exploitation. This is the reality in Ireland as well.

The statement continued:

The objective conditions exist for overcoming the age-old divisions between Catholic and Protestant, Irish and British workers, providing they are united on a programme that articulates their basic needs for decent jobs, health care, housing and democratic rights. These needs can only be realised on a programme for the international unification of the working class against the profit system.

That appraisal, based on Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution and a fundamental appraisal of the impact of globalisation, has been vindicated repeatedly during the past 22 years. Equality and freedom cannot be achieved so long as the working class is politically subordinated to its class enemies and exploiters. Everything depends on the development of an independent political movement of the working class, armed with a socialist and internationalist programme.

In repeated strikes in Northern Ireland by bus workers, local authority workers, educators and at manufacturer Caterpillar against below inflation pay offers, Protestant and Catholic worker have stood together against the common enemy. This must now become a conscious struggle to build their own party to fight for a socialist Ireland, within a United Socialist States of Europe. This means uniting with their British, European and international brothers and sister to defend democratic rights and oppose austerity, militarism and the drive to war, under the leadership of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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