

Sinn Fein poll ratings collapse in advance of Irish general election

Steve James**26 November 2024**

A general election takes place in the Republic of Ireland, November 29. It was called November 8 by Taoiseach (prime minister) Simon Harris, leader of the three-party coalition government of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party.

An election was required to be called before March 2025, but an early date was widely expected. Harris and the two main coalition parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, hope to take advantage of a temporary conjuncture working in their favour to renew their coalition in advance of the escalation of war against Russia and the inauguration of Donald Trump as US president.

The coalition has been buoyed by the polling collapse of Sinn Fein. The former political wing of the disbanded Irish Republican Army (IRA) won the previous general election, in 2020, as the beneficiary of a leftward movement of workers and youth against inequality and poverty. Sinn Fein, however, despite their left rhetoric, sought nothing more than a coalition with Fianna Fáil, which was rejected.

After months of horse trading, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the two “civil war parties”—so-called because of their origins on opposing sides of Ireland’s brief but brutal civil war in the aftermath of the 1921 deal with British imperialism which left the island partitioned—agreed for the first time to form a government together. Prior to 2020, one or other of the parties had ruled Ireland since the founding of the Republic, on occasion with support from Labour or the Greens.

Forced into opposition by the coalition led alternatively by Fine Gael’s now retired Leo Varadkar and Fianna Fáil’s Michel Martin, Sinn Fein’s polling figures rocketed during the pandemic, the inflation crisis and the post Brexit economic and political destabilisation of the North of Ireland. Sinn Fein also emerged as the largest party in the northern six counties, with the party’s vice president, Michelle O’Neill, finally installed as First

Minister in a revived Northern Ireland Assembly earlier this year. The party, committed to a referendum on Irish unity, appeared set to be in power in Dublin and Belfast.

But, from a high point of 35 percent average in polls in January 2022, and 32.9 percent in January 2023, Sinn Fein’s polling estimates have collapsed to 18.8 percent, well behind Fianna Fáil on 20.4 percent and Fine Gael on 24.2 percent, according to the Irish based pollingindicator.com.

Sinn Fein’s left talk has become thinner and thinner, with the party becoming indistinguishable from the ruling duo it seeks to replace. The party’s headline proposal, for example, to alleviate the housing crisis states an aspiration for houses to be available for purchase at €250,000 or rented for €1,000 a month. While these sums are below current averages, they remain beyond the means of much of a working population for whom the minimum wage is €12.70 an hour.

Sinn Fein’s manifesto outlines a series of reformist promises on health and social care, but these are little more than disposable packaging for proposals to “provide certainty in terms of tax and enabling conditions to continue to attract investment from abroad.” In line with the orientation of all the major parties, Sinn Fein aim to ensure a “flow of high-impact American FDI [foreign direct investment] and projects.”

Closely related, Sinn Fein has been unable to substantially benefit from mass opposition to war, particularly the Gaza genocide, among its own voters and broad sections of workers and young people despite frequent large demonstrations, rallies and protests. Sinn Fein leaders have made statements calling for a ceasefire, have denounced the Israeli government, and belatedly adopted calls for Israel’s ambassador to be expelled from Dublin, but has refused to distance itself from the US administration of Joe Biden. The party’s manifesto does not mention the role of US, UK or European imperialism

in Gaza once. Instead, it refers to a “new and successful chapter in British-Irish relations” and—on the brink of a major escalation in NATO’s war against Russia—sent Michelle O’Neill to Belfast City Hall lay a wreath for British war dead.

As part of its shift to the right, Sinn Fein has also adapted to the small but virulent and fascistic anti-immigrant and asylum protests that have targeted asylum seekers and the miserable accommodation offered by the Irish government. Sinn Fein proposes “proper planning of the migration system” and a new Immigration Management Agency under the Department of Justice. The new agency, effectively an Irish ICE (the hated US Immigration and Customs Enforcement) would be responsible for “proper planning of the migration system”, “processing” and “enforcement of deportation and... investigating illegal immigration.”

Ireland, a country from which so many have fled around the world, is now home to right wing, anti-immigration parties, including those currently in power. Sinn Fein, while distancing themselves from the foulest grunts of tricolour waving fascists, has utilised the anti-immigrant protests to present itself as a responsible party of capitalist rule.

Sinn Fein’s debacle has opened up a space for the ruling coalition to throw limited amounts of cash from windfall corporation tax receipts at the electorate, seeking an immediate electoral bounce. The recent budget from Fianna Fáil Finance Minister Jack Chambers announced an £8.8 billion increase in daily spending, including rent credits, increased tax thresholds, miserable increases in welfare payments along with one-off payments conveniently due to be paid before the election. These included double bonuses for social protection payments, working family and fuel lump sums.

The overall sums involved are dwarfed by the fortunes being made by the tech and pharmaceutical giants based, or headquartered, in Ireland. In all, more than 970 US firms currently employ 210,000 people directly, while another 168,000 rely indirectly on them. These companies supply the bulk of corporation tax paid to the Irish state. Last year, of a total tax take of €88.1 billion, €23.8 billion came from corporation tax. Of this, 83.8 percent was from foreign multinationals. Such is the wealth extracted that even with Ireland’s low corporate tax rate of only 12.5 percent, the coalition government is currently running an €8 billion annual surplus.

This does not include the €14 billion the Irish government has been told it must now collect from Apple

following a recent European Court of Justice ruling. €3 billion has reportedly already been paid. How to spend the windfall is featuring in the election campaign, with parties proposing infrastructure spending, housing and a sovereign wealth fund for financial rainy days ahead.

No party naturally points to the vulnerability of the Irish economy to the onrushing war crisis and the financial crisis this will bring in its wake, nor to the consequences of the Trump presidency and his trade war plans. Ireland was ruined by the 2008/9 financial crisis, with unemployment rocketing and social spending cut to the bone, the next crisis threatens to be far worse.

Trump’s nomination to head the Department of Commerce is Howard Lutnick, who has previously complained, “It’s nonsense that Ireland of all places runs a trade surplus at our expense... When we end this nonsense, United States will be a truly great country again.”

Any tariffs introduced by a Trump administration will heavily impact on Irish exports to the US, while Trump’s preference for “re-shoring” will have implications for the large numbers of Irish based US production facilities exporting into the European Union.

The pseudo-left People Before Profit (PBP), in July, offered an electoral pact to Sinn Fein. PBP’s Paul Murphy admitted in May, “Even though unfortunately, and I think lots of people are disappointed about it, their [Sinn Fein’s] trajectory is rightwards.”

International issues barely figured in PBP’s manifesto beyond forlorn appeals to uphold Irish neutrality and calls for peace in Ukraine. PBP criticised the “complicity of Western imperialism” in the Gaza genocide, but offered nothing in response beyond token calls for PBP representatives to pressure the Irish government for restrictions on the military use of Shannon airport and limited sanctions on Israel.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact