Denunciations of Gaza genocide secures Catherine Connolly's victory in Irish presidential election

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Irish voters have elected Catherine Connolly as the 10th president of the Republic of Ireland in a landslide vote which has humiliated the Fine Gael/Fianna Fáil coalition government.

Connolly, an independent left member of parliament (TD), won 63.8 percent of first preference votes against 29.5 percent for Fine Gael's Heather Humphries and 7.2 percent for Fianna Fáil's Jim Gavin.

The Irish presidency is a high-profile but predominantly ceremonial role established in 1937. The Uachtarán na hÉireann is the official head of state and supreme commander of the armed forces and serves for seven years. The incumbent is Micheal D. Higgins.

Although turnout was only 49.5 percent, the result lays bare a tremendous gulf between the political views of Ireland's working class and those of the ruling elite. Connolly has repeatedly opposed the genocide in Gaza, expressed a broadly left point of view on social and democratic issues and is a defender of Irish neutrality.

Ireland has seen the largest per head of population demonstrations against the Gaza genocide in the world, the last being earlier this month when tens of thousands of people marched through central Dublin.

Connolly was born in Galway in 1957, the ninth of a family of fourteen. Her father was a boat builder. She practiced as clinical psychologist for some years before qualifying as a barrister in 1991. She joined the Irish Labour Party in 1997, was elected as a Galway city councillor in 1999 and became the town's mayor in 2004. She campaigned for pro-Western Burmese activist Aung San Suu Kyi.

Connolly left Labour in 2007 after current president Michael D. Higgins refused to support her as his running mate for his own presidential campaign and stood as an independent candidate. She was elected TD for Galway West in 2016 and voted for pseudo-left Richard Boyd Barrett as Taoiseach in the new Dáil Éireann. She has also worked with independent left figures such as Clare Daly, Mick Wallace and Maureen O'Sullivan, accompanying them on a fact-finding trip to Syria in 2018.

Connolly was elected chair of the Dáil in 2020. In 2023 she spoke at a "neutrality forum" hosted by the Galway Alliance Against War with Daly, Wallace and British populist George Galloway. She endorsed Daly's 2024 European election campaign.

Her run for Irish president was announced July 16 this year after she received the necessary number of nominations from the Social Democrats, People Before Profit and some independents.

Announcing her campaign, Connolly said, "We must deal with climate change. We must be a voice for peace. We have to stop the normalisation of war and violence. We have to stop the normalisation of homelessness. We have to say that these problems are not inevitable... They are man-made, policy driven, and we can have a different type of country and a different type of world."

She also said she supported a united Ireland, but it would not be "immediate."

She was backed by the Labour Party, the Green Party, the Workers Party and the Communist Party of Ireland. Sinn Féin, having considered standing their own leader, Mary Lou McDonald, also eventually backed Connolly.

Speaking in September, at her official campaign launch, Sinn Féin TD Pearse Doherty explained the move was to "give a clear signal to people that there is a broad united opposition". Sinn Féin agreed to fund

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and mobilise for Connolly.

People Before Profit's Paul Murphy agreed that "It's about giving people the hope that the left can come together like we are here today, and that the more than hundred-year rule of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael can be ended."

Connolly offered more left vagueness at her campaign launch, saying, "This is a movement of energy, of vibrancy and of vision to say that we will steer the country in a different way, we will never accept the normalisation of genocide, we will never accept 16,000 households without a home as collateral damage to an appalling and unacceptable neoliberal ideology that has made a philosophy of knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing."

As with similar figures internationally, Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders both spring to mind, Connolly rarely mentions capitalism or socialism in her speeches. She is also carefully manoeuvring. During her campaign, former allies Clare Daly and Mick Wallace were very little in evidence, while both Sinn Féin's Northern Ireland First Minister Michelle O'Neill and leader McDonald spoke alongside her.

While Connolly, Sinn Féin and the rest of the left managed to suppress their differences, and at least rhetorically address some of the concerns and aspirations of much of the population, the right-wing parties of government proved barely able to find viable candidates, let alone fight a campaign. Increasingly the poll became a referendum on the government itself.

Fine Gael's Heather Humphreys, the party's deputy leader, was already set to retire from politics and was chosen as a safe pair of hands candidate capable of attracting rural farming votes after preferred candidate Mairead McGuinness dropped out. Humphreys' campaign was criticised for barely daring to face uncommitted voters.

Fianna Fáil fared even worse. The party briefly considered reviving the career of former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, an idea dropped because of his association with the post-2008 crash and bitter austerity. Eventually Jim Gavin, a former football boss, was chosen instead. Gavin turned out to be a liability when it emerged that he had refused to repay a rent overpayment from a former tenant.

Given the acute housing crisis in Ireland, with extortionate sales and rental costs across the country, Gavin paid the outstanding debt but concluded there was no point in continuing his campaign. His name still appeared on the ballot. The debacle of his campaign has further undermined the current Taoiseach, Micheál Martin.

Connolly's election is significant in that it shows the extent to which the anger provoked by the Gaza genocide has become a serious factor in Irish and world politics. The governments that have justified the crimes of the Israeli state are discredited.

But Connolly's victory does not change the political character of the pro-capitalist alliance that formed the basis of her campaign. They are positioning themselves to replace the exhausted Fine Gael/Fianna Fáil coalition, where they would divert and dissipate the tremendous class tensions building up in Ireland along channels that offer no threat to its role as an investment platform.

The vote had another feature: 13 percent of ballot papers were spoiled, up from one percent last time around, following a "Spoil The Vote" campaign by a clutch of right-wing, anti-migrant, anti-vaccination and "anti-woke" political figures with a large online following. The vote came during a week of sometimes violent protests targeting the CityWest migrant complex in Saggart, near Dublin. Egged on by billionaire Elon Musk, the protests show that Ireland is not immune to the far-right danger developing globally.

The task posed is not to cobble together a left-talking coalition devoted to pretending capitalism in Ireland can offer social reforms, but to fight for the mobilisation of the working class to oppose austerity, anti-migrant witch-hunts, genocide and war in a struggle by the working class for political power in Ireland and internationally, for socialism.

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