



# THINGS FALL APART

Brexit Ireland, and the left

John Mc Anulty

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*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;*

*Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...*

*...The best lack all*

*conviction, while the worst*

*Are full of passionate*

*intensity...*

*WB Yeats,*

*The Second Coming*

*1919*

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Things fall apart... Ireland, Brexit and the left

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# INTRODUCTION

**L**ike the blind men examining the elephant, those commenting on the recent European elections tend to focus on one aspect or another, unable to grasp the overall picture.

Is the issue Brexit? The rise of the right? The decay of the centre? The revival of the Greens? The failure of the left?

When we step back we see a picture of universal decay and fragmentation. None of the currents involved have gained the upper hand and none have a convincing strategy for solving the crisis.

This small booklet is an attempt to look at the overall crisis of Europe, as revealed by the European elections, from a Marxist perspective and to interpret the various political and national crises within that framework.

We believe that socialist groups have by and large remained committed to a failed perspective of reformist electoralism. To survive they will have to adopt new perspectives and structures and we hope that this analysis will in some way help aid that process.

We assert that, despite all the confusion and babble, the fundamental division in society is between capital and labour. Among all the chaos capitalism will be able to

adapt some of the current strategies to ensure its own survival, at whatever cost to the working class. A working class programme is a much more difficult affair, based partly on the history of struggle and partly on a clear analysis of the ongoing struggle between the classes. We are convinced that Marxism has its part to play - in fact we expect to demonstrate this in the following pages.

# THE EUROPEAN PROJECT

**T**he European elections drew attention because of the unusually high level of political discussion and voting turnout. However the voting numbers stayed well below that for a national parliament. In part this is because most workers are well aware of the lack of power residing in the European Parliament. Europe has been summed up as; Mickey Mouse, Mini Mouse and Mighty Mouse - Mickey Mouse is the parliament without any real powers, Mini is the Commission, taking all the blame for unpopular measures, and Mighty Mouse is the Council of Ministers that takes all the decisions. Here Germany is in charge with France in second place. Many workers are also aware that they are caught in a scissors between the ongoing savage austerity of Europe and the racism and populism being whipped up in each nation state. Whichever way they vote they will face further attacks.

However this recognition does not boil down to a plague on both your houses and indifference to the election results. One does not have to be a fan of capitalist Europe

to realise that the regulations that the right are so keen to abolish are around workers' wages and conditions.

Rather than the bastion of civilization and workers' rights that liberals try to portray it as, the European Union has led the charge in forcing privatisation and restriction of the working class across Europe. The rate of profit has fallen consistently since the late 1960s and capital has responded by cutting back on wages and workers' rights and by intervening to force money from the public coffers and into private hands. Treaty after treaty has restricted public spending and insisted on handover to the private sector.

A major problem with this process is that it has involved the active collaboration of Labour and Social Democratic parties and of trade union leaderships. Not surprisingly, the failure of the left has seen a rise of the right. In each country the reactionaries present a national solution which, at a more rapid rate than its European counterpart, aims for lower labour costs and removal of rights in order to increase productivity, frequently using racism to justify the suspension of democratic rights.

Socialist groups have mainly operated around the theory that there is now a space to the left of Social Democracy, created by their attacks on the workers. Rather than a space, we have a process of retreat. As the leadership retreat the workers become demoralised and the level of activity in the form of strikes and street activity falls. Rather than finding a space to the left of Social Democracy, the left groups have themselves retreated into electoral reformism and in the process they themselves have moved to the right, a rout accelerated by the fact that the reforms they seek are not available. Even more desperate attempts to present left populist groups as broad left parties have failed utterly.

Theoretically the globalisation of capital and a diversification of lines of production across countries enormously increases the productivity of labour and therefore the global wealth that should allow us all to live comfortably and sustainably. National solutions would clearly increase the costs of production and increase poverty. However we are in the period of late capitalism and, as fewer workers are involved in production, the rate of profit falls and the capitalists take more and more from the

working class as a whole, using banking, housing and privatisation to squeeze money from the stone. Both sides are willing to use migrants as scapegoats.

The workers are caught in a scissors between nationalist populists and international neoliberalism. Both wish them harm and they have no voice of their own, with few groups even beginning to present a policy for the working class.

The dominant project in Europe has been “ever closer unity”. The rationalisation of trade and regulation alongside further governmental and military integration was supposed to produce a land of milk and honey. Yet, instead of soaring, profit rates fell. Money was manufactured from money without the intervention of labour. Housing, debt, globalised money flows exposed the underlying relationships within Europe. The core economies of Germany and France fed off peripheral countries like Greece and Ireland. Even if European capital is able to head off challenges, it no longer has the strategy of a future superstate to present to the world and must depend increasingly on force to keep the workers at bay.

Capitalism has fulfilled its historic destiny. The global chain of production has enormously amplified the productivity of labour. Yet capitalism is unable to burst the bounds of its own mode of production. The next stage of human society involves the abolition of the profit motive, the common ownership of production and workers control of the state as we prepare for the transition to a human and sustainable society.

The alternative, exposing its face in Europe and across the world, is a future of brutality and barbarism. The answer is socialist revolution across the globe, with the immediate call for a united socialist states of Europe.

# THE ELECTIONS ACROSS EUROPE:

## Capitalist chaos, socialist failure

One of the great ironies of the elections for the European parliament is the extent to which the currents within Britain proved typical. The majority of the countries of the European area are dominated by high levels of sovereign debt and the austerity measures through which the workers have had to pay the banks and bondholders. This approach has led to immense social stresses. Capitalism is desperately searching for a new strategy that will deflect the high levels of anger and despair.

Across Europe, the major capitalist powers were in decay. A recovery is proclaimed on the back of a weak growth of 2% which is supported by low interest rates, an overall debt ratio of 86% and constant pressure for privatisation and deregulation especially in the countries of the periphery. The rise of Trumpism in the USA leaves European leaders rudderless, anxious to steer their own course but unwilling to directly confront American power. The euro continues a slow decline. Attempts to soldier on down the grim path of further austerity met with little enthusiasm, as did attempts to dress it up with a fresh face and a hint of social radicalism via leaders such as Macron and Varadkar. Efforts by the populist left to argue for a kinder,

gentler capitalism have turned rancid. The only currents showing drive and energy are the right populists, buoyed up by a rancid stream of racism.

The electoral results of the crisis were a sharp decline in the parties of the traditional right and the social democratic groups, the loyal opposition. This was only partly compensated for by struggles to put a new liberal face on austerity, led by Macron's En Marche movement, itself weakened by the rise of the Gilet Jaunes in France.

The rise of Brexit was a big stimulus for the European right, but the chaos that has followed has proved a check on their growth. Various exit projects in the various European countries have now been abandoned in favour of moving the entire European structure to the right. One big problem for these groups revolves around their inability to win an absolute majority. Even when they gain government, they continue to face determined opposition. The other big problem is their lack of a viable programme. It is easy to whip up hatred, but how does that translate into economic success? For that they need to stage a direct attack on the workers and mostly they hesitate. Their national chauvinism translates into conflicts with minorities and neighbouring countries, especially in the East. The overall strategy is to focus on migration and security issues. They believe that if they do not win power outright they can pressure the major parties into adopting many of their policies. History suggests they are right.

The parties of the left fell in numbers of seats from 52 to 38. This is hardly surprising. Their title is the GUE/NGL (European United Left–Nordic Green Left) and their weepy reformism contrasts sharply with the boldness of the right. When we find that the populist Podemos party in Spain is considered a socialist formation all we can do is shrug our shoulders and look elsewhere. The reformist left suffered a crushing blow with the capitulation of the reformist Greek party SYRIZA, and there has been no renewal of policy – simply a belief that a more radical SYRIZA can win the day and face down European imperialism.

The poor showing of the socialist groups saw a radical youth vote that went mainly to the Greens.

The growing consensus around climate disaster, along with the lack of conviction from the socialists, helps to explain the rise in the Green vote. However it has been forgotten that the past surge in Green votes itself came from disillusioned leftists and that an ebb followed when, in each national arena, they joined in coalition governments and implemented austerity. Green policy overwhelmingly rests on the

conviction that capitalism can be persuaded to become more sustainable. Their current starting point is often the Paris Accords, yet the accords were drawn up to get a document that all would sign and would not have resolved the climate crisis if they had been implemented. As the right mobilise against climate regulation the Greens turn more and more to blaming the workers. "We" should recycle more, when what is needed is the entire restructuring of production methods and the suppression of the profit motive.

The European elections ended with the main capitalist parties weakened but not supplanted. The right made gains without majority support or a viable solution to the crisis. The big danger now is that the capitalists will conciliate the right and make them stronger. They have already moved far to the right in their treatment of migrants and towards building a stronger and more repressive state.

Behind everything is an ongoing decay. Brexit and greater Euroscepticism in many countries means that a strategy of gradually closer union is no longer feasible. Economically there is stagnation and Trumpism demands greater subordination to the economic and military interests of the USA. Europe has no coherent alternative and a sign of their weakness was Italy signing up to sections of China's "Belt and Road" initiative.

The thing is, reform worked for sections of the Western working class, usually for the strongest and most organized sectors. We have had decades of retreat as wages, conditions and civic society have decayed. Workers have held on, have adapted. When betrayed by social democracy they cleave to the biggest reformist group to emerge. They show great discipline when union leaders ask them to act, but shy away from the enormous task of displacing that leadership when it sells out.

All the accommodations are reaching their limit. The capitalist system is creaking at the seams. Attempts by the reformist left to find an electoralist shortcut have failed. Social Democracy and the Trade union leaders struggle to save capitalism. In the name of unity the socialists trail along with attempts to improve capitalism, sagely nodding their heads and asserting that the working class is dead.

The working class is far from dead. Our task is to describe the inner contradictions of capital and prepare for the working class returning to the stage of history as an organized revolutionary force. The central proposal, in opposition to the austerity consensus and the racism of the right must be:

*“For a United Socialist States of Europe!”*

# THE BRITISH FRAGMENTATION

**I**n Greek mythology a Xmas goblin called Kallikantzaros was able to ambush the unwary traveller with the question “feathers or lead”? The answer was whatever the goblin wanted it to be. Either answer was wrong. Nowhere was the choice of feathers or lead more clearly poised than in Britain. The British never expected to find themselves in the May 2019 European election, but discovered that the Tories were unable to accept the Theresa May deal no matter how often she hid it behind her back, polished it, and offered it again, making a vote inevitable.

For their part the Brexiteers were unwilling to admit that all their trade deals and policy of being firm with Europe had come to nothing and that their programme boiled down to a hard Brexit and the economic suffering for workers that this would entail (The most hardline Brexiteers admitted that there would be economic collapse, but thought it a price worth paying to discipline the workers and; “*make Britain great again*”). The Brexit programme has been clarified by the Trump visit, where the British establishment prostrated themselves before the orange con man while he offered to privatise the NHS and dump US chlorinated chicken on the British market,

rounding off by expelling the British ambassador to the US and leaving the Brits in a mess of his making in a faceoff with Iran.

Labour was split three ways. The Blairite right were foursquare with European capital. Len McCluskey of UNITE and part of the "the left" of the labour bureaucracy, held to a combination of national chauvinism and bowing to racism that enabled Brexit. A third group were the radical youth that had joined the party in support of Corbyn and who wanted workers' rights within Europe, but he threw them under the bus in order to preserve the ramshackle alliance that is the Labour party today.

Into the vacuum rushed Nigel Farage. The Brexit set up illustrates the ease with which capitalists can jury-rig a party. Each candidate brought their own finance and all policy outside Brexit was ignored, even the toxic racism that motivated many supporters.

Farage, in a few weeks of campaigning, generated overall electoral victory but not a majority for Brexit. The Tory party stands on the brink, coming fifth in the polls and with a dolly mixture scrum of candidates to replace Theresa May. Success went to Boris Johnson, the blonde clone of the Trump world. Farage fulfils the same role as his European allies, unable to win power but able to shift a disintegrating Tory party even further to the right.

The BBC and British media have tried to portray the failure of the Labour vote to grow in the European election as equivalent to the collapse of the Tories. This is nonsense but it is enormously significant that, in the middle of such a crisis, the party is not seeing a massive upwelling of support. There is not any doubt why this is. Poll after poll shows widespread disgust at Labour's failure to adopt a straightforward opposition to Brexit.

Brexit is a joint crisis. It's a crisis of capital and a crisis for labour. What is important is how the issues are resolved in class terms, not the details of the various forms of Brexit.

The crisis for capital can be resolved, at least in the short term. The right wing of the capitalists don't really care whether the party representing them is called the Conservative party or the Brexit party. Other sections of capital will conciliate and compromise. Breaking the international chain of production will be painful, but

there is a growing view that it is worthwhile if it disciplines workers, removes regulation of wages and conditions and gives a freer hand in the unrestricted use of state power. Brexit is not the policy of the dominant elements of British capital - they are horrified by the prospect of the end of car production, to take just one example. But much of British capital is concentrated in the financial centres in the city of London and is highly mobile. It is aware of the level of future austerity and of the dangers of an explosion by the victims. If the auxiliaries in the shires, in small scale capitalism, and in the hedge funds feel that Brexit is necessary, they will stand aside.

Victory for remain led by the Social Democrats and the Blairites would represent at most a breathing space. The alternative to Brexit would be more austerity led from Europe, feeding further resentment and revolt.

Much has been made of the Labour vote, but there is very little reference to the decimation of the ultraBlairite Change UK party. This demonstrates just how weak the Blairites are outside the shell of the labour and trade union apparatus and how unable they would be to resolve the crisis.

Strong elements of English nationalism remain at play in sections of the left, but the idea of an imaginary alternative Lexit has had its day. The supporters of Jeremy Corbyn are the only significant bulwark against the right. The June Peterborough by-election and Labour victory demonstrates this clearly. Socialists should continue to defend Corbyn, but at this stage this involves protesting his constant capitulation to the right. It also involves going beyond simply saying "Yo Jeremy." Socialists should line up in defence of a left social democratic programme that he can't deliver.

Behind all the left manoeuvres is the idea that we can leapfrog over the lack of class consciousness in the working class and that it is a distraction to advance the socialist programme at this stage. Yet all political movements begin with a programme. By advancing the call for a United Socialist States of Europe and calling for the revolutionary overthrow of a corrupt society we would be laying the foundations of a socialist revival.

# IRELAND: A SILENT CONSENSUS.

**I**n only one electoral area was the issue of Europe not the subject of furious debate. Irish capitalism has established a national consensus that subordination of the economy to transnational investment and the development of the country as a tax haven are essential for survival. The consensus is reinforced by partnership arrangements between capital and the trade union leadership and by the political and economic structures fostered by Europe in support of the Good Friday settlement.

The deformation of the Irish economy is so intense that a special measure, GNI\*, has been invented to try to separate national and transnational economies. Irish workers

have been saddled with almost half the European banking debt arising from the credit crunch of 2008 and the government operate a programme of privatisation, resource selloff and wage restraint to pay off the bondholders. Mortgage and rent rises lead to greater and greater pressures on the working class.

Following decades of defeat the role of imperialism in Ireland is rarely referenced. In the absence of analysis, it is not surprising that resistance is not imagined. Support for Europe is taken for granted. There were some attempts by sections of the left to launch an "Irexit" campaign, but a number of campaigns were direct alliances with the far right while others lacked any political depth and quickly fizzled out.

However there were many more outcomes to over a decade of austerity directed by Europe and enforced by Irish capital over and above the exploitation of the workers. The political fabric of Irish society has been torn apart and the main focus of the simultaneous European and local elections was an attempt to repair the structures of class rule.

The main battle was between the minority government right wing party of Fine Gael and the populist opposition party, Fianna Fail. Fine Gael have always been the party of the right and have had the fervent support of their followers in the imposition of austerity, but have never won significant working class support or held a majority government. Taoiseach Leo Varadkar had sought to build that majority though a "Macron" strategy of presenting Fine Gael as a party of youthful modernisers and by adept footwork in referenda around gay marriage and abortion. Irish civic society has changed to such an extent that a referendum to liberalise divorce run alongside the elections passed with a substantial majority and without any comment. The Church now lacks popular support and its continuing role is now mediated by the state.

Varadkar failed in his appeal around modernisation, mainly because there are continuing scandals around the handover of state resources, including a new maternity hospital, to the church. Fine Gael were ahead of Fianna Fail in the European count and behind them in the local elections. For their part, Fianna Fail supervised the bankruptcy of the country by providing an unconditional guarantee to bondholders and as a result were decimated as a party. They have slowly recovered and leader Micheál Martin had hoped to restore the majority that had once made his party the natural party of government. These results are not favourable to his strategy.

Both parties are largely neck and neck and this means a continuation of a "confidence and supply" agreement that is in essence an unadmitted government of national unity, unsustainable in the long run.

In the past Fine Gael were able to form majority coalition governments with Labour, but that party was electorally slaughtered following the last coalition when they led the assault on the workers and they have not recovered. The chief surprise of the election was a sharp rise in the vote for the Green party. As elsewhere in Europe this was driven by climate change alarm but was surprising nevertheless given that the Greens had been utterly wiped out, with no political representatives, after their pro-austerity role in the last Fianna Fail coalition.

In case anyone thought the party had changed, the leadership, following this vote, immediately raised the question of coalition with other capitalist parties. Their hand was strengthened by the failure of the "left". The Labour party, the support of the last coalition, was not forgiven and did not recover, with the Social Democrats, presented as a somewhat more radical social democratic party and mainly composed of former labour party members, making modest gains. Sinn Fein, angling desperately for a seat in the next coalition, suffered catastrophe. Only one candidate was elected to the European parliament and they lost half their seats in the councils. The leadership is still reeling, as their entire political strategy hung on winning a place in government. The reformist left also suffered setbacks. They opposed taking a place in government with the major capitalist parties, but counterpoised an imaginary left government that, for some, included Sinn Fein while others looked to a Labour/ Trade union alliance.

Two leading activists, Claire Daly and Mick Wallace, standing as Independents 4 Change, won seats in the European parliament, in part because of high-profile struggles against endemic state corruption. Their vote represents an inchoate left aspiration untapped by socialist groups. However this election did not yet mark a new beginning, rather it marked the failure of existing political strategies of both the right and left.

The elections in the North saw the collapse of the Unionist party vote and the election of Naomi Long of the Alliance party alongside the DUP and Sinn Fein representatives. The Alliance and Sinn Fein vote confirmed yet again a local majority against Brexit, which is driven forward by the Westminster DUP/Tory alliance despite its minority support locally. However of more significance is the limits of the DUP strategy to maximise the sectarian headcount by mobilising around the Orange

card. This has now resulted in the cannibalism of its sister unionist party and marks a deeper and more profound decay of the political system.

The aftermath of the elections has seen a renewed push for a restoration of Stormont. Sinn Fein are desperate to get back into the local assembly in order to strengthen their claim for a place in a Dublin government, but this would involve an open capitulation to Unionism and the British that would badly damage them. Frantically they are calling on other political parties to support a common platform and to join a new administration as a cover for their own capitulation, but the parties are unlikely to oblige them and the shift to the right by the conservative government in Britain means there is little interest in preserving the Good Friday Agreement. The DUP are happy for undeclared direct rule to continue, but the overall political settlement continues to decay.

Reportage of the elections in the Irish state has contained little in the way of analysis. However a fascinating insight was provided by an exit poll sponsored by RTE. The overall reason for candidate selection was that they were local or known to the voter or had physically spoken to the voter. This indicates that the old tradition of clientelism, of voting for the local who can win resources for the area, is still alive - hardly surprising when all the candidates are operating within the narrow confines of budgets overseen by the European Central Bank.

However another question, about support for a United Ireland, produced a resounding yes from over 60% of respondents, with support much higher among working class voters.

With the Good Friday agreement in a state of collapse and the chief guardians of the deal, Sinn Fein, losing support this result will be of concern to Ireland's rulers

# SINN FEIN PASSES ITS ZENITH

**F**or some time after the outcome of the Irish European elections and the local government elections Sinn Fein were in the unusual situation of being struck dumb. Their incredulity was partly at the size of the defeat: they kept one MEP and lost half of their local councillors. The disbelief is also a testament to the level of detachment between the party and the voters that now exists, with the party blowing kisses to British imperialism and a majority of voters declaring for a united Ireland.

When the analysis did get underway it was based on a misconception. That is that the party could tack either right or left to correct itself.

No. They can only tack right. And that way lies disaster.

The author Ed Moloney, in his book about the IRA, *The Secret Army*, revealed that the Republican leadership always spoke out of both sides of its mouth. In the early days of the peace process the leadership told their members that they were following a "tactically unarmed strategy" while telling the British that they were pursuing a

"*totally unarmed strategy*". Neither side could be sure which strategy was being pursued. The only thing that all sides knew for certain was that the Republican leadership were lying.

The same tension applied when they found themselves in the Stormont administration. They campaigned on the basis that they were the party of revolution and revolt, but participated in the administration as a party of government willing to behave responsibly and accept the sectarian and reactionary policies that flowed from coalition with the Democratic Unionist Party in the administration of the northern colony. In the southern Irish state they applied the same strategy. To the voters they were representatives of the oppressed, a left wing party. For Irish capitalism they were a party of the right, willing to take their place in the next right-wing austerity government.

It was not a strategy that could last forever. It first began to erode when an attempt to cover up financial corruption and an acceptance of Unionist provocation around the Irish language led to a revolt by supporters and forced them to withdraw from the Stormont assembly. A deal was constructed with the DUP that was even worse than the original "Fresh Start" deal. The only concern was to include a reference to the Irish language that would justify the Sinn Fein retreat. Even that proved too much for the DUP. They pulled out and it quickly became evident that the DUP prefer direct rule by Britain to agreements that contain any hint of concession to nationalism. Since then Sinn Fein have been caught in a trap. The British have reinstated direct rule but Sinn Fein cannot afford to admit this. They are under constant pressure to return to the assembly and setup the local administration but there's absolutely no possibility of the DUP giving way and making any concessions that would cover a Sinn Fein retreat.

In the 26 Counties state Sinn Fein made the Tony Blair mistake: assuming that they will always retain a working class vote in the inner cities and moving further and further to the right to convince the middle class and the capitalist parties that they would be a safe pair of hands in coalition government.

In its most extreme form this involved kowtowing to British royalty and bowing and scraping to Orangeism in the name of cultural equality.

To make things worse, Martin McGuinness died and Gerry Adams retired. The original Sinn Fein base had been able to convince themselves that the pair had something up their sleeves because of the slight whiff of gunsmoke that still hung

about them. The new leadership are clothed in the politics of respectability and consensus and unable to carry as many working-class voters with them.

The conversation about the election results was over before it began. Pondering left or right? Sinn Fein decided to go right. In a classic intervention, Gerry Adams proclaimed that a United Ireland could not be rushed and must be planned. This reassured the membership that the United Ireland plan was still on course while at the same time telling Dublin and the British that Sinn Fein was still a moderate and reliable party.

The overall view of the leadership after the elections was that they were seen as a party of protest rather than a party of results. This is simply a restatement of the old mantra party of protest or party of government? In the North this has meant rushing back into Stormont talks and constant appeals to the smaller parties to confirm that they will join the government and therefore deflect critics of the enhanced sectarianism and austerity that will follow. Sinn Fein are trying to deal with two problems. There is nothing substantial that will be offered to them to bring them back into government. In fact the mechanism of government will likely be adjusted to the right to weaken the veto arrangements supposed to restrain unionism. The other problem is that the privatization and welfare adjustment program known as Fresh Start will swing fully into full operation against their base.

The Sinn Fein vote in the North fell slightly in the last local government elections and a section of their middle class supporters voted Alliance in the European election. Sections of the nationalist middle-class are perfectly happy with a return to Stormont as long as stability and their relative privilege is maintained but report after report shows that workers have gained nothing and that the relative deprivation of nationalist working class areas remains.

In the South Sinn Fein eyes are fixed on the middle class vote but where they have lost most ground is in working class areas in Dublin where they have been beaten back by Fianna Fail. If they can squeeze into coalition they believe that they can still save the day, but there is a great deal of competition for the position of junior partner in the next austerity government.

The illusion of being able to move left is just that, an illusion. When Sinn Fein signed up to the Good Friday Agreement they made a 180 degree turn from unrelenting opposition to imperialist rule in Ireland to agreeing to administer that rule. They were able to displace the Social Democratic and Labour party in the North and

become the voice of constitutional nationalism, but Fianna Fail is a different matter and now seem likely to see off Sinn Fein.

The fall in the Sinn Fein vote will see confusion and chaos but the only way to reduce this is to set about the construction of a revolutionary party. Sinn Fein are now a barrier to the progress of the working class. Their decay will allow new struggles to arise.

# WHY DID THE LEFT FAIL IN THE ELECTIONS?

Look no further than their  
Opportunism and Sectarianism

**T**he electoral and reformist left in Ireland is represented mainly by a loose alliance of two groups: Solidarity (a front for the Socialist party) and People Before Profit (the new face of the Socialist Workers Party) These groups saw the elections as marking a real turning point following mobilisation around gay marriage and abortion rights. The groups fielded 70 candidates but, rather than gaining, they lost 17 seats and have been reduced to a rump of 11 councillors.

This is clearly a very substantial setback for a decade-long strategy of electoral reformism. Understanding this setback requires a great deal of analysis that the members of these organisations may not be able to carry out, having been recruited to an environment where both opportunism and electoralism were unquestioned aspects of their daily activity and of their training.

What is opportunism? Essentially it is saying "Me too". You identify the flavour of the month and follow behind the workers, loudly expressing your support. Sectarianism explains itself. The interests of your own organisation come first and you pay little attention to the needs of the workers.

The outcome of opportunism is a gradual dissolution of the program of the organization. In each local area candidates seize on different issues that are seen as popular. Alongside this goes a gradual decline in political consciousness. Members no longer see any unifying thread of class struggle that ties them together. The decision last year of the Socialist Workers Party to convert itself into the Socialist Workers Network and become a tendency within PBP is a good example of this process at work. As political bonds weaken, so also does the discipline that holds people together and we have a process where public representatives assert their local interests over the national organisation, with some seeing themselves having a better chance as independents than as part of the larger group.

The sectarianism of Solidarity/People before Profit should be self-evident. Their unity is evidently a sham with different structures, conferences and policies and with members of the united organisation standing against each other. If the two groups can manage nothing better than a marriage of administrative convenience to get some more time in the Dail then they cannot convincingly argue the case for a broader workers unity.

In the case of the Socialist Party it is worth mentioning dogmatism. The international group hold firmly to a role as water carriers for the trade union bureaucracy. The international leadership criticize the Irish leadership for liberalism on the abortion issue and they in turn criticise their own Dublin TD for softening the claims that Sinn Fein are primarily responsible for religious sectarianism in the North. The tendency of the two groups to fragment is another reason why they are unable to build a broader unity.

Both groups expressed surprise that their hard work in the marriage equality referendum and the abortion referendum did not translate into support. In truth they give workers little reason to support them. In the case of the abortion referendum for example, with the exception of right to choose campaign run privately by the Socialist party, they did not raise any of the class issues that would allow continued restriction of abortion for working class women. PBP stayed firmly inside the popular front repeal group.

At the end of the day the program of reformism is simply an offer to make capitalism work better and combined with local parish pump politics becomes the standard clientelism on which Irish politics has always run. When reformism reduces itself to this point capitalist parties such as Fianna Fail can always do a better job than the reformist left. Fianna Fail are still masters of clientelism even compared to Fine Gael. This won them the local vote but was not a big factor in the European vote.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the crisis facing the reformist left internationally is the enormous struggle that takes place whenever they try to redefine strategy in the aftermath of the European election.

For example Miguel Urban Crespo, reprinted in the magazine International Viewpoint, frankly admitted that the left in its majority was unable to articulate a strategy differentiated from social liberalism and on occasion even fell into the trap of accommodating to rapidly rising anti-immigrant rhetoric.

He calls for a new balance sheet of the situation facing the left, and the opening of an essential strategic debate. His own contribution is that there should be less orientation towards parliamentary politics but a reconnection with newly emerging social movements and popular classes. Building a different Europe should be the watchword but this is impossible at the present time and the left must reimagine itself on a European scale.

It's quite difficult to understand this rhetoric if one is not part of the left milieu that produces it. It becomes clearer if we focus on what is missing. There is no reference at all to the working class. In fact, there is an ingrained belief that the working class, after being defeated on an historic scale, is no longer a factor. Strategy becomes orienting towards social movements which are largely middle-class.

Left analysis of the Irish elections was even poorer. There was some reference to left success in the water charges campaign without any critical analysis of what that success was and what it achieved, or any acknowledgment that the water charging and privatisation mechanisms are still in place. The answer to the election defeat was more unity to be achieved with a broader program. The requirements of the programme should be so basic that any everyone could sign up. The focus is on the requirements of the left organisations rather than on the needs of the working class.

There are common threads to many of the assessments. Bewilderment at their successes not leading to electoral support. The outcome of the water charges campaign is assessed as a complete victory even though the water charges structure was preserved. There is bewilderment that immersion in the gay marriage and abortion referenda did not lead to more support even though these were led by very broad all class forces and the left never seriously challenged the leadership or attempted to build its own program.

The working-class is rarely mentioned. The Irish left share the same assessment as the European left. Irish workers are no longer an active force and can be dismissed or, at the very least, they can be surrendered to the trade union leadership who march them up various hills in order to march them down again. For a decade the socialist groups have been immersed in identity politics and in the theory and practice of the popular front, where class politics are subordinated to a single issue. They are unable to even define what the left is. At various times it includes the Labour party, the Greens, and Sinn Fein. The real activity is a frantic search for more votes and more seats to build the profile of their organisation and the funds available from the public purse.

As with the European left, the Irish left made considerable concessions in the election. They acceded to the do nothing programme of the trade unions. They conceded to the popular prejudice in favour of private ownership of housing, even though they know that it is the dominance of the private sector that created the current crisis. The left retreated in prioritising localism over national political programmes. Above all they consistently ignore the dependent nature of the Irish economy, the dominance of imperialism and the client nature of the Irish state. Again, as in Europe, plan B seems to be plan A all over again. More fake unity around their own interests, more desperation for electoral success.

The examples from the USA are salutary. One large group, faced with a rape scandal, decided that the best way to deal with it was to dissolve their organisation. Many other leftists have flocked into the US Democratic Party despite the capitalist and pro-imperialist nature of the party and the utter corruption of its leadership.

Although individual members may break from the reformist trajectory in Ireland, It is difficult to see how organisations with this training and with this experience can rediscover class analysis and become part of a genuine fightback.

# THE ELECTIONS AND THE HOUSING CRISIS

**M**any militants dismiss the manoeuvring of the left on the grounds that they have not succeeded in becoming a national force and therefore are irrelevant. They ignore the fact that the left are a sort of gatekeeper that attracts young people to struggle and often play a decisive role in their future approach to political action.

Nowhere is this more evident than around the housing question. The socialist groups claimed that electoral activity would be a platform for building housing resistance. In reality it became a barrier to popular mobilisation.

The crowds of people in O'Connell Street Dublin for the May housing protest by the Raise the Roof Coalition heard one recurring theme: "*we will punish them* (the major parties) *at the election*".

There is an out of control crisis in Irish housing, with rents and mortgages forcing the poor onto the streets. There was no punishment. Housing was not a major point of debate in the elections.

Why not?

The main reason is that there is no effective campaign on the housing issue. Raise the Roof, controlled by the trade union bureaucracy, was mainly focused on winning concessions in last year's budget and since then has held only a few housing demonstrations.

There are no tactics that are generally agreed beyond street protest aimed at lobbying the government. At times housing activists have been involved in mass occupations of property and direct physical confrontation with bailiffs. The main campaign has not discussed these and has kept its distance from anything that goes beyond lobbying.

There is no real opposition program. Again the unions are for a mixture of public and private housing, calls for a housing emergency and repetitively chanting that "*housing is a human right*" that someone should do something about.

In this environment the socialist movement has shamefully capitulated. A main plank of the socialist electoral platform was a call for affordable housing, that is, a call for low cost private housing in an environment where the housing market and privatisation has produced the current chaos. One socialist councillor went a great deal further, signing up to a "*not in my backyard*" call to ban further housebuilding in that electoral area "*until there was a better public transport system*".

Nothing could illustrate more clearly the problem of opportunism. Candidates stand to build a platform to encourage resistance only to find that they abandon radicalism in the hope of winning a seat.

It should be pointed out that an exception to the more opportunist campaigns was that of Brian Leeson and the republican group *eirigi*. Substantial research and propoganda was carried out into the role of vulture capital in the housing market and the candidate proposed mass public housing as a solution. Leeson gained a

substantial vote but was not elected. The main issue was that there was no mass housing campaign to implement this platform, but a further problem was that the eirigi campaign was itself electoralist, focused on council seats when the councillors have no real say around the housing question.

The elections tell us there is no widespread resistance movement around housing. The starting point to building a movement is a political programme. That programme should be from above and below, demanding that the government undertake a programme of mass public housing while supporting occupation and defence movements from below, resisting intimidation by the landlords. The cost of housing, alongside a programme controlling public sector pay, has extended the austerity offensive into a second decade. This is the central issue facing the working class, not the electoral fortunes of the left.

Can the socialists change direction? Or do we need a completely new movement willing to confront existing political leaderships, especially those in the trade union leaderships, and build an independent party of the working class?

# THE EUROPEAN CRISIS

**I**n Marxist analysis political events always have a material base. What is the material base of the European crisis? Overall, as with many other areas of the global economy, the driving force is the long-standing tendency for the rate of profit to fall. More and more capital reserves that cannot be productively invested build up, leading to an increased financialization of the capitalist system and an enormous increase in inequality. Large sections of production move to the global South and the rate of exploitation increases there. In Europe the capitalist system shifts to obtain value outside the factory as well as inside by squeezing the areas of workers consumption. There is a drive to privatise public resources, reduce public services, reduce wages and pensions, and for increased inequality as more and more unproductive capital builds up in the hands of fewer and fewer people.

The austerity process can't go on forever without eating away at the political system. The Social Democrats lost support, followed by the centre right conservative groups. Now capitalism tries to relieve pressure through the rise of the right. Racism and nationalism create scapegoats to blame for workers poverty. This strategy leads to further instability. When it is implemented it disrupts the global supply chain and reduces the productivity of labour and this means an even greater crisis and more exploitation of the workers

All this is taking place during a European recovery where growth never went over 2%. The move to the right is one of the factors that will drive a turn towards recession, something already signalled by the rise of Trumpism in America and the steady drift towards trade war. Anyone who believes that European powers will try to face down this threat to democracy is living in a dream world. They have already done a great deal to conciliate the right, as for example, around the treatment of migrants, and they will do more in the immediate future. In addition to this reality is the fact that the US is attempting to increase the rate of exploitation in the global south. Although Europe has as part of its rationale a goal of winning independence from the United States, it has proved completely incapable of mounting resistance, as for example its pandering to Israeli genocide and its response when the US tore up the uranium nuclear treaty with Iran. Fine Gael try to build support for a European army, send troops to support French imperialism in Mali and arguing that this will increase independence from the US. In reality Europe will join with the USA in armed intimidation of the global south, with a much increased risk of war with Iran alongside continuing austerity at home.

In Britain the convulsions in the Tory party and the divisions and confusion in labour mean that Brexit is becoming more and more defined as a hard Brexit. There are two things to bear in mind here. One is that May's proposals are dead in the water. The second is that, while membership/non-membership is a singular event, the relationship with Europe is a process that will continue on and on. Brexit will be a terrible blow to British workers, but it arises from a class offensive which is the foundation of the Brexit shambles. Fighting class war, rather than looking for support to a ruthless European elite, is the task facing workers.

Hard Brexit robs Europe of much of its power. Given rejection of the May plan, in the chaos that follows Europe will negotiate to reduce the financial damage to its own economy. The rights of British workers won't enter the equation. Again, the political process will resemble that in the rest of Europe, with an attempt to soften Brexit by offering concessions to the right. The Brexit process will lead to greater dominance

of US capital and a greater willingness to join an increasingly militarist regime in its march to war.

As with the Republican Party in the US, the Tories have moved with astonishing speed to position themselves to the far right. They and their supporters around Farage will unite to force through Brexit. There is also clearly a space for an opposition; a new right-wing pro-European party involving a section of the Tories, the Liberal Democrats and the Labour right. A big problem for the Labour right is that much of their support rests on their presence in the Labour apparatus and they would be obliterated if they left the party, as demonstrated by the fate of "Change uk." The right's constant betrayals of Corbyn are an attempt to hold the apparatus and force him out.

As the Peterborough election showed, the only effective opposition to the Brexiteers comes from the Corbyn current. Elements in the Corbyn circle are contaminated by little Englander politics, but behind them is a radicalised section of the working class. Socialists should continue to defend Corbyn, but they must oppose the political elements that weaken the current: English nationalism and parliamentary reformism. The workers' fight back will not be confined to Britain, will not be in alliance with Tom Watson and the labour right, and will take place on the streets, in the communities and in the workplaces rather than focused on parliament.

In Ireland the Fine Gael government has put on quite a show, wrapping the green flag around itself during the phony war based on the May proposals. On platforms Taoiseach Leo Varadkar proclaimed Irish sovereignty, putting Britain in its place, although in reality the rights of Irish citizens in the North never became an issue. Politically Varadkar was saying that his big brother in Europe would face down Britain. They would stand by the Good Friday agreement and, in defence of that agreement, they would hold Britain to the backstop of free movement on the island of Ireland.

The threat of a hard Brexit brings all this bombast to an end. May's plan is dead, reaction is on the march and, in the absence of a strong working class movement, and capitalism will look to conciliate that reaction. Finance capital in Britain will try to moderate their demands on the economy. Europe will try to ameliorate the effects on member economies and on specific sectors. Economically this will mean a reduction in labour productivity and bring forward a recession which is already on

the cards. An Irish economy that already involves a great deal of smoke, mirrors and hidden debt will be devastated and Irish capital will intensify an already intense offensive against Irish workers. In the North a decrepit economy will be pushed further under the water.

The political effects will be even more catastrophic. In the absence of the current deal, there will be no backstop and no Good Friday Agreement. Europe will count anything less than Britain crashing out altogether as a gain but will find it is extremely difficult to devise any plan for free movement across the border. The Brexiteers will demand the scrapping of workers' rights and intensify the unconditional support for unionism and partition.

The only good news, if that is the right way to put it, is that it will remove much of the political justification for a complacent and corrupt Irish political system. The received wisdom is that sticking with Europe will guarantee prosperity, even as the EU/Latin American Mercosur deal threatens the Irish beef industry and that sticking with the Good Friday Agreement will guarantee peace, stability and an eventual united Ireland (although we should put that on the long finger to avoid upsetting unionism). Nowhere is this ideology more pernicious than on the so-called left. It is used by Sinn Fein to present themselves as progressive, by the union bureaucracy to justify their acceptance of austerity and by the socialists to justify shameless opportunism.

Whatever comes next, that chapter of Irish history is over

# BUILDING WORKERS RESISTANCE

**C**apitalism, on a global scale, is in crisis.

Can the crisis be resolved by capitalism itself?

We can't say that this is impossible. What we can say with certainty is that resetting capitalism would require the destruction of much of the mass of currently accumulated capital. Traditionally this has been achieved by war.

Today even a global conflagration would hardly be enough. Any post war capitalism would be constrained by the level of environmental degradation that has already

taken place. In any case the robotic production system that is now emerging, unlike human labour, cannot produce value and sustain the capitalist mode of production.

We assert that a socialist revolution is necessary. The system of production based on profit must be overthrown and replaced with a system based on abundance and the satisfaction of human need.

We further assent that a revolution must be led by the working class. Not only are they central to production, they are also the only class without any intrinsic ties to the system and able to act as its gravedigger.

A fundamental problem for the working class in fulfilling its revolutionary role is what is called the "bootstrap" problem. Unlike the early capitalists, the workers aren't able to amass resources and build up islands of workers power within capitalism. They must lift themselves by their own bootstraps and take power in a revolutionary upsurge. Yet not all the knowledge, methods and techniques of revolution can be mastered spontaneously in one historic moment. For this reason it is necessary to build a revolutionary party among the most advanced layers of workers to prepare in advance for the future revolutionary upsurge.

One final assertion: Revolution is a global task. It will begin in isolated pockets, but history tells us that it must press forward across the globe or be isolated and crushed.

The conditions for revolution are easily stated. As Lenin said, they take place when the ruling classes are unable to rule in the old way and when the oppressed classes are unwilling to be ruled as before, The continuing catastrophe since the 2008 financial collapse; chaos in the USA, decay in Europe and the braying reaction of Brexit in Britain - all indicate that the political system of capitalist rule is fragmenting.

The election results in Ireland show capitalism in control. However that control is not secure. There is no dominant party, so government and opposition work together, removing the illusion of a democratic alternative within the electoral system. The elections don't indicate that the mass of workers have reached the end of their tether. However they do at least show that those who want to oppose have grown tired of the reformism and opportunism of the republican and socialist groups.

This is quite important. Class struggle does not develop in a steady movement. A military metaphor is more apt. Victory energises class struggle for years after the initial event. Defeat has the opposite effect. For decades Irish politics has been dominated by the policy of social partnership supported by the trade union leaders and by the flip in Sinn Fein politics from opposition to imperialism to support. These strategies are reaching the end of their tether. The pay restraint inside the Public Sector Stability Agreement has been stretched to the limit and involves endless dancing in the cracks to head off discontent without bursting the envelope of austerity. In the political arena the chances of a Northern assembly being re-established on any foundation of equality seem very slim, with long term reputational damage to Sinn Fein.

The weakening of support for Sinn Fein and for trade union leaders will mean an initial weakness and fragmentation, but this is necessary if new movements are to grow. There are many spontaneous upsurges to look to, especially around housing. The key issue is a new programme to bring militants together on the march to revolution.

It is unlikely that substantial numbers of current Republican or socialist groups membership will play a major role in the recomposition of a working-class movement. However even a small number of activists could play an important role in the early days of a new movement.

A new movement in Ireland will almost certainly depend on movement in Europe and on a global scale. This has historically been the case. We are a small country with a weak working class burdened with the failures of social partnership and the Good Friday Agreement. Events such as the Russian Revolution, the Vietnam War, and the '68 events in Paris exerted strong influences on the development of Irish politics. Unfortunately that international influence has acted in a negative way over the past decades reinforcing the collapse of political consciousness. The Scottish Socialist party has been followed by Podemos, Syriza, the Portuguese Bloco, Die Linke and the Danish red-green alliance. The steady movement to the right has been slavishly applied in Ireland. Each failure has been followed by amnesia and further moves to the right.

In Europe these reformist currents have almost run their course. In France, Greece, Spain, Germany and Italy small forces have developed that run counter to the electoralism of the majority. A platform for a revolutionary international has

developed inside the Fourth International. In the USA a new enthusiasm for socialism has been largely captured by the Democratic Party, but there has been a growth in revolutionary currents in both the US and Canada and a sizeable revolutionary current has developed in Argentina.

None of these currents are strong enough to ignite a new Irish movement, but they are strong enough to serve as a point of reference and to build links if such an Irish movement begins to become established.

All of these political shifts are dependent upon movement in the working class itself. Outside of the bluster of Trumpism it goes largely unremarked that last year saw the biggest US strike wave in decades. The most successful of these movements were led by US teachers and it should not be a surprise that their first task was to push aside a conservative bureaucratic leadership of the unions. A coup in Venezuela, openly supported by the USA, was swiftly faced down in the absence of working class support for the reaction. In France the yellow vest movement shows a mass mobilisation that was not captured by the right wing.

In Ireland we see desperate attempts to placate workers inside the stability agreement between union leaders and the government. On the one hand the payments made stretch the agreement to its very limits. On the other hand they fall far short of even the basic principle of equal pay for equal work. An intricate machinery of conciliation and labour courts meant to give flexibility, are more and more seem as ways of denying workers their rights. As workers struggle to free themselves from bureaucracy they confront a practice of licensed unions that denies them the right to select the union of their choice or to organise independently.

Runaway rent and mortgage payments, alongside pay control and a budgetary "*fiscal space*" set by the European central bank that will in the coming budget set a limit of €700 million on government spending—and where much of that spending is already committed, spells sharp conflict in the near future.

There are many issues where workers should draw a red line of total opposition. We will not join with gombeen nationalism in a fanciful Irexit, nor will we embrace a repressive and parasitic European capitalism. The only grounds for remaining in the European Union is that it represents a better terrain on which to organise and where we can build unity with other European workers. Pale green nationalism in Ireland means endorsing the gombeen internationalism of the vulture funds and mass

privatisation. Rather we should be for the expropriation of swindled property and the expulsion of the parasites.

The most likely outcome of the current right-wing offensive is a strengthened partition and renewed reaction in the North. We should demand British withdrawal and a 32 county constituent assembly. The workers call should be for a Workers Republic and a United Socialist States of Europe

