

# Editorial

## Revolution at the Ballot Box

The General Election of 2011 which brought the downfall of Fianna Fail and the Greens was described as a riot at the ballot box'. The Independent called the recent local and European election results a 'revolution at the ballot box'.

Marxists understand, of course, that there has not really been a revolution; the government remains in office, the state machine remains intact, the ruling class still rules and there has not yet been what Trotsky called 'the most indubitable feature of a revolution ...the direct interference of the masses in historic events'<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless the Independent's hyperbole is not completely over the top - what took place in Ireland on 23 May was a political upheaval of serious dimensions.

Richard Boyd Barrett called it, 'The end of civil war politics' and this historical perspective is important. Ever since the War of Independence Irish political life has been dominated by two parties: the political representatives of the wing of the Irish bourgeoisie who supported the Treaty, who became Fine Gael in 1933, and the representatives of those who opposed it, who became Fianna Fail in 1926. Of the two, it was Fianna Fail who dominated holding office for 61 out of the 79 years between 1932 and 2011. Fianna Fail's vote was regularly 40 percent plus and exceeded 50 percent in 1938 and 1977; Fine Gael generally ranged from the high 20 percents to the mid 30 percents; but between them they garnered 80 percent or so of the popular vote - a position of great strength for the forces of conservatism and capitalism, i.e. for the Irish ruling class. It is this hegemony that has been broken, with the combined vote

of the two parties falling to well below 50 percent, and it has broken to the left.

After six years of austerity the 'centre' or 'mainstream' parties were in trouble right across Europe but in some countries it was the populist and racist right who were the beneficiaries of popular anger, in others it was the left. In the French Euro elections the fascist National Front topped the poll with 25 percent of the votes. In Britain the racist UKIP scored 27.5 percent in the Euros and 17 percent in the locals. In Hungary the fascist Jobbik Party got 20 percent in the General election in April of this year and 14.7 percent in the Europeans. In Denmark the right wing anti-immigrant Danish People's Party became the biggest single party with 26.6 percent in the Euro elections (though some of the left parties also did quite well). In Greece, however, there was a marked swing to the left with Syriza topping the poll at 26.5 percent, 4 percent ahead of the conservative New Democracy but the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn did dangerously well with 9.8 percent. In Spain there was also a big shift leftwards with, like in Ireland, the combined share of the mainstream parties (PP and PSOE) falling below 50 percent and the United Left tripling its vote (since 2009) to 9 percent and, even more strikingly, the new Podemos ('We Can'), which emerged out of the great Indignados movement, coming from nowhere to poll 8 percent and win 5 seats (See Andy Durgan's report from Spain).

The results here put Ireland at the left end of this spectrum. The swing to the left took three main forms. First, the destruction of the Labour Party; second, a big surge for Sinn Fein; third a huge rise in so-called 'independents'

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<sup>1</sup> L.Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, London 1977, p.17.

The catastrophe that befell Labour would have come as no surprise to any one who had any interaction with Irish working people in the course of the election campaign. The rage against Gilmore and co was palpable. Nor should it have come as a surprise to anyone with a sense of history. As was shown by the Green partnership with Fianna Fail and the Liberal Democrats' with the Tories in Britain, the role of junior partner and left cover in coalition with a major capitalist party bent on making the working class pay spells doom for that party. At least many Fine Gael (and Tory) voters knew they were voting for savage cuts and wanted to see them. Labour voters were hoping, naively, for protection and were deeply bitter at its absence. Of course, for Gilmore, Rabbitte and the like winning ministerial office is what politics is all about, so they will retire happily with their pensions having enjoyed their moment in the sun, leaving their party to pick up the pieces - if they can be picked up.

The swing to Sinn Fein was nationwide and resulted in them winning three seats out of 11 in the Euro elections in the South, one in each of the three Constituencies, plus one in the North. In the locals they gained 103 seats reaching a total of 155 in the South, and making them, when the North is included, the largest party on the island of Ireland.

Here it is important to understand that although SF are a nationalist party committed to Irish capitalism as is shown by their implementation of austerity in the North, in the South they have consistently positioned themselves to the left of Labour, rejecting austerity and opposing the water charges, and have a strong base in the manual working class. The vote for Sinn

Fein in the South was clearly a left wing, anti-austerity vote and it does not seem to have been much affected by the politically motivated arrest of Gerry Adams during the campaign. Clear proof that the Sinn Fein vote was more motivated by opposition to austerity than by nationalism was provided by the Dublin West bye-election. This ended up a close three horse race between Sinn Fein, Fianna Fail and the Socialist Party. SF were knocked out first and it was their transfers which decided the outcome - they went massively leftwards to the SP's Ruth Coppinger, not 'traditional nationalist' to FF.

The rise of the independents who took about 30 percent of the popular vote - more than any individual party - is a more complex phenomenon because 'independents' come in all shapes and sizes. Many are clearly right wing or ex-Fianna Fail or ex-Labour who shed their party affiliation to save their seats, while some are clearly left or left-leaning. But it was very clear from the experience on the doorsteps that for most of the electorate voting 'independent' was a protest against the three main establishment and pro-austerity parties.<sup>2</sup>

Most importantly the vote for so-called independents contained within it spectacular results for the far left. People Before Profit, of which the Socialist Workers Party is a major component, raised its number of local councillors from 5 to 15. This included the hugely important victory for PBP of Gerry Carroll in West Belfast - Gerry Adams' home base - to which we devote a special article by Sean Mitchell. At the same time the Anti-Austerity Alliance, associated with the Socialist Party, increased their seats from 6 to 14, as well as winning the aforementioned parliamentary bye-election in Dublin West.

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<sup>2</sup>Which is why it is a matter of some democratic importance that RTE and polling organizations start reporting opinion poll results for People Before Profit separately rather than just lumping them in with 'independents'.

The Irish working class is concentrated in Dublin and it was in Dublin that the swing to the left was most marked. In the Dublin Euro constituency Sinn Fein's Lyn Boylan easily topped the poll, with the vaguely left independent, Nessa Childers, in second place on the basis of getting lots of transfers and the Fine Gael candidate, Brian Hayes, who was media favourite at the start of the campaign, only just beating the Greens for 3rd place. The candidates of the far left - Paul Murphy of the Socialist Party and Brid Smith of People Before Profit - were both endorsed by Unite and both did very well getting 8.5 percent and 6.8 percent respectively, with combined first preferences of over 53,000 (compared to 7.3 percent for Labour).

In the locals People Before Profit went from one to five seats on Dublin City Council with a further seven in the outer areas (three in Dun Laoghaire, three in Dublin South, and one in Fingal) Two PBP candidates, Brid Smith and John Lyons, polled over 2000 first preference votes, which puts them in a strong position for the general election. PBP also won seats in Sligo and Wexford.

One nasty feature of the election was the racist, Islamophobic campaign directed at People Before Profit candidate for Castleknock, Memet Uludag<sup>3</sup>, which featured taping bacon to his posters, destroying them and covering them with pigs' head pictures. Many local people and some of the other local candidates responded well to this vile racism but it is clear that there is still much confusion about the racist nature of Islamophobia. We have therefore included a short article on the subject.

Another problem, less horrible but still insidious, was the pro-mainstream anti-left

bias of RTÉ which showed itself particularly in the reporting of opinion polls in the Euro elections when the standing of Bríd Smith and Paul Murphy was repeatedly omitted and in the organisation of the Prime Time hustings into A and B teams.

When it comes to assessing the political consequences of these results we need to be clear that although they have shaken the political establishment, claimed the scalp of Eamon Gilmore, and were probably the main factor in the retreat over medical cards, it will basically be business as usual both in the Dáil and in the Councils. Councils are particularly undemocratic because they are particularly powerless in relation to the unelected managers and, sadly, Sinn Fein, has already been sucked into various deals for positions with pro-austerity parties.

Nevertheless the election to our councils of a considerable body of potential 'disturbers of the political peace' is a real and significant gain if they are able to use their positions to build resistance on the ground, especially the campaign against water charges, and if the bloody nose given to the parties of austerity raises the previously battered confidence of the Irish working class. It is also clear that a real window of opportunity exists to build People Before Profit into a significant national political force - this opportunity must be seized.

## Also in this issue

This issue coincides with the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War. So appalling was the scale and nature of the carnage in that war that even for the British establishment, never mind the Irish, jingoistic or nationalist celebration seems highly problematic. Nevertheless, it

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<sup>3</sup>Memet Uludag is, of course, a member of our editorial board and a regular contributor to IMR. His 'Is the Irish State Racist?' was the lead article in our last issue. <http://www.irishmarxistreview.net/index.php/imr/article/view/108>

is possible that ‘respect for the dead’ and for their immense ‘sacrifice’ can be used to cover up just who sacrificed who and for what. This should not be allowed to happen because the fact is that the international ruling classes sacrificed almost an entire generation in the interests of imperialism, that is in a struggle for the division and redivision of control of the world’s resources, markets and territories.

We have responded with three articles: an overview of the slaughter and the revolt that developed against it by Megan Trudell, a study of the Irish dimension of the war by Paul O’Brien and a survey of the reflection and representation of the war in visual art by John Molyneux.

Economist of the month, or more likely the year, is Thomas Piketty whose mas-

sive book *Capital in the 21st Century* has caused a minor sensation in many quarters with its demonstration of rising inequality and its call for a wealth tax. Over 600 people attended Piketty’s presentation to TASC on his visit to Dublin. Kieran Allen welcomes the book and notes its many strengths while also making some necessary criticisms.

‘Public bad! Private good!’ is a central tenet of neo-liberal globalisation and therefore a key element in the strategy of our government. Dave O’Farrell charts and critiques the ruthless privatisation strategy pursued by Fine Gael/Labour.

We also have reviews of Ken Loach’s new film *Jimmy’s Hall* by Marnie Holborrow, and Martin Empson’s important *Land and Labour* by Conor Kennelly.