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Ireland

Time to change direction

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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Build a new movement of resistance, revolution

Ireland has turned the corner! Cry the pundits. We will exit the rule of the Troika and a new economic recovery is on the way.

No one has told the workers. Croke Park III is devastating the public sector and another austerity budget of €-2.5 billion has been announced. The re-election of Angela Merkel tells of continuing austerity across Europe.

To add insult to injury, we are told that, even when bankers openly confess to conspiracy against the Irish working class, as they did in the Anglo-Irish tapes, the issue is to be dismissed – they may have been slightly boorish but there is no evidence of wrongdoing – and we are to keep paying into the next generation no matter how criminal the means by which the debt was placed on the shoulders of the workers.

Our stalwart defenders in the Labour party and trade union bureaucracy claim to have restricted the new round of cuts to €-2.5 billion. These restrictions are the result of creative accounting. In return they support a budget that oppresses the poor, squeezes everyone else, featherbeds industry, guarantees the profits of transnational capital and openly invites Irish youth to climb on the emigration boat or starve here.

"People's Assembly"

The response by socialist groups to this on-going litany of catastrophe and betrayal was a "People's Assembly" at the opening of the Dail. The assembly strategy, imported by the Socialist Workers Party from its senior organization in Britain, was based on the idea that only a broad movement could mount a fight back and that any explicit political position would alienate workers and limit the size of the movement.

The falsity of this position was shown by the turnout in the hundreds. Even if it was much larger it would have been ineffective because few had anything clear to say. Denunciations of austerity – while the majority of the platform accepts the need to bail out the banks. Calls for mass mobilization – while the routine "left" union bureaucrats bring only themselves. Calls for "people power" while the charities and NGOs spend their lives around the Dail committees, lobbying for favours.

This simple-minded opportunism becomes criminal when it seeks alliances with right wing labourites and with Sinn Fein - the very people looking for coalition deals and likely to prop up the next version of austerity government when the voters finally have their revenge on this one. In fact one outcome of the latest budget was that Sinn Fein dropped much of its fake left cover to advance its own austerity budget that matched exactly the sums demanded by the coalition government.

The failure of the assembly was not the organizational failure of one meeting. It marked the failure of a unity policy applied in slightly different forms by the vast majority of the Irish socialist movement from the bank bailout and before. It has ended with the socialists isolated, demoralised and fragmented.

Retreat

In our view the pressures of the capitalist onslaught, combined with the collapse of traditional leadership organizations within the working class has led to a headlong political retreat of the socialists. Where once they would have advanced socialist policies, they now embrace reformist proposals that simply don't make sense as an alternative to austerity.

This political retreat is most marked in the trade union movement. It is a long time since opposition to social partnership was a guide to action in the trade union movement. Rather socialists have applied a programme of left reformism, seeking to unite with the left of the bureaucracy and build as a loyal opposition confined within the largely moribund structures of the union branches. Other activists in the republican and anarchist movements ignored the trade unions and engaged in relatively apolitical community work.

When social partnership was exposed, via the Croke Park deals, as a mechanism for enforcing austerity, the socialists' lack of political opposition left them simply tailing after the bureaucracy. On the November 2012 budget march, the bureaucracy openly accepted the €3.1 billion figure for cuts, lobbying in these narrow confines for a contribution from the rich. The activists were silent. Ordinary workers heckled the ICTU speaker. The activists were silent. A protest was proposed as ICTU moved to endorse Croke Park II. The socialists voted the proposals down.

Electoralism

The socialists took up electoral politics within the same reformist framework. The United Left Alliance adopted the same better fairer way politics as the trade unions. Adjustments within capitalism to increase the tax take from the rich would solve the crisis. The place to get things done was in the Dail committees.

Although the leaders of the various groups were well aware of Marxist theory indicating the limits of the Dail as a mechanism for opposing capitalism and the role of parliamentary structures in subverting socialist representatives, they operated in the Dail in the same way as the capitalist politicians.

In the absence of a revolutionary perspective there was little to distinguish the ULA from other political groups and independent TDs. As support fell groups and TDs began to fight amongst themselves to secure the vote. The ULA disintegrated in an orgy of sectarian backbiting, with different factions planning to stand against each other for the same seat in the local and European elections.

The third and most successful element of socialist activity was the Campaign Against Household and Water Taxes. It drew in much more diverse and combative groups from outside Dublin, but it was constrained by the leadership group based on the Dublin activists and by the reformist perspective that informed their strategy.

In the case of the CAHWT the reformist ideology expressed itself as an exclusion of politics. The policy was to ignore as far as possible the broader issues of the bail out and austerity and focus on non-payment. The strategy was

reformist in that it focused in on achieving a majority of non-registers in the belief that this would force a government U-turn. This was essentially a belief that there was an alternative to austerity that the government could apply without threatening capitalism.

The campaign decayed rapidly. The government avoided a full-scale legal offensive that many had expected. There was insane bombast based around the claim that all non-payers were political supporters of the campaign. The no politics line morphed into a moralistic programme of social justice. This in turn led to a witch hunt against Mick Wallace and his supporters and a refusal to support members of the campaign who owned multiple homes. An attempt to press the reset button when the property tax was introduced failed and the campaign collapsed. The installation of water meters remains a potential focus of resistance but, given the inability of the groups within CAHWT to respond to public support for water privatisation by the union leaderships, it is unlikely that there will be a viable campaign on this issue.

Reformism

As with other failures of the left, it is common to blame sectarianism and lack of democracy. This idea is contradicted by the 2012 INTO conference. There a motion drawn from the ICTU policy document, clearly design to sidestep executive support for Croke Park II and supporting a property tax was supported by socialist and anarchist groups. This vote can only be explained as part of a common policy of reform and reliance on the state shared with the union bureaucracy.

One of the utterly astonishing elements of the household charge campaign was the fact that it rigidly copied the Dublin Bin Charge campaign of a decade before. That campaign had been decisively defeated and the government quite clearly used the lessons it had learnt then to modify its tactics, while the campaign remained frozen around "don't pay" to the exclusion of everything else.

There are two explanations for the behaviour of the left groups. The first is that the very sharp limits on the campaign avoided conflict with the union bureaucracy. The other explanation is that, from the point of view of the SP and SWP, the campaigns succeeded in increasing their electoral base.

This explains why, following the collapse of so many initiatives, the groups seem relatively unaware of the level of defeat or the need to re-examine their politics and strategy. Instead both have redoubled their electoral campaigns.

The fact is that a few councillors or TDs, especially when they argue for reformist solutions to the crisis, cannot possibly represent a strategy for a working class fight-back.

Resurgence

We must build a movement of resurgence, aimed at presenting the broad outlines of a working class programme as a resource for workers as they move into struggle. The movement would utterly repudiate any programme based on paying the bankers debts, call for the independent self-organisation of the workers and raise the flag of the Workers Republic and of international revolution.

Such a movement would:

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â€¢ Contain a description of capitalist crisis and an introduction to the ideas of Karl Marx to explain the contradictions within capitalism.

â€¢ Describe the Irish economy and the role of imperialism.

â€¢ Allow workers to speak: provide a platform for struggle, inter-views with workers and expressions of solidarity.

â€¢ Provide a discussion forum to evaluate competing ideas in the socialist movement and the outcome of struggles locally and internationally.

The Irish working class, in common with workers movements in many of the capitalist economies, has suffered a number of stunning defeats. The socialist and activist movement is now in rout, partly because it has little faith in its own policies and has tried to take short cuts. It is time to regroup in defence of the heroic history of the Irish working class, a history summed up by the battles of 1913, a history turned to pantomime by the current leaderships of the working class.

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