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North of Ireland

What does the success of People before Profit candidates mean?

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The election of two Socialist Workers Party/People Before Profit candidates to the Stormont Assembly on May 5 at the end of a [lacklustre election campaign](#) in the North of Ireland was like a lightning flash, providing excitement and colour.

The results was generally welcomed by political commentators as showing that the Irish peace process had come of age and that the Stormont assembly had matured to the point where it could accommodate a socialist presence.

The candidates responded to the publicity with a great deal of bombast. Eamon McCann sang the internationale and announced that the new movement was neither Orange or Green, but a socialist movement gathering votes from across the sectarian divide.

It was not long before these claims were challenged. A Sinn Fein supporter carried out an analysis of transfer patterns and showed that the PBP vote came almost exclusively from disaffected Sinn Fein and SDLP voters. It was part of a wider pattern of dissatisfaction among nationalist voters which involved a fall in the overall vote and an increase in votes for independents. Evidence of vote transfer from unionist supporters was vanishingly small.

SWP members defended their organization, arguing that the vote did not invalidate their non-sectarian policy.

Electoralist alliances

That won't wash. The SWP proclaimed their neutrality on the Irish national question while at the same time targeting over many years the two most deprived nationalist constituencies in North. The Socialist Party, with their own front, Labour Alternative, stood in unionist areas with derisory results.

So behind the bombast was a very carefully crafted and exclusively electoral strategy. When we see that the vote came, not on the back of working class upsurge, but on the back of a substantial defeat for the working class and the imposition of the Fresh Start austerity programme, it is necessary to investigate further.

Unlike the majority of socialist electoral gains these gains for the SWP were not based on an upsurge in struggle - rather the reverse. What brought victory was a series of alliances. Election statements were aimed at specific constituencies, but each had less to say than met the eye.

Don't mention Sinn Fein

The main constituency was dissatisfied nationalist voters and this was addressed by statements on the Casement park scandal, where planning and safety regulations had been set aside to force through a GAA superstadium. Gerry Carroll decried "poor administration" but stopped well short of exposing the sectarian sharing out of spoils and rampant corruption involved in the deal.

In addition in both constituencies there was a substantial republican vote. The republican groupings do not stand

candidates for Stormont, but are willing to lend their votes. They got almost nothing in return - a vague statement of concern about prisoners - but the intervention of Bernadette McAliskey in support of the PBP campaign was decisive in ensuring this vote.

Finally the PBP campaign appears to have been the only campaign to voice opposition to the Fresh Start austerity offensive, but PBP clarified their opposition by saying they would work with UNITE and UNISON trade union leaderships around campaigns such as local mental health. As both union leaderships have signed up to Fresh Start, the statement amounts to nothing more than dancing in the cracks inside an austerity budget.

Minimalist Programme

These positions translate into a minimalist programme for the new MLAs. Asked to accept that his election was due to Sinn Fein's failure to alleviate levels of deprivation in West Belfast, Gerry Carroll managed to answer without mentioning Sinn Fein. In fact there are few direct criticisms. Those who see PBP as a left opposition to Sinn Fein are clearly unaware of the level of collaboration between the groups on both sides of the border.

However the key alliance in the electoral jigsaw is the alliance with the left of the trade union bureaucracy. Both Carroll and McCann are closely involved with the trade unions. They can be said to be on the left, but hardly be called a left opposition.

So when, in his first speech in Stormont, Eamonn McCann criticises the Stormont executive for not fighting hard enough against the cuts, he reinforces the Sinn Fein narrative that the cuts are "British cuts" and the trade union narrative that we can pressure and persuade "our politicians" to protect us from austerity and that the best thing is to keep lobbying and avoid confrontation.

Sinister mantra

But the most sinister mantra is the claim that PBP are neither Orange nor Green, but socialist. This is quite a shift to the right for a group that historically defended the democratic validity of the call for a united Ireland.

Again it is a reflection of the ideology of the trade union bureaucracy - a neutrality on the national question that in a heartbeat becomes capitulation to Loyalism and the promotion of sectarian gangsters to be accepted as representatives of the Protestant workers they oppress.

So the task of socialists becomes one of polishing their non-sectarian halos. Sectarianism is yet again some form of disease from which "all sides" suffer equally and the socialists are blind to the material base of sectarianism in the structures of the Assembly they sit in and in the background sponsorship of the British state.

A SWP spin doctor has had the bright idea that this election can be compared to the election of two of Socialist Democracy's progenitor People's Democracy councillors during the hunger strikes. In terms of politics the current programme comes closer to the rise of the old Northern Ireland Labour Party. There was room for the NILP in the old Stormont as long as it remained stable. When that political structure began to decay it vanished like smoke.

Today the excitement around the new political formation was over in days as yet more crises and instability hit

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Stormont. A major part of that instability is the disenchantment among nationalist workers. The refusal of the two PBP MLAs to recognise the base on which they were elected and to declare unremitting hostility to the institution they sit in is an obstacle to the task of building on that resistance.