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Ireland

Sinn Fein Tops Irish Polls

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A great deal of excitement has been generated following the most recent mid-July electoral poll in the southern Irish state.

Following earlier high poll numbers, Sinn Féin continued its rise, up three points to 36%. It now leads the poll in the southern state, following an election in the North that saw it establish itself as the largest party there.

Is the party on course to meet its goal of being in government in both administrations? Would a place in government in the Dáil (southern Irish parliament) mean a decisive break with submission to imperialism represented by successive governments since partition and especially by Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil governments, separately and in combination? Would it begin to resolve the multiple crises, foremost of them the housing crisis?

There are obstacles in the North to leading a new administration. Although Sinn Fein recorded the largest vote, Michelle O'Neill is not First Minister. This is because the Democratic Unionist Party will not agree to the re-establishment of the local Assembly. The ostensible reason is the British campaign to repudiate the Brexit agreement. The DUP claim that once the British tear up the [Northern Ireland Protocol](#), they will return to the enforced coalition around which the administration is structured. However, the reason that the DUP is not the major party is because the unionist vote fractured to some extent. A sizable minority voted for Traditional Unionist Voice and indicated their opposition to continuing to share power with nationalists. In fact, Sinn Féin's vote only went up by 1.1% with the number of seats it holds remaining static at 27. It was hardly the great advance that some see and that they themselves claimed.

In these circumstances the DUP will not accept the humiliation of the Deputy First Minister title and support for their intransigence from an increasingly far right British government is growing. At best, as has happened frequently throughout the history of the peace process, Sinn Féin will be asked to agree to some form of restructuring of the political agreement involving a further shift to the right and further concessions to Unionism. At worst the local Assembly will simply collapse.

South of the border there are other obstacles to a place in the Dublin government. In a system of proportional representation Sinn Fein has a low transfer profile. That means that all the other parties have a long history of alliance and exchanging voting preferences. The main bourgeois parties could gain a lower proportion of the vote but still find it easier to form a government coalition.

It is possible that Sinn Fein could form an alliance with the left groups (the left government proposal advanced for many years by reformist socialists), but many of the socialist seats are under threat, as they draw on a similar voting base as Sinn Féin. SF could also ally with the independent TDs (MPs). The composite vote for left groups and independents has reached 20%. However, this group is extremely heterogeneous and a government formed from this alliance would be very unstable.

The barriers to government aren't limited to voting calculations. There is one basic reason for the SF electoral advance. Their group is the last one standing. Every other party has taken its turn in various rainbow coalitions. Working class consciousness is at a low ebb and the focus for change is seen as through the Dáil. The desperation for change and the limits of parliamentarianism are so acute that even parties that have been punished for betrayal in one coalition can be forgiven and revived. The Green Party were obliterated following coalition with Fianna Fáil only to be revived for the current coalition. The Labour Party was decimated but is back in contention.

That doesn't mean that nothing has changed. Stable government in Dublin was Fianna Fail. When they occasionally failed at the polls they were usually replaced by a Fine Gael/Labour coalition. All that came to an end when Fianna Fail bankrupted the country in 2008 and the major parties endorsed the bank bailout.

Since then, support for the major capitalist parties and their collaborators has fallen steadily. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have had to coalesce in government. Now they are no longer able to garner a majority even as a combined force.

So capitalist disintegration, rather than political radicalism by the former republicans is the major factor in the current situation. The issues are well defined. The overall squeeze on worker's standards of living is dominant, with the catastrophic cost of rents and mortgages to the fore.

Can Sinn Féin resolve these issues?

One place to look is due North, where they are in government (when it's functioning). The record is terrible. There is a steady process of privatisation of housing, with the old Housing Executive in the process of conversion to a mutual company funded by bank loans. Whole areas are abandoned as sources of social housing because of complex deals designed to maintain sectarian apartheid in housing. A loose planning policy is seeing floods of speculative capital flooding into Belfast in a pattern similar to the dysfunctional system in Dublin.

None of this matters. There is almost no discussion of the North, widespread support for the political settlement and general belief that Sinn Féin "has to" follow right wing policies. The fact that they are the richest of the bourgeois parties and heavily sponsored by the right in Irish America is ignored.

The real problem for the party lies in the South. Its housing policy is built around small-scale developments and cooperative schemes. It provides a plan for a mixture of "social" housing, which includes houses rented by local authorities but also with the right to sell public stock. They also are not opposed to private housing per se and argue for some oversight of it, such as tenants' rights and rent controls, which would be very difficult to implement effectively without full public control of ownership. They do not plan to challenge the current private housing market.

Yet, as with other partial reforms outlined over the years, the financial foundation to the scheme is the fantasy that the European Central Bank can be persuaded to agree massive low interest loans to Ireland on top of existing sovereign debt.

Housing representative Eoin Ó Broin has made it abundantly clear that publicly built and owned housing is low on the priority list. "Affordable" housing will be financed within the regulations set by Europe. Under these conditions it is difficult to see how Sinn Féin can resolve the housing crisis. It's also important to understand how unstable the electoral map is. A recent attempt to prove their moderation by cosying up to British Royalty saw their vote crash, only to surge massively as the current coalition presided over further falls in the standard of living. A left swing also faded away when the party pulled away from demands to end Ireland's special criminal court and emergency legal powers.

However as long as class tensions are constrained within the electoral process there will be a massive impetus for a SF vote. If that vote is big enough then Sinn Fein will be in government. If Fianna Fáil fare badly there will be a split and the western wing will cohere with Sinn Fein.

It should not be too difficult for a new government to swing away from the landlordism of the old. What will be impossible is to break from Ireland's dependence on the European Central Bank and on transnational capital. Within those constraints a new policy of housing based on social need will not be an option.

Will the outcome of this failure be a mobilisation of the working class or a further demoralisation?

The lack of an alternative has nothing to do with the Dáil itself. Ireland's dependent economy is managed by a united capitalist class in alliance with imperialism. The bourgeois parties have managed to co-opt the Trade Union leaders and the socialist groups do not challenge their hegemony. Sinn Féin itself is very definitely a parliamentary party, sending only token delegations to street demonstrations.

So, the battle for mobilisation starts now. The socialists should turn away from electoral calculation to provide an anti-imperialist critique of Irish capital, to oppose the collaboration of trade union leaders and to strive for self-organisation of the workers. At almost every level capitalist rule is decaying in both Britain and Ireland. The carefully constructed constraints of a national wage agreement have failed, non-unionised workers in the private sector are winning wage increases far in excess of those available in the public sector. The shift to the right in Britain throws the Brexit deal into question and raises the possibility that a new border will throw claims of success for Ireland in the peace settlement into question, and with it Sinn Féin's claims of triumph.

Their vote in the North did not reach the high tide of the past. A successful coalition in the South will be a pale shadow of the former domination of Fianna Fáil. Really the question of a working-class party can no longer be put off.

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