

# What Is People Before Profit?

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To many readers of *Irish Marxist Review* the answer to this question would seem obvious: it is a political party of the radical left, indeed the leading party of the radical left, in Ireland both North and South.

Moreover, many readers will be members of People Before Profit (PBP) and many others will at least vote for it.

But push the question a bit deeper or extend its scope and matters are not so simple. Ask, for example, whether PBP is a reformist or a revolutionary party and you might get a range of answers even from its members. Ask leftists or socialists outside Ireland and the likely response would be a mixture of ignorance and confusion. Talking to socialists internationally I have encountered the view that PBP is a kind of anti-austerity united-front campaign, while others think it may be akin to Die Linke in Germany or to Respect in Britain in the noughts.

The ignorance is partly accounted for by the lack of coverage of Irish politics in the international media (including on the left), and the confusion, including among some of our own members, is partly due to the fact that PBP is in important respects a new phenomenon. We always tend to see the present through the prism of the past and this can lead to a tendency simply to slot a new development into a convenient old category. In the case of PBP this is misleading. Hence the purpose of this article is to offer both to an Irish and an international audience an account of how PBP came about, of what it is and of what it might possibly become.

With its 3000+ members, its four TDs in the South, one MLA<sup>1</sup> in the North and eleven local councillors (five in the North, six in the South), PBP is a small left success story and therefore merits investigation. The majority of the individual members are passive rather than activists, but in per-capita terms the 3000+ in an all-Ireland population of 6.9 million is roughly double the size of the Democratic Socialists of America and of Podemos in the Spanish state and two-thirds the size of the much less radical Die Linke in Germany. PBP stands at about 2–3 per cent in the national opinion polls but much higher in key areas: e.g. Richard Boyd Barrett polled 15 per cent of first preferences in Dun Laoghaire in the 2020 general election and Brid Smith 11 per cent in Dublin South Central, with similar figures in parts of Belfast (see below). Moreover, the high level of activity and proactivity of our elected representatives means that PBP is a voice in the national political debate and outright socialist arguments are quite frequently heard on the national and local airwaves

## How PBP developed

People Before Profit was not set up on the basis of any pre-elaborated theory or plan.<sup>2</sup> Rather it evolved gradually and “organically.” “We rather stumbled into it,” as Kieran Allen, currently PBP national secretary, once put it. It began as an initiative by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP, now the Socialist Workers Network or SWN) and other left activists in two rather different areas: Ballyfermot, a strongly working-class area in West Dublin, and Dun Laoghaire, a more mixed (working-class and middle-class) suburb south of Dublin.

In Ballyfermot, PBP grew primarily out of the struggle against the Bin Tax between 2001 and 2005. This was a tax on refuse collection introduced as a wedge leading to privatisation of the service and was rejected by large numbers of working-class people as a double tax. It was a national issue and campaign but it took on a genuinely mass character in a number of Dublin working-class communities such as Dublin 15,

Crumlin and Tallaght. In Ballyfermot and Inchicore, a leading role in this struggle was played by SWP member Brid Smith. She was already an established trade union and community activist with a long track record going back to the Anti-H Blocks campaign in 1981 and the Dunnes Stores Anti-Apartheid strike in 1984–87, and was also heavily involved in the Irish Anti-War Movement which put one hundred thousand on the streets against the Iraq War. In Autumn 2003, Brid Smith (along with a number of other activists) was jailed for two weeks for defying a court injunction to not block refuse collection lorries.

In Dun Laoghaire the Anti-Bin-Tax campaign also played a role, but probably more important was the Save Our Seafront campaign founded in 2002 to defend the Dun Laoghaire seafront against developer vandalism. Here it was another SWP member, Richard Boyd Barrett, who was the key activist, with Richard also spearheading, and being the main spokesperson of, the national movement against the Iraq War.

In 2004, Brid and Richard stood for SWP in their respective local elections, both narrowly failing to get elected. Then in 2005 they launched the People Before Profit Alliance as a national initiative with its main bases in these two areas. It was originally conceived as a broad left electoral alliance (hence “alliance” in the name) rather than a party as such. This alliance was strengthened by the accession of sitting councillor Joan Collins and her Crumlin-Kimmage based Community and Workers Action Group. Another important development at that time was the role of People Before Profit in mobilising support for the Shell to Sea environmental campaign and the jailed Rosport Five in Mayo 2007. A marker of the advance made in this period is that when Boyd Barrett stood in the 2002 general election for SWP he polled 876 first preferences. When he first stood for PBP in 2007 he polled 5223 first preferences and only just failed to get elected.

## 2008—The crash

The 2008 crash, with its attendant bank bailout, recession and IMF-imposed austerity, was an important turning point. Fianna Fail (FF), the dominant political party in the Southern Irish state for over seventy years, saw its hegemony evaporate almost overnight. The party had been distinguished by its ability to sustain a cross-class alliance between the capitalist class to which it was completely loyal and a significant section of the working class. After it was perceived to have driven the national economy over a cliff and was simultaneously exposed as deeply corrupt, it lost a large section of its bourgeois support to Fine Gael and was also deserted by its working-class voters. In 2007 FF polled 41.6 per cent of the vote and won seventy-seven seats. In 2011 its vote fell to 17.4 per cent with only twenty seats.

Throughout this period there were repeated attempts at resistance by trade unionists, by working-class communities and by students to the vicious cuts and austerity imposed by the government. Although there were a number of big marches and protests, the effectiveness of this resistance was seriously damaged by the rotten conservatism of the leadership of the trade union movement, above all that of the largest union, SIPTU, which had been corrupted and weakened by more than twenty years of social partnership with the employers and the government. This was linked to and compounded by the right-wing character of the Irish Labour Party, which had a very firm grip on the leadership of SIPTU and some other unions. The Labour Party commanded about 15–20 per cent of the vote, largely in working-class areas, but unlike most social democratic parties it lacked any significant left of a Bennite or Corbynite character and had a long tradition of going into coalition with Fine Gael whenever the opportunity arose.

As a consequence, the outrageous bank bailout and the brutal austerity were not met with the class fightback they merited and which would have been possible with a halfway decent leadership. But one side effect of this

was to open up a certain space for the radical left, which the radical left, including PBP, was at least partially able to occupy. This was very important. All sorts of anti-government voices were raised at this time—from the right, from deluded “freemen,” as they called themselves, from anti-politics anarchists and so on. But overall it was the voice of the left that was the loudest in active opposition to the assault on working-class living standards, and this was reflected at the ballot box.

In the 2009 local elections there were, across the state, about twenty or so far-left councillors elected, including six from the Socialist Party (SP) and five from PBP.<sup>3</sup> Then, in the 2011 general election, which saw victory for a Fine Gael/Labour coalition, there were five far-left TDs elected under the banner of the United Left Alliance—Seamus Healy of the Workers and Unemployed Action Group (WUAG) in Tipperary, Joe Higgins and Clare Daly for the SP and Richard Boyd Barrett and Joan Collins for PBP.

Recording PBP’s progress in terms of election results is useful in that it is a relatively objective, quantitative measure, but it also potentially misleading in that it may suggest that PBP was primarily just an electoral project. On the contrary, PBP developed very much as a grassroots campaigning organisation fighting on everything from supporting workers’ disputes and the defence of local bus routes to toxic waste dumps, racism and women’s rights as well as engaging in generalised campaigning against austerity and the consequences of the bank bailout. It was very much on the back of this people-power campaigning that PBP started to have some small electoral success.

## **The failure of the United Left Alliance**

The United Left Alliance (ULA) was formed between PBP, the SP and the Workers and Unemployed Action Group (WUAG) and various independents in the run up to the 2011 general election.<sup>4</sup> It began with very high hopes and much good will. There was a large founding meeting of 250–300 at the Gresham Hotel,

and I remember how when Richard Boyd Barrett’s result was announced in Dun Laoghaire, his supporters burst into spontaneous chants of “ULA! ULA!” To PBP it seemed that with its five TDs, the ULA was a real opportunity to build a serious and substantial left party in Ireland. We proposed it should declare itself a party and launch mass recruitment drives at meetings round the country, and that this should be combined with concrete anti-austerity campaigning. Our allies in the ULA were having none of it.

The SP argued that the time was not right for such initiatives, and WUAG were similarly conservative with the added twist of opposing (for local electoral reasons) any talk of increasing taxes on the corporations. As a result the ULA fell rapidly into a state of inertia, and by 2013 it had dissolved following walk outs by WUAG and the SP.<sup>5</sup>

If the ULA had fulfilled its fairly evident potential, the SWP would have maintained its organisation as a revolutionary Marxist group within a much broader formation, but it is very possible that PBP, as a kind of middle term between the SWP and the ULA, would have faded or lost its relevance. But with the collapse of the ULA, the SWP decided to throw itself even more enthusiastically into building PBP.

## **From household charges to water charges**

When the Fianna Fail/Green coalition were evicted by the electorate in 2011, they were replaced by a Fine Gael/Labour coalition, but the policy of cutbacks and austerity remained, as did working-class resistance. Moreover, this resistance had an added political edge to it because of the behaviour of Labour. The Labour Party had campaigned and gained its best ever result on the basis of defending working-class people from the ravages of the IMF and Fine Gael. “It’s Labour’s way or Frankfurt’s way,” declared Labour leader Eamon Gilmore. But from the moment Labour was in office it proved to be Frankfurt’s way all the way, and

this betrayal generated a backlash of great bitterness in working-class communities.

Consequently, as the ULA was floundering, a major anti-austerity movement emerged in working-class areas over the issue of household charges, a tax on the family home. A national united front, the Campaign against the Household Tax was formed, focussed, as in the Bin Tax campaign, on refusal to pay. PBP, the SP and the anarchist Workers Solidarity Movement (WSM) were the three main political forces involved, but the campaign also drew in significant numbers of unaffiliated working-class people and held big meetings and demonstrations. The government responded by replacing the Household Tax with a property tax which could be deducted at source from wages and pensions, and this effectively killed resistance. There was a period of widespread demoralisation and fatalistic resignation in many working-class communities.

Then the government, no doubt flushed with success, overreached itself and moved to reintroduce water charges. This unleashed a massive wave of revolt right across working-class Ireland. It was often said that water charges were “the straw that broke the camel’s back,” but more important than the extra dose of deprivation caused by the charges was the fact that working-class people, already deeply enraged by the relentless austerity, sensed that here, unlike with the Property Tax, was an attack that could be defeated. From the government’s point of view the water charges scheme had two key flaws: 1) it was possible simply to refuse to pay and the charge could not be taken out of wages; 2) imposing the charges involved installing water meters outside every household.

The rebellion that erupted had three main components: 1) mass refusal to pay; 2) community resistance to water meters; 3) huge demonstrations, both nationally and locally.

In some ways it was the resistance to water meters that was most striking. In many locations across Ireland, but especially in working-class Dublin, people fought

street by street to prevent installation by the simple device of coming out of their houses and blocking access by Irish Water to their water feed. This brought communities together in extensive networks bound by real ties of solidarity. Local street meetings abounded and resisters ranged from grannies in their seventies to teams of young people acting as “flying squads.” It was on a scale that left the Gardai more or less powerless.

This grassroots resistance laid the foundation for the huge street demonstrations. On 11 October 2014 there was monster march from Parnell Square the size of which—100,000 or more—took organisers and activists alike by surprise. This was followed three weeks later on 1 November by nationwide local demonstrations which mobilised even more people. Particularly astonishing was the size of the marches in many small towns—many thousands protested in out of the way places such as Letterkenny in Donegal or Gorey in Wexford. This was followed by numerous other big national and local demonstrations through 2015 into 2016 until the government were obliged to retreat and withdraw the charges.

People Before Profit acquitted itself very well in the whole water charges campaign. Right at the beginning it organised (in conjunction with Unite the Union) an important “Our Water Not for Sale” conference with local and international speakers, including from the great water revolt in Cochabamba, which helped launch the whole movement. Then PBP TD Richard Boyd Barrett played a vital role in bringing together Right2Water, a broad united front involving five trade unions, a number of left-wing politicians, many community groups and most of the far-left organisations, and this became the umbrella under which the huge demonstrations were called. At the same time, PBP members everywhere threw themselves into their local campaigns, blocking meters, leafleting their communities, organising contingents for the marches and recruiting to the party. This was possible because there was, as a consequence both of the austerity and the revolt, a wide

radicalisation in the working class, especially the manual working class.

This radicalisation was, as it always is, uneven. It contained both a serious increase in class consciousness and elements of conspiracy theories (sometimes with a tinge of racism) which could have led in a right-wing direction. But the shift in that period was overwhelmingly to the left.

One of the key achievements of this period was that PBP expanded into a fully nationwide organisation. It had long been a feature of the Irish left that it was overwhelmingly concentrated in Dublin. In these years, PBP (especially through the work of its main organisers Kieran Allen and Brian O’Boyle) launched a major drive to establish branches across the country in towns ranging from Sligo to Wexford. This transformed the national profile of the party, and all of this was reflected at the ballot box.

In the May 2014 local elections, PBP won fourteen council seats, with a similar number being won by the Anti-Austerity Alliance (AAA—formed by the SP). In May and October 2014, Ruth Coppinger and Paul Murphy won Dail by-elections for the AAA in Dublin West and Dublin South West. Then, in the 2016 general election, while Labour crashed from thirty-seven to only seven seats AAA-PBP won six seats.<sup>6</sup> Of these, three were PBP—Richard Boyd Barrett, who topped the poll in Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown, Gino Kenny in Dublin West and Brid Smith, who scraped in by thirty-five votes on the final count in Dublin South Central.

## **From repeal to Covid**

After their defeat over water charges, the government (Fine Gael now propped up by Fianna Fail<sup>7</sup>) took their foot off the austerity pedal. The gradual recovery of the Irish economy gave them the scope to do this, but they were careful not to introduce the kind of generalised attacks on working-class living standards that would provoke a repetition or escalation of the water charges revolt. In this situation, many of those

working-class people who mobilised in 2013–16 took a step back, albeit with a different level of consciousness, into relative passivity. However, the struggle now shifted onto other less economic terrain.

There were the issues of Donald Trump’s election in the US,<sup>8</sup> the ongoing death of refugees in the Mediterranean and the oppressive Direct Provision system for asylum seekers. Most importantly, there was the campaign to repeal the Eighth Amendment to the Irish Constitution, which banned abortion in Ireland. The question of abortion rights, along with horrific misogyny from the Catholic Church and the Irish State, was of course not new, but the decision, finally extracted from the government after sustained and vigorous campaigning by feminists and socialists, to hold a referendum on the Eighth in 2018 raised the struggle to a whole new level. It was already clear from the large positive vote in the Marriage Equality Referendum legalising same-sex marriage in 2015 that Ireland had changed fundamentally since the days of Archbishop McQuaid and Eamon de Valera, but it was no less clear that the Catholic Church hierarchy and the conservative forces entrenched in parts of Fianna Fail and Fine Gael would fight tooth and nail to prevent repeal. For them this was the ultimate red line, so the referendum was to be a crucial battle over what contemporary Ireland would look like.

Many prominent PBP women such as Goretta Horgan, Brid Smith, Ailbhe Smyth, Melisa Halpin, Mary Smith and others had long records, going back to the X case and before, of fighting for a woman’s right to choose, and now they joined hands with a new generation to throw themselves into the Repeal Campaign. PBP participated wholeheartedly in the main Together for YES campaign,<sup>9</sup> but focussed on arguing for the slogan of “Choice,” which actually proved very popular on the doorsteps but was opposed by the cautious Together for YES leadership, and on organising mass canvassing, especially in working-class areas. The canvassing teams were spectacular, frequently fifty to a hundred and sometimes more, and

of course, the result—64 per cent for yes—was a major victory.

The Repeal Campaign was a significant episode for PBP, placing it ever more firmly at the forefront of left politics in Ireland. It was also important in terms of PBP's internal development, that is, its transition from being an alliance against austerity to being a rounded socialist party. Given PBP's origins, it was by no means guaranteed that all members would support repeal, but in the event, the overwhelming majority did, and the whole party campaigned as one on the issue.

The next major burst of activity was over climate change, with the spark being provided by the 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report announcing there were only twelve years left in which to avoid calamitous levels of global warming. This produced a huge school students strike in March 2019, which put 10–15,000 on the streets of Dublin, and a big growth in Extinction Rebellion, which was regularly convening meetings of two hundred or more. Again PBP participated enthusiastically in the movement, with an emphasis on mass action, a just transition and links with workers. We were able to make effective use of our toehold in parliament by means of Brid Smith's Climate Emergency Bill in the Dail, which proposed to ban fossil fuel exploration and "leave it in the ground." This proved a useful rallying point for the movement.

The 2019 local elections in the Republic were tough for the left. Fianna Fail, Fine Gael and Labour stabilised their positions and made small gains. The recently formed Social Democrats did quite well, and there was a real surge, on the back of the environmental movement, for the Greens. Sinn Fein, the leading left-of-centre party, did badly mainly because of a low turnout from the manual working class (their main base), and the far left, the Solidarity-PBP alliance, lost more than half their seats.<sup>10</sup> Within this, however, PBP was less hard hit than Solidarity and the SP. PBP retained seven council seats and

polled 22,000 votes, while Solidarity kept only four and polled 11,000. This was partly because the SP and the international organisation it was affiliated with were wracked with internal conflict, and partly because it reacted in more sectarian fashion to the need for political diversification after austerity.

This augured badly for the general election in February 2020, but that went poorly for both Fianna Fail and Fine Gael as a mood for change swept the country. Sinn Fein far exceeded even their own expectations, emerging as the largest single party, and PBP did quite well, retaining its three seats. Richard Boyd Barrett did extremely well in the televised national leaders debate, and again topped the first preferences in his constituency. Brid Smith, who had squeaked home after days of recounts in 2016, came in easily in second place to Sinn Fein in Dublin South Central. A feature of the election, and an expression of the mood for change, was the large number of voters in working-class areas who voted first for Sinn Fein but gave their second preference to PBP. This was a result that showed a real shift leftwards, and it had the effect of forcing the two rival capitalist parties, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, into coalition with each other for the first time, leaving Sinn Fein poised as the main opposition.<sup>11</sup>

The onset of Covid just after the election has had, for nearly two years, a major dampening effect on protests and grassroots mobilisation,<sup>12</sup> punctuated only by brief explosions over Black Lives Matter and Palestine. Nevertheless, PBP seems to have been able to continue gaining ground, with a substantial increase in membership (mostly through online recruitment) making it by far the largest force to the left of Sinn Fein in Irish politics. Clearly one factor in this has been the strong performance of our elected representatives both in parliament and on the national air waves. Another important development was the accession to PBP of the Dublin South West TD Paul Murphy and his organisation RISE. Paul Murphy had been for many years a leading member of the SP, including serving both as an MEP and a TD. In late

2019, he and his supporters left the SP on the basis of rejecting their sectarianism and formed RISE. After substantial negotiations, RISE joined PBP in early 2020, bringing PBP's tally of TDs to four. This further strengthened PBP's dominant position on the far left.

The unpopularity of the government and decline of Fine Gael has been accompanied by a sustained rise of Sinn Fein, which currently stands eleven points ahead in the opinion polls (with 33 per cent as compared to FG with 22 per cent and FF with 18 per cent.) This raises the possibility (probability, even) of a Sinn Fein-led government after the next election, and poses directly the question of how the far left should respond to this. It is clear that this would be a major development which will be fiercely resisted by the Irish political establishment and much of the Irish ruling class. Ireland has never had even the semblance of a left government, and there is no doubt that a Sinn Fein-led government would be seen in this way, particularly by the working class, who would be hopeful of real change regardless of the opinions of socialists.

One option for PBP would be to rush or manoeuvre to join this government lured by the prospect of office and achieving "real change." This would be a disaster as PBP would be trapped, as the Greens are currently, in running capitalism in a pro-capitalist government, and PBP would utterly discredit itself with its own supporters. A second option would be simply to stand on the sidelines saying that Sinn Fein are inevitably going to sell out and we want no part of it. The problem with this position is that PBP would marginalise itself in a situation of intense political debate and cut itself off from the aspirations of a large segment of the working class. It would also let the leadership of Sinn Fein off the hook regarding going into coalition with Fianna Fail, Labour or the Social Democrats. They would simply say, "PBP made it clear they were not interested."

PBP has rejected both these responses. Instead it is stating clearly that it is campaigning for a left

government and will certainly use its votes in the Dail in favour of Mary Lou McDonald as taoiseach. But PBP wants to see a genuine left government that actually takes on capitalism and will only consider joining the government (that is, taking ministerial posts) if its core demands are met. The exact nature of the demands will have to be determined according to the circumstances prevailing at the time, but they would need to be both radical and popular, making sense to a lot of working-class people. They would include such things as: a) taxing the rich and the corporations to fund public services; b) tackling the housing crisis with a major programme of building public housing on public land, combined with banning vulture funds and introducing rent controls; c) establishing a proper National Health Service that is free at the point of delivery and taking private hospitals into public ownership along with free public education for all; d) standing up for workers with a minimum wage of €15 an hour and repeal of anti-union laws; e) ending Direct Provision and combating racism; f) taking serious measures to tackle climate change and beginning a rapid and just transition from fossil fuels; g) a complete separation of church and state and full support for women's rights; h) defending Irish neutrality by not signing up to EU militarisation and ending the use of Shannon by the US military.<sup>13</sup>

This approach, which would require popularising these demands in advance of and during the election campaign, would be aimed at positioning PBP clearly to the left of Sinn Fein while also appealing to Sinn Fein voters and members.

## **The Northern dimension**

People Before Profit is an all-Ireland party organised and with elected representatives on both sides of the border. In the North it currently has one MLA in Stormont and five councillors (three in Belfast and two in Derry). It is strongly opposed to partition and calls for the holding of a border poll in which it would vote yes to Irish unity. Its overall aim is that of James Connolly: a united socialist Ireland.

The reason for dealing with the development of PBP in the North separately is that the very fact of partition leads to different political dynamics in the North. The three key elements of difference are 1) its being a separate jurisdiction, under British rule, with a different government in office in Westminster; 2) its being a sectarian state with a divided population and above all a divided working class; 3) its being governed, throughout the period of PBP's existence, by a power-sharing executive with Sinn Fein in partnership with the DUP, as opposed to the situation in the South where Sinn Fein has always been in opposition and only recently emerged as a leading contender for office. If the second element is a major disadvantage and obstacle from the standpoint of socialist politics, the third element constitutes a certain opportunity for the left, similar to the opportunity created by Labour's coalition with Fine Gael in the South.

But opportunities have to be seized, and so often that doesn't happen. The fact that PBP's development in the North has paralleled, and at certain points run ahead of, its development in the South is both a justified source of pride for PBP nationally and a tribute to the political astuteness of its members in the North.

Key to this was PBP's strong position on the national question. After the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process it was possible, just about, to engage in left politics in the South while more or less ignoring the national question or least not taking a clear stand on it. This was never an option in the six counties. PBP's position, worked out over many years but particularly concretised in, and formally adopted over, the last decade, combined three central elements: a) total opposition to participation as having produced "a carnival of reaction" North and South, and support for a border poll; b) implacable opposition to sectarianism and a refusal to write off the Protestant working class; c) a strong conviction that the best road to a united Ireland lay through fighting for working-class interests and socialism against both reactionary states. Indeed,

conditions in the North, where PBP was attempting to build under the constant pressure of being in Sinn Fein's heartland, put a particular premium on having clear, worked-out socialist politics across the board.

As in the South, the rise in PBP's fortunes in the North is most easily charted in terms of election results. PBP's first electoral outing came in 2007 when a very young Seán Mitchell stood in assembly elections in West Belfast, polling 774 votes (2 per cent). As Mitchell himself observed, "A result that, though far from earth shattering, nevertheless did signal a break from the usual one or two hundred votes that the Left had until then become accustomed to."<sup>14</sup> This was followed by Gerry Carroll polling 1661 votes (4.8 per cent) in the assembly elections in 2011, and in a further advance, 1751 (7.6 per cent) in a Westminster by-election later that year.<sup>15</sup> The first breakthrough came in 2014 when Carroll was elected to the City Council for Black Mountain in West Belfast; when asked, as is customary in the communal politics of the North, whether he was going to sit on the unionist or nationalist side of the chamber, Collins replied, "I'm not a unionist or a nationalist. I am a socialist!" In 2015, in the Westminster general election, Carroll came second to SF with 19.2 per cent, and then in what was something of an electoral earthquake, he topped the poll in the 2016 Belfast West assembly election with 8299 (22.9 per cent), ahead of five SF candidates and the SDLP and DUP. The next assembly election was only one year later and was characterised by fierce sectarianism, plus SF got their vote management together and ran one less candidate, but Carroll still elected with 4,903 first preference votes (12.2 per cent), rising to second place after transfers. Moreover, in the 2019 Westminster general election he came second to SF—in a first-past-the-post system—with 6144 (16 per cent).

PBP's success with Gerry Carroll was complemented at council level with Matt Collins, who replaced Carroll as councillor in Black Mountain, retaining the seat in 2019 with a poll-topping 2,268 (16.14 per cent), and the election of Mick Collins in Collin ward



and Fiona Ferguson in Old Park. <sup>16</sup> Meanwhile in the six counties' second city, Derry, veteran socialist Eamonn McCann also won a seat in the assembly for Foyle in 2016 with 4176 votes (10.5 per cent).<sup>17</sup> He lost the seat in 2017 due to boundary changes, but bounced back in 2019, along with Shaun Harkin, to give PBP two seats on Derry City and Strabane District Council. <sup>18</sup> And it is worth noting that PBP had two near misses in neighbouring wards.

But, as in the South, it cannot be stressed too strongly that this electoral success was not the product of "electoralism" but rather the culmination of tireless campaigning on the ground. Whether it is on workers' picket lines, in campaigns against toxic waste or destructive mining, fighting cuts to community services, standing up for students, combating racism and the far right, supporting and organising Black Lives Matter demos, defending abortion rights and opposing misogyny and denouncing DUP homophobia and transphobia, PBP members in Belfast, Derry and elsewhere in the North are relentless activists.

The parallel rise of PBP North and South has also made it possible to pose the struggle for Irish reunification in a new way, not simply in terms of incorporating the North into the twenty-six counties as they currently stand, nor primarily as the fulfilment of an old republican principle, but as an opportunity for a new beginning for the country as a whole that will, in very concrete terms such as an all-Ireland National Health Service, be of real benefit to working-class people. Also, it is clear that there now exists, in both jurisdictions, a substantial body of opinion, particularly among the young, who are opposed to reactionary church domination North and South, in favour of women's rights and LGBT rights North and South, against racism North and South, pro-Palestine North and South and for defence of the environment North and South, and that such people can be mobilised in cross-border campaigns and solidarity in the here and now, so as to help prepare the way for victory in a border poll.<sup>19</sup>

## What is PBP?

What, then, is the current nature of People Before Profit as a political organisation? Let us start with some things it is not.

It is not a united front. Perhaps it had some characteristics of a united front when it was first formed, but it certainly isn't one now. A united front is an agreement between two or more different organisations and forces (parties, unions, campaigns, etc) to form a common front on a particular issue or cluster of issues such as combating fascism, fighting racism, defending workers jobs, defeating water charges, etc. PBP is clearly a political party that not only consistently contests elections but also has a comprehensive programme of policies.

Is it then a reformist party? Certainly it does not resemble the Labour Party (Irish or British) or other traditional social democratic parties. Nor is it the same, in programme or practice, as a left reformist party such as Syriza, Podemos or Die Linke. It is, as we have seen, thoroughly anti-capitalist, opposed to coalition with bourgeois parties and only prepared to enter a government which is actually prepared to take on the system. It is significantly different from left reformist formations in terms of its emphasis on people power and struggle from below in campaigns and its rank and file orientation in the trade unions. Its policy on international issues is also radically different from that of reformist and left reformist parties, being thoroughly anti-imperialist (not only in relation to Britain and Ireland), internationalist, pro-refugee and anti-racist. Above all, the leadership of PBP is in the hands of avowed revolutionaries of long standing—comprehensively in their hands. Every member of its democratically elected steering committee is an avowed revolutionary socialist. And politically the party stands on the ground of a serious Marxist analysis of Irish society—its history, economics and politics—embodied in numerous books and articles by its leading writers. <sup>20</sup>

Is it then a fully fledged revolutionary party? No, not yet. And I do not mean that just in terms of numbers or implantation in the working class. It also not the case that it is programmatically committed to smashing the capitalist state or to revolution by means of working-class insurrection and workers councils. You do not have to be a revolutionary (still less a Marxist) to join PBP, and obviously many PBP members are not anything of the kind. This is particularly true of its passive members who have joined online but do not regularly take part in meetings. The culture/atmosphere of its meetings, however, is clearly socialist and influenced by Marxism and revolutionary ideas.

A good term to describe this contradictory and moving reality is to say that PBP is a “transitional organisation,” that is, its aim was and is to be a kind of transition belt between the working class and the party. This is how PBP was characterised by Marxists working within it, especially Kieran Allen (now PBP national secretary), as it developed in the period following the economic crash. The argument was that the working class was radicalising but that workers who were moving from conservative or mainstream politics (e.g., Fianna Fail or Labour voters) or who were “non-political” would be unlikely to move directly to revolutionary socialism, and that it was therefore necessary to create a political space to accommodate their radical and often militant but not yet fully socialist consciousness. At the same time it was essential that this formation had at its core a revolutionary spine. Without that spine it would either be co-opted by the system or simply dissipate. Such was People Before Profit in its earlier days.

It was founded as an anti-neoliberal party that sought to bring community groups together with the radical left to oppose privatisation, austerity and poor public services. It was called an alliance, and the first tension within it was whether it was mainly a coalition of community activists or was it moving to be “political.” Initially, PBP took no stance on abortion, the border or the nature of the state. And SWP members who were

playing leading roles operated under a self-denying ordinance whereby they restricted themselves to a left reformist discourse when speaking for PBP.

But what was striking was that over time this changed. No organised reformist pole developed in PBP. No formal decision was taken, no actual resolution was passed, but the discourse of PBP and its spokespersons became more and more and more overtly socialist, and its stances on issues of the day such as climate change, Black Lives Matter, Palestine, US imperialism and the killing of George Nkencho became more and more drawn from a revolutionary perspective. At the recent PBP AGM there were a number of vigorous debates, but they all took place with a revolutionary left framework. Hence, PBP at present is not only a transitional organisation but a transitional organisation led by revolutionaries. This may not be a characterisation that fits neatly into familiar categories, but it is nonetheless an accurate description.

## **What can PBP become?**

Describing PBP as transitional between the reformist aspirations of workers and the revolutionary party poses also the question of transition in a temporal sense. What might it be transitional to?

The future of PBP is not determined. It will depend on external factors, the crisis of the system and the development of the class and political struggle in the world and specifically in Ireland, as well as on what PBP itself does. Let us consider a couple of possible scenarios.

First, it is possible that Sinn Fein could find itself in government in the South, trapped in running a capitalist system in serious crisis and thus unable to deliver the change it has promised, or worse, actually launching full-scale attacks on working-class living standards.<sup>21</sup> In that case, it would also be possible that there would be some sort of left reformist breakaway from Sinn Fein. If that were to occur, it would be vital to engage with such left-moving workers, and that

might involve some new form of “transitional” organisation.

Another possible scenario is an upsurge in working-class militancy, generated, say, by inflation, and a further radicalisation of sections of the working class, an extension and deepening of what occurred during the water charges period. This might bring in a new influx of members to PBP as well as galvanising layers of its existing, more passive membership. Such a development could see PBP relaunched, as it were, with an explicitly revolutionary perspective *and* increased roots in the working class.

Other unforeseen scenarios, including, of course, serious setbacks,<sup>22</sup> might be possible. But PBP members and, within PBP, the SWN are not and must not be simply passive observers. We must remain alert and ready to respond to a variety of developments and prepare for these by drawing an ever wider layer of our members into activity and educating them in socialist and revolutionary ideas so as to be able to rise to the challenges ahead.<sup>23</sup> One such challenge is to strengthen our implementation in workplaces and unions, which are where workers have the most power to hit the bosses’ profits and paralyse their operations. Another is to forge a party that is neither a monolithic sect (in which everyone has to agree the line of every issue past and present) nor a pluralist amalgam of different factions and tendencies unable to take decisive action, but one which responds to real shifts and debates in the working class. If PBP were to achieve this it would still not be the finished article, but it would have taken a very important step forward in the direction of building the kind of organisation, flexible but principled, needed to spearhead the overthrow of capitalism.

One final question remains to be posed: To what extent might the experience of People Before Profit be of relevance internationally? Clearly it would be foolish to treat it as a model that could be mechanically copied in different countries with different conditions. One of the strengths of PBP is

that it was a response, I think a creative response, to specific Irish circumstances. Nevertheless, there are features of the experience that could be of wider use. First, much of the revolutionary left internationally is caught between stagnant small-group marginalisation on the one hand and the mire of reformism on the other as represented by Syriza and Podemos, and the example of PBP shows that real, more fruitful alternatives are possible. Second, it suggests that the key to breaking out of the sectarian ghetto is finding ways to relate to and articulate the actually existing concerns and aspirations of working-class people in their communities and workplaces. To repeat, this is not an argument for economism, still less for making concessions to racism, sexism, nationalism and the like. On the contrary, many of the actually existing concerns of today’s working class may precisely be about such issues as racism and gender-based violence. But it does mean engaging in actual grassroots campaigning alongside people whose political consciousness is still far from fully formed.

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<sup>1</sup> Member of the Legislative Assembly in the Stormont.

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, this was also true of the Bolsheviks. The notion that the Bolshevik Party was constructed “as a party of a new type” according to a plan laid out by Lenin in *What Is to Be Done?* is a product of ignorance of the actual history or deliberate distortion of it by Stalinism.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Boyd Barrett and Hugh Lewis in Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown and Brid Smith and Joan Collins in Dublin South Central.

<sup>4</sup> It was established too late to be registered as a party and appear on ballot papers, but it did feature on election leaflets.

<sup>5</sup> For a fuller account see Kieran Allen, “Whatever happened to the ULA?” *Irish Marxist Review*, issue 6, available online from: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/allen-k/2013/06/ula.htm>

<sup>6</sup> The Anti-Austerity Alliance and PBP formed an alliance in October 2015, strictly for electoral purposes, on the ground that the organisations remained distinct.

<sup>7</sup> Fine Gael no longer had an overall majority and were only able to form a government through what was known as a confidence-and-supply agreement with Fianna Fail under which FF ensured FG remained in office.

<sup>8</sup> Opposing Trump caused a certain blowback from some in what could be described as the water charges milieu. The arguments ranged from “This is none of our business” to a certain sympathy for Trump as a “rebel” and “man of the people.” While there was some of this sentiment on the periphery of PBP, it had much greater effect in the Anti-Austerity Alliance because of its more economic practice, and resulted in the dissolution of the AAA by the SP and its replacement by Solidarity (which, however, never gained the same level of support).

<sup>9</sup> Unlike the SP which formed its own explicitly socialist campaign called ROSA.

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of this election see John Molyneux, “Editorial: a tale of two elections”, *Irish Marxist Review*, issue 24, available online from: <file:///C:/Users/oem/Pictures/355-1403-1-PB.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> For a fuller account of this election see John Molyneux, “The General Election and After,” *Irish Marxist Review*, issue 26, available online from: <file:///C:/Users/oem/Pictures/355-1403-1-PB.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> For reasons that are not clear, at least to me, this seems to have been more the case in Ireland than in many other countries.

<sup>13</sup> To repeat, this is not at all a complete or definitive list of the core demands PBP would actually advance in such a situation but is simply intended to give a concrete idea of what this approach would involve.

<sup>14</sup> Seán Mitchell, “Rediscovering the road less travelled”, *Irish Marxist Review*, issue 10, available online from: <http://www.irishmarxistreview.net/index.php/imr/article/view/126/128#>

<sup>15</sup> Occasioned by the resignation of Gerry Adams in order to stand for the Dail in Louth across the border.

<sup>16</sup> Which prompted one journalist to quip, “I never thought I would live to see the day when there were more Trots on Belfast City Council than Official Unionists!”

<sup>17</sup> As a point of reference, it is worth noting that Martin McGuinness polled 5,037 (12.69 per cent) in the same election.

<sup>18</sup> In 2021, Eamonn was forced to retire on health grounds and was replaced by councillor Maeve O’Neill.

<sup>19</sup> For elaboration of this point see John Molyneux, “Towards the end of partition,” *Irish Marxist Review*, issue 29, available online from: <http://www.irishmarxistreview.net/index.php/imr/article/view/395/387>

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<sup>20</sup> Examples include:

Kieran Allen, *The politics of James Connolly*, Pluto Press, 2016;

Kieran Allen, *The Corporate Takeover of Ireland*, Irish Academic Press, 2007;

Kieran Allen, *Ireland's Economic Crash: A Radical Agenda for Change*, The Liffey Press, 2011;

Brian O'Boyle and Kieran Allen, *Austerity Ireland: The Failure of Irish Capitalism*, Pluto Press, 2013;

Brian O'Boyle and Kieran Allen, *Tax Haven Ireland*, Pluto Press, 2021;

Kieran Allen, *1916: Ireland's Revolutionary Tradition*, Pluto Press, 2016;

Kieran Allen, *32 Counties: The Failure of Partition and the Case for a United Ireland*, Pluto Press, 2021;

Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town*, Pluto Press, 1974;

Seán Mitchell, "The Permanent Crisis of 21st Century Ulster Unionism," *Irish Marxist Review*, issue 9, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> As we have seen, this is what happened in the North, especially in the post-2008 austerity period, but with the alibi that the cuts were coming from Westminster and that the government had no choice but to implement them on the pain of wrecking powersharing and the peace process. They would not have this excuse in the South.

<sup>22</sup> As we know, the history of the socialist movement is littered with promising beginnings that came to nothing or were diverted into dead ends.

<sup>23</sup> This can be described in Gramscian terms as the creation of a layer of "organic intellectuals" of the working class, which he said would serve as "the whalebone in the corset" of the movement and "really transform the ideological panorama of the age."