



Editorial

The Rise of Sinn Féin

The rise of Sinn Féin (SF) is the most important contemporary phenomenon in Irish politics. From a low of just 9% in southern elections in 2019, SF has risen to become the most popular party on both sides of the border – a position recently reinforced by their victory in the north on 18 May. Sinn Féin currently wins support through two key promises. First, they promise genuine change, presenting themselves as the only party capable of throwing out the establishment. Second, they promise genuine progress, positioning themselves within the broad left on social rights, and public spending.

In the south, this has worked remarkably well in the context of mass movements around marriage equality, water rights and Repeal of the 8th; but also, in the context of a Labour Party that destroyed its credibility

by governing through austerity. It is important to stress that SF never led any of these progressive movements, but as the biggest organisation in all of them, it benefited disproportionately from their success.

In the north, they have been helped by the reactionary politics of the DUP, but also by a deeper crisis of political unionism that has allowed SF to present itself as the primary bearer of a progressive future – the very antitheses of old conservatives, who want to divide the north and hold it back. With unionism split between those who look backwards to a ‘sectarian past’ and those who look forwards to a ‘neoliberal future’, SF have been able to enthuse a layer of voters with two major promises. One is to oust the DUP from their primary position within the Assembly, the second is to create a more inclusive Ireland for a better future. The net result is that SF have become synonymous with ending the grip of conservatism across the island, even as they themselves have begun to move towards the centre.

When Pascal Donoghoe accepted an OECD recommendation to increase Irish corporation taxes, SF criticised him for giving up Ireland’s competitive advantage. The party currently wants to lower taxes for smaller firms on both sides of the

border and they have softened their rhetoric around taxing the rich.¹ SF has also moved to reassure the southern elite that they can be trusted by dropping opposition to the Special Criminal Court and by weakening their position on Irish neutrality.² On important social issues SF can also be suspect. They followed their participation in Together4Yes in the south for example, by abstaining on a crucial vote to extend abortion services in the north.³

The rise of SF is therefore a contradictory phenomenon. On the positive side, their growth reflects the aspirations of wide layers of working people who want progressive change on both sides of the border; their messaging is also generally left wing, and they play an important role in insulating Irish society from the rise of the far right. On the negative side, their growth reflects a certain passivity among working people who see change coming from politicians that will 'deliver it for them'. This passivity not only makes revolutionary politics seem less attractive; it also clears the way for conservative moves towards the centre, as the prospect of government becomes more likely. One danger in this context, is that SF will play down the importance of anti-racist work to allow them to govern in a deeply racist state.

Although their spokespeople have come out strongly against racism in their official pronouncements, in most areas they have not led the way in facing down fascists on the streets, nor have they made the running in local 'For All' groups designed to create wider anti-fascist united fronts. Their role in Le Cheile (Together) has also been relatively marginal and there is a danger that they will act strategically with a view to upcoming elections, knowing that some of their supporters – at least according to some recent polls - are uneasy with current levels of immigration.⁴

A second danger is that SF will trade their progressive rhetoric for conservative policies once they are safely in government in a major tax haven. Mary Lou McDonald recently went on a charm offensive in the board rooms of the multinationals and if their record in the Northern Assembly is anything to go by, SF will accommodate themselves to the structures of Irish capitalism and then seek to accommodate the rest of us to their strategic accommodation.⁵ A third danger – particularly in this context – is that SF will not pursue a radical transformation of the island, instead opting for the line of least resistance when it comes to the question of partition. All of this means that socialists must continue to relate to the progressive sentiment that is lifting SF, at the same

time as building revolutionary politics on the ground and continuing to place demands on the SF leadership not to sell out. Nationalist parties can often speak left and fight for basic reforms but as long as they seek to govern through the system, they will frustrate all moves towards workers control and genuine human liberation.

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One way to understand the nature of the current SF project is to ground it historically. In a wide ranging interview to mark the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, Eamonn McCann sat down with Seán Mitchell to discuss the history of the Troubles for the IMR. Three points are particularly noteworthy from their analysis. The first is the centrality of working class struggle as a catalyst for change. The Troubles might have developed into an armed conflict, but they began as a mass civil rights movement to end discrimination – met with the brutality of the state. The second point is that the rise of the Provisional IRA was never pre-determined. Instead, they emerged as the most coherent force in a period when state repression demanded a response, and the different forces of the left were unable to provide it. The third point is that their move to the political centre was pre-determined by a nationalist strategy that was always likely to move from a military

campaign into bourgeois constitutionality. McCann explains all of this admirably, bringing it up to date in the current impasse at Stormont.

The rise of the right

The most worrying phenomenon in recent Irish politics has been the rise of the right. After decades on the margins, the far right has recently begun to make progress here with a series of demonstrations against housing refugees. The far right is a growing cancer everywhere and while we have to face this cancer head on – we must also recognise it as a symptom of a deeper set of crises associated with capitalism itself. Since the turn of the 21st century, ordinary people have had to face the fallout from the Great Recession, a decade of austerity, the consequences of a global pandemic and an engineered cost of living crisis, as firms seek to bolster their profits.

They have also endured a major housing crisis alongside the hollowing out of their public services, and the ongoing spectre of climate change. Capitalist relations are increasingly creating chaos, misery, and alienation, but they are also reinforcing various forms of social division. By scapegoating minorities, asylum seekers and refugees far right activists are feeding into the misery caused by the wider system

and reinforcing a false solidarity between workers and their bosses. Xenophobic nationalism is a core feature of modern capitalism everywhere, as Alex Day and Clara McCormack explain in their detailed assessment of the Irish far right. Their essay outlines the hotchpotch of nativism, authoritarianism, ethnopluralism and familialism that constitutes the core of far right ideology – justifying attacks on minorities and glorifying a return to some mythical ‘Irish purity’. Day and McCormack also make important suggestions for taking them on, including working to transform common sense into good sense through participation in the struggles of ordinary people.

In her assessment of the role of women in far right ideology, Marnie Holborow builds on some of these same ideas, explaining how the right casts women as dutiful wives and mothers in their wider project to revive the ‘purity’ and ‘sustainability’ of the nation. Familialism is central to far right ideology, as the nuclear family – built on conservative gender roles – becomes identified with the appropriate role for women in the reproduction of the nation, and in the deferential role they are expected to play in society. Holborow unpacks these ideas expertly, arguing that the only road to genuine liberation is

through the struggle for international socialism.

My own contribution roots the rise of fascism in the imperialist conflicts that culminated in the First World War, but also in the rapid industrialisation that created a modern proletariat. Worker’s struggle in the period up to the First World War was overwhelmingly progressive. It brought the masses into politics for the first time and forced the conservative elites to look for ways to counter them. Fascism emerged as mass politics on the right in an era of imperialist struggles and mass destruction. It emerged autonomously from the traditional ruling classes but its role historically, has been to divide the working class against itself and to allow the system to recover from crises.

Darryl Horan begins his analysis in the same era, focusing on the united front as a central tactic for revolutionaries isolated from the mass of workers by the twin forces of social democracy and Stalinism. His analysis insists that the core of the united front is working with forces beyond the revolutionary left, whilst avoiding two sets of attendant dangers – one is to assimilate into more conservative forces; the second is to detach your project from the mass of the working class in struggle. Horan then brings these ideas up to date,

arguing that united fronts against the modern far right need three complementary components (1) a core group of activists who will confront them on the streets (2) a broader group of anti-racists who will build wider support and (3) an orientation to the key struggles of working people.

08 Kieran Allen's piece looks at the toxic relationship between oil and capitalism. It explains the centrality of oil for working class exploitation and situates some of the most important imperialist conflicts over the last hundred years around the need to control fossil fuels. Allen also gives a sobering analysis of the links between fossil-fuelled capitalism and climate chaos, arguing that on the basis of the trillions in stranded assets that would be necessitated by ending our reliance on fossil fuels alone, capitalism is not compatible with sustainability nor with climate justice.

A tribute to John Molyneux

Mary Smith rounds out this edition with a deeply moving tribute to her partner John Molyneux. As most readers of the IMR will know, John was both the founder and editor of this journal, from its inception in 2012 until his death in December 2022. John's energy and commitment to revolutionary activity were central to

everything good about the IMR. He was involved at every level from helping new writers to find their voice to breaking new ground on important topics such as art and religion, eco-socialism, Marxist philosophy, and the importance of revolutionary organisation.

The guiding strand through all of this effort was John's insistence that a better world was not only possible but that it was possible because it could come about through the self-emancipation of the working class; through the conscious activity of millions of people realising their interests and fighting alongside each other to secure them. His contribution to the working-class movement was immense and his pioneering work on Marxist theory will live on in the struggle. This journal owes John Molyneux a debt which simply can't be repaid. Our small contribution is to celebrate his life and work by rerunning one of his seminal articles on eco-socialism, alongside Mary's wonderful tribute.

Rest in Power John.

Brian O'Boyle - Editor

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- ² Freya Mc Clements. 2012. Sinn Fein drops opposition to Special Criminal Court Irish Times @ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/sinn-fein-drops-opposition-to-special-criminal-court-1.4715275>; Pat Leahy. Sinn Fein Drops Pledge to withdraw from EU and NATO defence arrangements. Irish Times @ <https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2023/05/13/sinn-fein-drops-pledges-to-withdraw-from-eu-and-nato-defence-arrangements/>
- ³ Gerry Moriarty. 2021. Sinn Fein accused of speaking out of both sides of their mouth on abortion. Irish times @ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/sinn-fein-accused-of-speaking-out-of-both-sides-of-their-mouth-on-abortion>.
- ⁴ See for example, Damien Loscher. 2023. Farmers and Sinn Fein voters overrepresented among opponents to refugee obligations @ <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/social-affairs/2023/02/23/farmers-and-sinn-fein-voters-over-represented-among-opponents-to-refugee-obligations>.
- ⁵ Cliff Taylor. 2022. Can Mary Lou win over the Multinationals? Irish Times @ <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/2022/09/17/can-mary-lou-mcdonald-win-over-the-multinationals/>.