

Northern Ireland: The 'no change' elections

But record low turnout shows anger at main parties' cuts

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On 5 May elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly and local councils saw the further consolidation of the two largest parties, the loyalist Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the republican Sinn Féin. Their victory occurred despite the fact that these two parties, in coalition with the other three main parties, are implementing sharp public spending cuts.

Every election in Northern Ireland is dominated by a "sectarian headcount", as political parties which are based entirely in either Protestant or Catholic communities battle for supremacy. For the last 15 years there has also been a battle within each community as to which party will become pre-eminent. In each case the most strident representative of the 'interests' of 'their' community has won out.

The five main parties on the outgoing Northern Ireland Executive were and are united in implementing a programme of sharp cuts and attacks on working people. This was the cause of widespread anger and disillusionment but at this stage this did not result in damage to the electoral base of the Executive parties.

In part this is because the cuts have in the main yet to bite and there has not yet been a generalised anti-cuts movement, and because there is no credible mass alternative force at the ballot box.

It is also the case however that the 'national question' still dominates politics at every election in Northern Ireland. Notwithstanding this, on the doorsteps in this election, cuts, the economic situation and class issues tended to dominate.

Parties' iron grip

A consequence of widespread cynicism with all the parties was a sharp decline in the number of those who actually turned out to vote however (just over half the electorate voted).

The largest unionist party, the DUP, consolidated its lead over the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), gaining two Assembly seats to bring it to a total of 38. Its share of the vote at 30% was marginally down (by 0.1%). The UUP vote fell from 14.9% to 13.2% and it lost two seats.

Sinn Féin increased its share of the vote marginally (to 26.9% from 26.1%). It won one extra seat (it now holds 29) and significantly further eroded the base of the previously largest party in the Catholic community, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP).

The SDLP vote fell from 15.2% to



Public sector cuts will have a major impact in the coming months photo SP Northern Ireland

14.2%, it lost a key Assembly seat in Fermanagh South Tyrone and Sinn Féin came within 500 votes of the party in Derry, previously an historic base of the SDLP.

Between them the DUP and Sinn Féin won 56.9% of the vote. In the first elections post the ceasefires in 1996 the two parties won a total 34.3%. Whilst it is true that both parties have changed many of their positions and have entered into a coalition since then, it remains the case that they are seen as the most ardent defenders and promoters of the interests of 'their' community and their vote has grown on that basis.

Alongside the growth in the vote of the Sinn Féin and the DUP the recent period has seen the demise of several of the smaller parties which emerged in the early years of the peace process. Their development was important in that it appeared to at least open up the possibility of change.

Today the sense that change is possible has ebbed but the fact that hundreds of thousands have turned away in disgust from the established parties and no longer vote, is a clear indication that a political vacuum has opened up. The question is how and when a new mass party of the working class can fill this space.

There are a number of smaller parties with representation in the Assembly but they do not point the way forward in any way. The Alliance Party is a 'cross-community' party which seeks votes from both communities. It now has eight seats,

a gain of one, and saw its vote rise to 7.7% from 5.2%.

Alliance is largely a middle class party and has adopted increasingly right wing policies in recent years. It is in favour of the introduction of water charges, for example. Much of its vote has come straight from disillusioned UUP voters.

A warning for the future was the small but not insignificant vote of the extreme unionist party the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV). The TUV won one seat and 2.5% of the vote.

There was also a clear growth in the vote of 'left republican' groups. The Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP, linked to the paramilitary INLA) stood in five council seats and in Strabane narrowly missed out on a seat.

Éirígí, a relatively new left republican group, won approximately 10% of the vote in West Belfast. The votes for these groups represents a rejection of the status quo (and in working class areas Sinn Féin are now seen as part of the status quo by many) and reflects class anger at the fact that the peace process has not delivered.

There is also a sectarian edge to the vote however. Groups such as the IRSP and Éirígí are based entirely in the Catholic community and have no perspective whatsoever of building support among the Protestant working class. They increase sectarian tensions through many of their actions.

The negative side to this vote is well illustrated by the significant support in Derry gained by a candidate who is associated with the 32 County Sovereignty Committee and the Real IRA.

The vote for Eamonn McCann in Derry must be analysed in this light. He won 3,120 first preferences (8.3%) in Foyle for the People Before Profit Alliance (PBPA, a group established by the Socialist Workers Party). PBPA candidate Gerry Carroll received 1,661 votes (4.8%) in West Belfast.

There is no doubt that PBPA benefitted from the fact that left republican or other dissident republican candidates stood simultaneously but not in the same elections. For ex-

ample, PBPA stood in the Assembly election in West Belfast but not the local elections in the same area. The IRSP and Éirígí did the opposite.

Living standards

The new Assembly and Executive will take over from where the last left off. The Northern Ireland economy remains in recession. The private sector has now been shrinking for 41 months in a row. New car sales fell 19% year on year in April. The housing market remains in the doldrums - few houses are being sold and prices have fallen by 40% from their peak in 2007.

Public sector cuts will have a major impact in the coming months. The living standards of working class people are falling rapidly.

The exact measures that the Executive will now implement are uncertain and will depend to an extent on what ministries each party holds. Individual parties have stated their opposition to certain policies but all are of one voice when it comes to cuts in general.

The Socialist Party stood in three Assembly seats and four local council areas in our biggest ever electoral intervention. The party stood on a clear socialist programme and we undoubtedly raised our profile to new levels.

Three candidates in Belfast - Pat Lawlor, Tommy Black and Paddy Meehan - won 819 votes in the Assembly elections in total. In Enniskillen Donal O'Cofaigh received a very creditable 248 votes standing in Enniskillen for the local council. The party intends to build on these votes by putting down firm roots in the working class communities where we stood.

The Socialist Party has established the Stop the Cuts Campaign with others, and we believe that in the next period the campaign will be central to attempts to organise a fightback to the cuts agenda of the Executive. The experience of mass struggle will transform the situation, giving working people confidence in their strength as a united class, and bringing the issue of the need for a new mass party of the working class to the fore.

The Committee for a Workers' International

The Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) is the socialist international organisation to which the Socialist Party is affiliated.

The CWI is organised in 45 countries and works to unite the working class and oppressed peoples against global capitalism and to fight for a socialist world.

For more details including CWI publications write to: CWI, PO Box 3688, London E11 1YE. email cwi@worldsoc.co.uk

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Vincent Kolo, [Chinaworker.info](http://chinaworker.info)



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Gauche Revolutionnaire (CWI, France)



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Socialist Alternative reporter, British Columbia, Canada

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