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Irish government collapses

United Left Alliance offers real alternative

AFTER THE economic collapse of the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' economy, Ireland is spiralling into social and political disintegration. The coalition government of Fianna Fáil and the Greens imploded and the Greens left the coalition on 23 January. Prime minister Brian Cowen had to resign as chair of Fianna Fáil (the main pro-capitalist party), which was in government for 20 of the last 23 years.

Fianna Fáil won 41% of the national vote at the 2007 general election, but has fallen to 8% in the latest opinion polls. It is an open question as to whether the Greens will be able to return to the parliament.

Negotiations with the so-called opposition parties have resulted in an acceptance by Fine Gael and Labour to implement a crucial finance bill implementing the savage austerity measures announced by the government in its budget last December.

Election

THE BILL is expected to be passed by parliament on 29 January and gives legal effect to the reductions in Ireland's minimum wage, tax rises and public spending cuts. In return, the government promised to bring forward general elections, initially called for 11 March. They are now expected to be held on 25 February.

The Socialist Party (CWI Ireland) will stand candidates in the coming elections as a key part of the United Left Alliance (ULA). The ULA may stand in up to half of the 43 Irish

constituencies with the potential to get up to nine elected. As Joe Higgins said, the ULA is: "offering an entirely different alternative to the other political parties who are imprisoned within the financial markets system."

Opening a press conference on Monday 24 January, Socialist Party Councillor Clare Daly, a ULA candidate for Dublin North, said:

"Fine Gael and the Labour Party correctly say that the Fianna Fáil minority government: a) doesn't have the confidence of the Dáil [national parliament]; b) has a Taoiseach [prime minister] who doesn't have the confidence of his own party; c) is so utterly discredited that the general election must be brought forward.

"It is therefore a massive contradiction that they are falling over themselves to help a discredited, disintegrating government with no mandate or moral authority to pass a finance bill that savages the living standards and public services of working people and the unemployed so that European speculators and financial institutions recover the billions they disastrously gambled in the Irish property market.

"What Labour and Fine Gael are at, is to ensure that the infamous and unjust IMF/EU programme is passed by Fianna Fáil so that they can pretend to avoid direct responsibility for its passage but then claim that they have no option but to implement it."

Joe Higgins, Socialist Party MEP and ULA candidate in Dublin West



Socialist Party MEP Joe Higgins (right) addresses an anti-cuts protest in Dublin.

comments: "This must be a low point in cynicism in Irish politics which has seen many lows. We have here the ethics of corner boys pushing one of their number to mug vulnerable passers-by while the rest skulk nearby ready to pick the victims' pockets.

"The finance bill enshrines the most far-reaching attack ever on the livelihoods and living standards of ordinary people to satisfy the profit lust of the financial markets. It is a grotesque betrayal for the Labour Party in particular to cooperate in

any way in its passage.

"Clearly the general election should be called immediately with the provisions of the Finance Bill and economic policy generally as the centre of debate. In this way every party will be called on to justify why working people in this state should be enslaved to the financial markets or to repudiate such a policy."

Councillor Gino Kenny, People Before Profit ULA candidate for Dublin Mid West said: "The farce in Dáil Éireann must end and a general election must be called today. We

are staunchly opposed to the current budget and by extension to the finance bill. Fianna Fáil must call an immediate general election and allow the people to have their say.

"The reality for hundreds of thousands of Irish workers and their families is that their living standards are collapsing and their children are faced with no choice but to emigrate. For those who are unemployed there is little or no prospect of finding work and the little protection offered by social welfare is under concerted attack"

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Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) conference 'We need hundreds of challenges to job-cutting, services-axing councillors'

THE TRADE Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) conference on 22 January was attended by 150 people and aimed to, according to chair Dave Nellist, "lay the basis for hundreds of challenges in the council elections this year".

Bob Severn

Dave, a Coventry Socialist Party councillor and former MP, spoke of the need to increase the profile of the TUSC election challenge, including by promoting the campaign at the TUC national anti-cuts demonstration on 26 March.

The first speaker, Independent Socialist Preston councillor and Socialist Workers Party member Michael Lavalette, said that Preston city council and Lancashire county council cuts add up to £180 million, with attacks on children's services and pensioner services affecting the most vulnerable.

Michael exposed the hypocrisy of five Preston Labour councillors, who voted against cuts at an anti-cuts campaign meeting, but then voted for those cuts in the council chamber.

However, Michael thought that it could be difficult to build a left-of-Labour challenge. This was, he said, due to an increase in Labour support as shown by the estimated 60,000 people who have joined Labour since the 2010 elections and the increase in the Labour vote at the recent Oldham and

Saddleworth by-election.

The next speaker, TUSC steering committee and Socialist Party member Clive Heemsker, said that a quarter of the Con-Dems' cuts were to local authority administered services so it was important to have election candidates rooted in the anti-cuts movement.

TUSC must show that councillors do have a choice, that they should set 'needs' budgets and demand the extra money needed from central government. In 1984, by following this strategy, the Militant-led Liverpool Labour Party council won £60 million from Thatcher's Tory government that was stronger than the current Con-Dem coalition.

Clive pointed out that the 47 Liverpool Labour councillors were not surcharged for setting a deficit budget, but for not setting a rate 'on time'. Now, the law has changed so councillors can only be surcharged for using the council budgets for personal gain.

In answering Michael's concerns, Clive gave the example of the support for Labour during the anti-poll tax struggle, which initially increased. However, Labour only saw a 2% rise in its vote in the May 1990 council elections as Labour local authorities were administering the Conservative's poll tax.

The third speaker was RMT transport union national executive member Owen Herbert, who reminded us how Tony Blair had promised that New Labour would re-

nationalise the rail companies before being elected in 1997, but then continued privatisation when in government. Having privately owned rail operators, which put profits before safety, helped to increase fatal rail accidents such as the Ladbroke Grove rail crash.

Owen pointed out how Labour has said that, if it was in government, it would not stop cuts but instead carry them out at a slower rate.

Contributions from the audience included experiences from the 2010 election campaigns, discussion over how many seats TUSC should stand in this year, and ways of promoting TUSC's profile.

There was discussion over an amendment to the TUSC policy platform for allowing above inflation council tax increases if agreed by the electorate. In some areas, such as Darlington, councils have kept council tax low to help win elections, resulting in greater cuts to services. However, after discussion, this amendment was withdrawn.

Former 'Liverpool 47' councillor Tony Mulhearn pointed out that putting forward any above inflation council tax increases would take away from TUSC's argument that working class people should not have to pay for the Con-Dem's funding cuts.

The conference voted unanimously for the TUSC 2011 local election platform (see www.tusc.org.uk).