

# Socialist Strategy in Ireland

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The radical left has made significant advances in Ireland. People Before Profit has elected five public representatives to both the Stormont Assembly and the Dáil in Dublin. It has over 1,000 members organised in forty branches, many in provincial towns. Its activists have played a key role in many of the struggles that have broken out in recent years. These include the teachers strike, the Repeal the 8th campaign to remove Ireland's restriction on a woman's right to choose, the Right2Water Campaign and the protest movement against the 'cash for ash' scandal which has implicated the North's first Minister, Arlene Foster.

In the South, a close alliance has been forged with comrades from the Anti-Austerity Alliance. Together our joint parliamentary group in the Dáil, AAA-PBP, has stood out as a voice for workers in struggle.

It is interesting to observe the response of the 'extreme centre' of mainstream parties and their pet commentators in the media. They label us as 'the Trots' in an attempt to frame us as exotic creatures who do not belong to Irish political culture; but they also refer to the British Labour Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn as a 'Trot'. In fact, any union activist who really fights is called a 'Trot'. If you talk about socialism and show no willingness to compromise, you will certainly be called a 'Trot' at some stage. We do not go home at night and genuflect to a little statue of Leon Trotsky. The label is only a recognition that we have a hardened left in Ireland. We have probably the most hardened left in any parliament in Europe.

The representatives of the AAA-PBP are determined to take the wealth off the Irish capitalist class. There is a real unity between the two pillars of the alliance on this. We have different stances on partition and the status of the Northern state, but on the question of wealth we are agreed. We aim to treat the rich in the same way that they treat

social welfare recipients today. To get their benefits, claimants must fill out detailed official forms so that every aspect of their financial situation is subject to scrutiny. We want the Revenue Commissioners to treat the rich in the same way: to discover how they are making their wealth and to stop their tax dodging. We want to know, for example, how Ireland's leading billionaire, Denis O'Brien, can claim to be a 'tax exile' while he owns four houses in Dublin 4.

There were formations in the past which claimed to be genuinely left wing but they were often marginal. The one exception was the Workers' Party, which won seven seats in the Dáil in 1989. However, the AAA-PBP has none of the baggage of believing that Russia or North Korea were socialist homelands. This belief had led to a top down strategy whereby the Workers' Party engaged in the most devious of manoeuvres to seek electoral advance. By contrast, today's radical left puts 'people power' at the centre of its strategy and is committed to the overthrow of capitalism itself.

For most of my life when we talked about strategy, we talked about growing by a few score members in any one year. In other words, it was about simply building a revolutionary party. Now we can talk about strategy to have a real impact on political events. This means looking at where we are, what our methods are, and what are the realistic objectives we hope to achieve in the coming period.

Let's start with where we are. I want to make a case that this country is a weak link within a weakened capitalist system. Capitalism is a system of economic cannibalism. It goes into periodic crisis and those capitalists that survive gobble up the bankrupt ones. Every time you have a slump you expect it to start picking up again. This is because the system needs a crisis like a breath and slumps are its brutal mechanism for restoring economic health.

But, instead of overall progress, the current period of capitalism is one of continuing

stagnation within the core of the system. It is eight years since the crash of 2008, but European capitalism is growing at the rate of 1 percent or 1.5 percent a year. Healthy capitalism normally grows at a rate of 3% a year. Each month the ECB pumps €60 billion into the EU financial markets but the EU economy still stagnates. This is certainly the winter of capitalism. It is a system that is weakening and is going to produce greater geopolitical conflict.

The prediction, of Marxist economists such as Michael Roberts, that we will face another global crash is quite realistic. We do not know when. We are not crystal ball gazers. All we know is that the system faces major economic problems. Within that system, Ireland is a weak link and I want to outline why this is so because most Irish socialists have never thought about it like that. We have often thought that the revolution would happen in places like Nicaragua or France or somewhere exciting where lots of red flags were on display. But Ireland? ‘Nothing ever happens in Ireland!’ it was claimed. So let’s understand why this country is a weak link.

The current nature of Irish capitalism is to be a tax haven. We have more ‘tax planners’ per head of population than almost any country in the world. A tax planner is a person who will charge you up to €500 an hour to tell you how you can skip paying taxes. Let me give you two examples of how it operates. The biggest aircraft leasing industry in the world is in Ireland. Fourteen of the largest companies operate from here. Do you know why? They pay virtually no tax. They employ hardly any people. Yet they get away with a gigantic tax scam. If you have €1 million in spare cash and you go to Matheson-Ormsby-Prentice, the legal firm for the rich elites, and say, ‘Please, can I register for ‘qualifying assets’? they will ensure your cash will find its way to be registered as an asset that qualifies for little or no tax.

This is how they have been building Irish capitalism. And let’s be honest, they have been relatively successful in their own terms up until now. It is a beggar-thy-neighbour strategy as money moves from one country

to another. The Irish elite pretend to be good Europeans, but they tell the global corporations, ‘come to us, we will ensure you pay hardly any tax. If you are a finance company, we will even passport your services throughout the EU so you can get away with anything.’ So, there are three elements to it: bring in capital, especially American capital; offer the benefits of a tax haven; and provide access to the EU. It worked for a few decades, but there are big problems with this model now. Up until recently it was thought that the scale of tax evasion was small that no one paid it much attention. But after the Apple case they are visible. They will not be left alone by the EU elite.

Many other states are paying out huge subsidies to support capital. The EU’s contribution of €60 billion a month is just one example. The US runs a budget deficit of nearly \$600 billion. These states are starting to ask: where will the revenue eventually come from. Why, others are asking, should we let Dublin take revenue that should be going to Germany or France or the US. The departure of Britain from the EU – assuming it goes ahead – means that the Irish elite have lost their biggest ally in tax dodging. In other words, the Irish elite face problems in keeping their current model going.

There is something else. We live in a country that has been deeply affected by partition. As James Connolly predicted, partition ushered in a carnival of reaction whereby reactionary politicians who clothe themselves in green and orange flags dominate society. Think of the DUP in the North. These are dinosaurs who are against gay marriage and want ‘creationism’ taught in schools. They come to power by claiming to represent ‘their community against the other side.

In the South the elite pretend to be liberal cosmopolitans. If you have ever canvassed a big house in Dublin 4 you will find people who tell you, ‘Of course we should pay water charges – we are Europeans. How could you not pay water charges?’ This is the extent of their liberal cosmopolitanism. But behind the veneer lies the legacy of Catholic fundamentalism. Men still cannot go to Vincent’s hospital and get a vasc-

tomy. There is no free contraception. Young women pay around €300 to get a contraceptive bar implant in their arm. You have to queue up to get into many primary schools and 95% of these are still run by the Catholic Church. If you don't have a baptismal cert, you have to go to the back of the queue.

So on one hand we have this fake liberal cosmopolitanism, but on the other, when it comes to the crunch on abortion or a myriad of other issues, the Catholic fundamentalists are still there. Where else is there a provision on the statute books to give women a 14-year jail sentence for taking an abortion pill? The point, though, is that a new generation has arisen that will no longer accept that. Many are being drawn into struggles on economic issues but also many youth are demanding bodily autonomy from a system that panders continually to Catholic theology.

Another source of weakness is the nature of the political system. In the south, this used to be organised through a two-and-a-half party system of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, which were exactly the same, and a pathetic Labour Party which hopped between them to allow one or the other get into power. This was a stable system for decades, but now it is breaking up. Whereas over 80% of people voted for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in the past, this has now declined to just over half the electorate. They should really rule together but they are too frightened to do so.

So we have a deeply unsatisfactory situation from the point of view of the capitalists. Enda Kenny cuts a pathetic figure as he leads a minority government. Fianna Fáil pretends to tack left even while they prop him up. The result is a continual set of retreats and inaction. The only long term solution is that either Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael come together or that Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin finally do a deal. But no matter which option comes about, the situation is pregnant with elements of a long-term systemic crisis

Where will the resistance come from? We should be clear what we mean by this. Our tradition has never seen the party as the primary agent of change. We never said,

like Communist Parties once said in Europe, 'Elect the Party and you will get socialism'.

For us the key issue is what does the working class do? By working class, I don't just mean blue-collar workers. I have a major difficulty using the term middle class. I don't understand it. Why are you in the middle, and between whom? If someone is a nurse, a teacher, or working in the civil service why are they different in their class situation from other workers? You are a local authority clerical employee; you are on €25,000 a year; you cannot pay the rent; you are being harassed by your boss. What is the difference between that and working as a manual worker? We could talk about manual and clerical workers as white collar and blue collar sections of the working class. If you must talk about 'the middle class' the reference point should be to about 15% of the Irish population. It is mainly composed of the small business people, barristers, consultants and accountants – the natural support base of Fine Gael. The vast majority of this country belongs to the working class.

For decades, the left was pessimistic about the political development of the Irish working class. Many thought there could be no change because the bishops ruled over workers. Then in recent years, there was another argument. You could get no change, we were told, because the working class were dominated by consumerism. All they ever think of is buying the latest commodities and going shopping. But working class consciousness in any country is contradictory. Workers have different ideas in their heads. They understand solidarity but they are pulled by the ideas of the ruling class.

In Ireland there were additional problems. For five or six decades a conservative glacier covered working-class politics. The Catholic Church, Fianna Fáil, the local national school teacher, even the way the GAA was manipulated, all of these made up the elements of the glacier. It created a conservative culture that dominated the minds of working-class people. Irish working-class culture developed in a different way to many other countries in Europe. When you went to Britain, you could go to the local labour club. In Italy you could go to the local social

centre. In France, you could join May Day demonstration and surround yourself with red flags. There was none of this in Ireland.

We are living in an era when this is changing and workers are moving to the left. But when they started on this journey, they did not encounter any vibrant left-wing tradition to articulate their views. This is one of the main reasons why Irish workers were one of the slowest of the group of European countries hit by the troika, that is Portugal, Spain, Greece and Italy, to move against austerity. Activists used to say: 'but why are we not like the Greeks?'. They forgot that the Greeks had a strong left-wing tradition, a vocabulary of left-wing ideas and politics to offer an alternative to austerity.

The late radicalisation of Irish workers, however, has its positive side because it comes without baggage. There is no Stalinist tradition of any significance. There is an instinctive contempt for the Labour Party. You have to go back nearly a hundred years to the days of Connolly and Larkin to find a tradition that militant workers respect.

Broadly speaking we would say there are two possible roads for the left – two options. One is the idea that we manage capitalism. A section of the union leaders around the Right2Water Campaign, for example, believed that the next step in Ireland was to get Sinn Féin into government with a tame left that was willing to go along with a programme that did not talk significantly about raising corporation tax or taking measures to radically challenge Irish capitalism. They wanted instead to implement some sort of softer Keynesian programme.

Now just think about this. People wait for years for a hip operation in this country. They can be in pain for three years just because they are poor and do not have private health insurance. Do you think that in a tax haven society where the richest billionaires are tax exiles and virtually every large corporation is dodging taxes that they will provide resources to fund a proper national health service to treat everyone freely and equally? Do you think this will happen under Irish capitalism?

The room for any serious economic reform is limited. Demanding reforms is going

to bring you into confrontation with Irish capitalism itself. So we will not be going the road of managing capitalism. We are on a different road – we want a revolution to uproot capitalism. When you ask why is AAA-PBP so principled, it is because at their core they are organisations dedicated to the overthrow of capitalism.

However, we also need to acknowledge a problem. Some of us have been revolutionaries for far too many decades. When you are marginalised for decades, certain habits develop. You come to see yourself as a commentator on the world. You think the real struggle for socialism belongs to your grandchildren's era. You develop all sorts of self-justifying alibis to explain why in the present situation the left is not growing. You develop an inbuilt pessimism.

What I think is important about the strategy we are employing in Ireland, is that it is based on a transformation of the revolutionary left itself. We have to set our ambitions far higher than any revolutionary group in the past or than other revolutionary groups in different countries. What does that mean? Those who came from the SWP tradition never thought that we had a programme that would guide the working class. We did not claim to have a 'transitional programme'. We did not go to a few books and look up what sort of demands would move working class people.

Philosophically, we were often empiricists. We listened. We talked to working class people to identify the issues they were concerned with. That was the key to our understanding. We made a distinction between what Gramsci called the 'good sense' of workers and the 'common-sense'. The 'common-sense' is fed to us through the *Irish Independent*, RTE – all the crap of capitalism. But there is also, and this is crucial, the good sense of workers. Before WW2, socialists instinctively knew that socialism was an expression of the good sense of workers. Then that connection was broken, first by the horrors of war, and then by a post-war boom which enabled capitalists to give significant reforms without destabilising their system.

Socialism does not arise from sociol-

ogy or philosophy departments or from critiquing post-structuralist texts. It ultimately comes from the good sense of working-class people. If you are working class it is easier to understand why health treatment should be free and everyone treated according to their need. You can quickly see the need for collective organisation.

If you want to see what that means in practice have a look at how People Before Profit started. It began when Richard Boyd Barrett began agitating to keep Victorian baths in Dun Laoghaire for the people. It was never written in any Marxist textbook on strategy to 'Raise the demand for Victorian baths'. We are going to run meetings on car insurance because people are being ripped off by the private insurance industry that is desperate to recover its profits. I don't want to live in a car-dependent society forever; I want to see a free public transport system. But what are we to do with a situation where young people must pay €2,000 to drive a car as there is no proper public transport?

Now remember what Marx did – or maybe you won't remember. Marx was a student radical who read all the books he could about Hegel and Feuerbach. But guess what turned him into a revolutionary? It was when he took up an issue concerning peasants having a right to gather firewood for free. That was Marx's break. That was when he stopped philosophising about the world and set out to change it.

We are moving in the same direction. We are moving from commentating to taking up an issue like car insurance. When people ask what will you do about high insurance costs, we say we want a publicly owned, not-for-profit entity that gives cheap third party insurance. And guess what – many agree. In a recent survey conducted by a television programme, 71 percent of respondents favoured that option.

When you see the Apple scandal and the €13 billion fine imposed by the EU, we are asked: what do you want to do? We say: take the money, use it to fund our services. Working people understand that – and many agree. But along come the experts whose

job it is to befuddle your brain with talk of 'complexities' and 'Ireland's reputation for foreign investment'. Against them, we insist: take the money! Look at the Irish Glass Bottle Site. This was a symbol of the worst of the Celtic Tiger when it changed hands for over €300 million to a developer who then went bankrupt. It now belongs to NAMA, effectively an agency of the Irish state. When you ask the people of Ringsend, the neighbouring area, what should be done with the site, they agree with us. It should not be used for expensive houses but to help solve the homeless problem. Build a thousand council houses there to get people off the waiting lists. Scores of people will come to meetings and help campaign for this. The opportunities for the left to mobilise on 'simple' issues are enormous. This is because neoliberalism intruded into every area of our lives and now many have had enough. So I cannot imagine how a group of socialists anywhere cannot find some issue to agitate on.

So let's understand the method by using a bit of Marxist theory here, We have a dialectical relationship with workers. We do not position ourselves as the teachers. Marx posed the key question to those who wanted that role: who teaches the teachers? We start by listening, engaging and learning. But we also argue with workers. When people articulate racist or sexist ideas, we challenge them. Our aim is to make socialist ideas mainstream. If you admitted to that ambition two years ago, people would think you had gone off your head. But we are now talking in a situation where one opinion poll – I don't believe it will last in the short term – put AAA-PBP at 9%. When you are hitting that scale of support, your policies about use of public land for public housing, a not for profit car insurance company, a national health service – these can become not just the good sense but the common sense of Irish workers.

Here is our prediction. The more we fight on these issues, the more we come up against the limits of capitalism. The more we demand decent jobs, with security and decent pay, the more you come up against the limits of capitalism. And even when you do

not hit these limits immediately, you find the only way to get change is through people power. When you win, it helps to break down the fatalism that has been built into our heads. We talk about ‘people power’ a lot. But of course there is a certain ambiguity about ‘people power’.

There are different types of people power. You can march in Dun Laoghaire for baths and win – and that is excellent. But if you want to take the money off Denis O’Brien or stop the banks being handed back to private ownership, marching is not going to do it for you. It is a start. It is very important to do it but even sitting down on squares as the Occupy movement did, is not going to do it for you.

At the core of the concept of people power is workers’ power. This is why we do not emphasise a distinction between a strategy built on social movements and the working class. We want to unite them. That is one of our key strategic objectives. Currently we are weak in the unions. The media has launched a witch hunt about ‘Trots’ in the ASTI but the truth is that there are not enough socialist militants.

We hope this will change. Confidence has built up amongst workers because of the fight over water charges and we want this confidence to move into the workplaces. Workers are waking up. They are starting to say to the government: ‘you talk about a recovery but there is no payback for workers’. It started with the Luas drivers who secured a victory. It moved onto the bus-workers and then the teachers. The government wanted to make an example of the teachers and that is why they locked them out. They are giving a warning to everyone else who wants a pay rise.

There are two wings to the Irish trade union movement. There is an axis that is dominated by SIPTU, IMPACT and the INTO which are plugged into the political establishment – often through the Labour Party. Then there are unions which are more left wing, like UNITE and MANDATE. They played a positive role in helping to build the Right2Water Campaign – but they have limitations.

UNITE opposes social partnership but

once the SIPTU axis pushes it through the ICTU, they comply with its terms. In the North, UNITE has played a bad role in supporting the ‘Fresh Start’ agreement which leads to a running down of public services. In other words, while there is a division between the pro-partnership unions and the left unions, the level of grassroots activity in the left unions is low. There is an abundance of left rhetoric and support for left movements outside workplaces. But workplace militancy is still quite low. We want to build networks that change all this. We want to see unions defy social partnership, challenge the policies of the Stormont Executive and take whatever steps necessary to secure victories.

So let’s summarise our strategy. We want to increase our voice in the Dáil and the Northern assembly. We want to grow the number of public representatives. I think there is going to be another general election next year. The rich cannot tolerate forever the joke government that they have at the moment. We want more TDs and MLAs – but not because we think the elections are everything. We simply think that at this stage of the politicisation of Irish workers, they want to see representatives in the Dáil to articulate their views. The key, however, are the struggles outside the Dáil.

We want to double our membership. We want to build an organisation of over 2,000 people, the largest left organisation that has been seen in this country in recent decades. We want to increase our base in the unions, to have a network of activists who build grassroots movements for change

In all of this we present a minimum programme that arises from the good sense of working class people. But we never hide the fact that to win these in their entirety, you are going to have to challenge capitalism. When we say ‘Don’t pay off the bondholders’ people will agree with us. But to actually stop these payments, we will have to break with capitalism.

We want to build in both local communities and the workplaces. Sometimes there is a mechanical view on the left that the opportunities are directly linked to the level of strike days. If that was the case, we

would have been buried years ago. We went through decades of social partnership where workers fought very little. We were forced to orientate on communities. We now seek to combine community work with union work.

Internationally, the left is coming back. But as a latecomer to the process of radicalisation, the Irish can learn from the failures of others. Unlike Syriza – who talked a somewhat similar language about a free health service and subsidised electricity – we say there has to be a break with the EU. You will never convince economic terrorists with rational arguments. You have to face them

down. Unlike Podemos, we will not drop talk of a left versus right divide. We are breaking out of a ghetto set up for the left – but we are doing so on a revolutionary basis.

How could it be otherwise? Gerry Adams once claimed that a united Ireland would be achieved by 2016. It was a fantasy. You cannot end partition by joining together a sectarian state in the North with a state in the South where hospitals and schools are run by the Catholic church and where the rich enjoy the freedom of a tax haven.

To change this island, you will have to uproot capitalism on the way.