

resistance

irish socialist network

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On the road to bankruptcy - next stop default

KEVIN QUINN (ISN)

Enda and Eamon obviously do not know the difference between kicking ass and kissing ass. During the election campaign, our aspiring Taoiseach and his would-be deputy were talking tough with Europe. Talk of "burning bondholders" abounded. The electorate soon learnt that these were the rantings of two leaders suffering from a disease known as "election fever". As soon as the votes were in, Doctor Olli Rehn ordered his Irish patients to shut up and take their austerity medicine.

Just three weeks after taking office, the new coalition government ended its phony war with Europe and embraced the bank policy of its predecessor. A fifth bail-out of the banks was announced by the new finance minister Michael Noonan, with a further €27 billion pumped into these insolvent institutions. This brings to €70 billion the sum the State has committed to recapitalising the Banks. Add to this the €34 billion NAMA has borrowed to acquire the toxic assets of property tycoons, and you begin to appreciate the scale of debt which our governments have transferred from the private-enterprise sector onto the backs of the Irish people. Ireland's bailout will cost this country proportionally ten times what the UK Government spent rescuing its financial services industry.

Meanwhile the health of Europe's "sick man" continues to deteriorate. The Irish economy has shrunk by 11%. In the last two and half years, mass unemployment has returned to our shores and one thousand people a week are heading for the exits. Bram Stoker's Dracula story has become a reality in the author's native land as our vampire banks suck the life-blood out of our nation. In addition to the problem of servicing repayments on the money borrowed to fund recapitalisation and NAMA, the policy of slashing state expenditure by a whopping €20.5 billion in the last three years is adding to our economic woes. Draconian taxes are adding to a deflationary spiral which is stultifying growth. What of the Labour component in the coalition government? The 2011 election saw that party return 37 TDs, its best-ever result. This was in no small part due to the support it received from public-service workers who defected en masse from Fianna Fáil. Despite this, the first three ministers out of the traps threatening further pay cuts in the public service were none other than Labour stalwarts Brendan Howlin, Ruairi Quinn and Pat Rabbitte. Only weeks in office, Labour

appears to be doing its best to alienate this new-found support base.

Potentially one of the most important portfolios in this government is the Department of Communications and Energy, occupied by Pat Rabbitte. A progressive tax and development strategy for our energy resources could hold the key to the salvation of the Irish economy and the restoration of our State's sovereignty. Yet Pat is at pains to convince us there is no black gold out on our continental shelf: "It is very difficult to make the case that the Irish taxpayer should invest billions in an intensive effort at this time ... instead this should be left to the industry who can include exploration in the Irish offshore as part of a balanced international exploration portfolio."

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Pat, of course, is referring to the multi-national oil companies, with their long record of exploiting the natural resources of less-developed countries, leaving a trail of ecological wreckage behind them. Labour's legacy will be the near-complete globalisation of the Irish economy. Manufacturing exports, banking, our soon-to-be privatised utilities and our off-shore natural resources will all be in the hands of foreign multi-nationals. The "Ireland For Sale" sign can come down now to be replaced by the "Sale Agreed" logo. Labour's acquiescence in the sale of our semi-state companies ends any pretence that it is committed to even a modest social-democratic agenda. Multi-national companies and our own vulture capitalists must be wetting themselves with glee in anticipation of the fortunes to be made asset-stripping the nation's last public-owned institutions. Despite all the savage cutbacks and the fire-sale of our national assets, a default on the nationalised bank debt is inevitable. The next stage of the crisis is only a matter of time.



Olli Rehn spots another cloud on the horizon

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Socialists and the environment

Colm Breathnach (ISN)

The demise of the Irish Green Party once again raises the question of how socialists approach environmental issues. The inner logic of capitalism is continuous growth to constantly make more profit. This is not a matter of human nature but the engine that drives the whole machine. This drive to accumulate has led to massive environmental destruction and has reached the stage where, through climate change, the very survival of humanity is threatened. Of course ruling classes have shown the ability to regulate capitalism to ensure their survival in the past but the changes now required to avert the most extreme outcomes threaten the ability to continuously make profits so they are caught in a bind. This then opens the danger of sections of the capitalist class using scientific advances to attempt to insulate themselves from the inevitable consequences while allowing the majority of humanity to sink.

Even radical environmentalists tend to overlook the link between class structure and the environment. Food production, pollution, environmental disasters all impact in a differential way on different classes. For example in the USA, factory farming causes massive pollution, prices family farmers out of the market, produces unhealthy food of a low standard primarily consumed by working-class families, and super-exploits non-union migrant and African-American labour. In addition a plausible link has been made between the emergence of new strains of flu and the concentration of pigs in factory farms. Those at greatest risk from the resultant pandemics are the peasants and workers of

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the global South. While the rich cannot completely avoid the consequence of environmental/biological disasters, they can buy their way out of much of the resultant impact.

Green parties emerged as an important political force in Western Europe in the 1980s. Initially they were seen as a radical challenge because of the leftist background of many members and their anti-capitalist policies. They questioned economic models based on endless growth and supported participatory democracy and direct action, in contrast to the stale politics of the social democratic and Stalinist left. But one after another Green parties have drifted to the right, entering coalition governments with establishment parties and sidelining more radical factions. They have ended up backing imperialist wars, supporting nuclear power and implementing brutal austerity programmes. This unfortunate evolution is not just the result of



opportunistic leaders but also reflects the class base of these parties: their support base is variable but they have rarely made any inroads or indeed shown much interest in the core sections of the working class: manual workers, lower-paid service workers, public-sector workers. While the spectacular fall of the Irish Greens is welcome, socialists now bear a heavy responsibility to provide a genuine green alternative by putting environmental issues at the centre of their agenda.

Doing so will be a major challenge because many socialist organisations have a poor record when it comes to the environment. The Stalinist regimes which many socialists supported were based on massive destruction of the environment combined with vicious exploitation of the working class. Even socialists who did not support these regimes tended to downplay environmental questions, seeing them as

'middle-class' issues which were not important for workers. In recent years radical socialists have begun to see that the question of how human societies should relate to the environment is a crucial question for the exploited classes. The continuation of capitalism will leave us, at best, with a ravaged planet where most of humanity is reduced to bare survival or at worst it will lead to the extinction of our species. Only the emergence of a radically different type of society based on democratic control of economic, social and political structures combined with an environmentally balanced mode of production can offer the viable future for all. Such a future is not pre-determined; it will only come about through the myriad struggles of exploited people throughout the world. The stakes are high but now more than ever we really have a whole world to win ... or lose.

Sinn Féin - a tale of two parties

Ed Walsh (ISN)

Sinn Féin has always condemned the partition of Ireland. But it seems to have divided itself into two different parties following the partition line between North and South.

South of the border, Sinn Féin has taken the radical high ground, condemning the EU-IMF "bail-out" that is pushing the state towards bankruptcy, opposing cutbacks and defending working-class people against austerity. That stance took Sinn Féin to their highest vote since the 1920s.

Stronger than the United Left Alliance and left-wing independents, more credible than Fianna Fail, Sinn Féin is in an excellent position to make further gains as the new coalition government continues with the same disastrous economic policies.

Once you cross the border, however, Sinn Féin presents a very different image. It has just completed a full term in office with the Democratic Unionist Party. There was little trace of radical or even moderate socialism in the programme of the Northern coalition government. Martin McGuinness took a trip to Wall Street with Ian Paisley soon after becoming Deputy First Minister, ringing the bell at the New York Stock Exchange. Recently he has lined out with Peter Robinson to



support calls for the rate of corporation tax in Northern Ireland to be slashed, transforming the North into another tax haven for big business. Whatever else we might get from the second term of the power-sharing administration, there is no reason to expect radical reforms that would redistribute wealth and opportunities to working-class

communities, unionist and nationalist.

Sinn Féin will say, of course, that their hands are tied because the Northern Irish statelet is dependent on funding from Westminster. That is exactly what the Fine Gael-Labour government says about its own dependence on Brussels and Frankfurt for assistance. It hasn't stopped Sinn Féin from attacking their policies (rightly so).

Sinn Féin's split personality is easier to understand if we look at the ideology of the party. Gerry Adams has always said that national reunification must come before socialism in Ireland. Until partition has been ended, he believes, the republican movement must be ready to work with anyone who supports Irish unity, whatever they might think about public ownership of the banks or universal health care. So from this perspective, socialism will not come on the agenda in the North until it has broken free from the United Kingdom and joined the rest of the country in an all-Ireland republic.

The Sinn Féin leadership sees nothing wrong with paying homage to the White House, accepting donations from US corporate sponsors, or serving in a government that follows right-wing economic policies. The example of the ANC in South Africa shows what happens when a party postpones the struggle for radical economic change until some

indefinite point in the future: socialism is always for tomorrow, never today, as the one-time radicals are absorbed into the conservative establishment and lose any desire to shake up the economic status quo.

Although Sinn Féin is still in opposition in the South, this strategy has had a negative impact there as well. The party leadership wants Sinn Féin to be in government on both sides of the border, believing that this will give an extra push to reunification. Shortly before the 2007 general election, Sinn Féin ditched its policy on corporation tax overnight to make it easier to form a government with Fianna Fail. They must be thanking their lucky stars that it didn't work out; otherwise Sinn Féin might be in the same position as the Green Party today. In September 2008, Sinn Féin initially voted to support the bank guarantee, putting themselves to the right of the Labour Party in a bid to appear more respectable.

Although Sinn Féin have now swung back to the left in the South, they are still fixed on the goal of joining a southern government in time for the Easter Rising's 100th anniversary. The people who are looking to Sinn Féin as a radical alternative will be led up the garden path, unless the socialist left can get its act together and prevent that from happening.

Hezbollah

— a short history —

Augustus Richard Norton (Princeton, 2009)

Ed Walsh (ISN)

This is a very useful study of the Islamist movement in Lebanon which attracted worldwide attention in 2006 by holding the line against Israel and humiliating its leaders. The author is a former US army officer who taught at its officer training college, yet he is remarkably objective and free of the usual prejudices you would expect from the American military establishment.

Norton shows the rise of Hezbollah as the product of three converging factors: the political awakening of the Shia community in Lebanon, the resistance to Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and the growth of political Islam after the Iranian revolution. It was the last factor that gave Hezbollah a crucial boost. At first the main political vehicle for Shia Muslims was the Lebanese National Movement, a secular alliance that included left-wing groups and worked alongside the Palestinian guerrillas based on Lebanese soil. When Israel invaded Lebanon, the resistance was initially spearheaded by guerrilla units of the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP). It was the Communists who carried out the first suicide attacks on Israeli troops, not Hezbollah.



Yet the rise of Islamic fundamentalism throughout the Arab Middle East helped the "party of God" to displace its secular rivals as the main voice of the Shia community. With generous support from the Iranian state, Hezbollah was able to construct an efficient, well-armed guerrilla force that harried Israeli soldiers occupying southern Lebanon, winning credibility as a Lebanese nationalist party. It also built a network of charitable bodies, a kind of parallel welfare state

servicing Lebanese Shias and winning their loyalty. Hezbollah was willing to use violence against its rivals, assassinating dozens if not hundreds of LCP activists during the 1980s. The LCP is now a much-diminished party, but still has pockets of support in Lebanon: Norton mentions a village near the Israeli border called Kafr Rumann which is nicknamed "Kafr Moscow" because of its Communist loyalties, and LCP units fought alongside Hezbollah against the Israeli army in 2006.

While he makes no attempt to whitewash Hezbollah's record, Norton give short shrift to US and Israeli efforts to brand it as a "terrorist" or "fascist" organisation. He notes that it has mostly confined its use of violence to attacks on Israeli troops occupying Lebanese territory: violence of that sort cannot be compared to deliberate attacks on civilians (although Hezbollah members have sometimes been involved in such attacks, which do qualify as "terrorism"). Nor is it credible to present Hezbollah as "Islamofascists": the party and its leader, Hasan Nasrallah, may consider the Iranian political system to be their ideal, but they recognise that it cannot be introduced in Lebanon without provoking civil war. Unlike Iran, where the vast majority of the population are Shia Muslims,

Ireland Worst

Colin Couker

Among the more nauseating narratives that have come to define the current crisis is that which insists we will only emerge from the wilderness if we are willing to remain silent like infants and listen attentively to the sage advice of Ireland's small band of 'world class' entrepreneurs. The class that spawned the architects of our downfall will, apparently, also sire the authors of our salvation. An especially grating instance of this trend occurred in the middle of March when, on three consecutive days, the Irish Times provided a platform for the musings of seventeen members of the corporate and political elite whose passion for irony has moved them to style themselves as Ireland First. The document that distills the cumulative wisdom of the group – A Blueprint for Ireland's Recovery – strikes an ostensibly reasonable and even humble tone. The existence of the text reflects 'a sense of deep concern about the challenges that Ireland is now facing'. It is the ambition of Ireland First to map out the course to an economic recovery that will lead to the creation of 'an equal and fair society'. This is of course all very promising and inspiring. Or at least it would be if it were actually true.

While the intellectual visionaries who assembled A Blueprint for Ireland's Recovery claim that they wish to foster a prosperous and equitable society, the specific measures that they advance would produce precisely the opposite outcome. The policies advocated by Ireland First would visit further grave hardship on ordinary people reeling from a sequence of austerity measures introduced to allow the socialisation of private debts to foreign banks. If the prescriptions of the seventeen signatories were to come to pass, 30,000 public employees would lose their jobs, wages would be cut across the board, state assets would be privatised and recipients of social welfare would be subjected to increased surveillance and harassment. While the policies championed by Ireland First were heralded in the national paper of record as bold and visionary, they are in fact depressingly predictable. The measures suggested by the group are those that are always dusted down and driven through when a country – and particularly one in the Global South – finds itself in debt and danger. Indeed, if Ireland were a poor nation rather than one of the wealthiest in the world then the Blueprint would probably have already been named as what it really is – a 'structural adjustment programme'.

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That the musings of Ireland First transpire to be so clearly unreasonable and partial should hardly come as a surprise. If you wanted to ascertain the class interests served by the Blueprint you would only have to cast a glance down its gilded list of signatories. Among those who lent their names to the text are a pair of renowned 'entrepreneurs' who routinely appear on Ireland's Rich Lists – that veritable Mother Teresa of the Caribbean, Denis O'Brien, and the mustachioed maverick who imagined the national economic graveyard down in Dublin's Docklands, Dermot Desmond. While both men count their personal wealth in the thousands of millions, neither contributes a single cent in tax to the dwindling coffers of this country. The only people that O'Brien and Desmond ever put first are, of course, themselves. And yet we are expected to hang on their every word and to accept their tear-stained expressions of patriotism without retching.

Offering a platform to billionaire tax avoiders to berate and patronise ordinary people is an offence to any society that presumes to have some moral compass and not least to one that claims to be a Republic. It is a fairly elementary Republican principle that there can be no representation without taxation. While the filthy rich refuse to pay their way, they still get more of a say than the rest of us. But then it is rather easier to get your voice heard in the media when you own large swathes of it. All of which leads us to an obvious, if not terribly comforting, conclusion. As this crisis unfolds, it becomes increasingly apparent that we are not citizens of a Republic but rather subjects of what some have astutely named a Dragons' Den Democracy.

Union activists plan resistance

Steven Morris

Whilst many trade union members hailed the near-annihilation of Fianna Fail, those celebrations were brief, as the new coalition is pursuing the same fundamental policies. Basic employment rights secured through years of struggle by workers organised in unions now face a systematic attack by the Fine Gael-Labour government. While the new administration pledged to restore the minimum wage from €7.65 to its previous level of €8.65, it combined that policy with the dismantling of Registered Employment Agreements (R.E.A.'s), Employment Regulation Orders (E.R.O.'s), and Joint Labour Committees (J.L.C.'s) that protect the low paid. It is estimated that these pieces of legislation protect over 300,000 vulnerable workers in areas such as the hotel, catering, cleaning, and construction industries. The removal of this protection would have a serious impact on the livelihoods of 300,000 workers and their families. Already low-paid construction workers have seen a 7.5% reduction in their pay as employers move to scrap the R.E.A. that covers the construction industry.

The lack of any real conviction from the trade union leadership in challenging this government has become a major concern for union activists. This is especially worrying when you consider the links between the union hierarchy and the Labour Party leadership. Trade union leaders are widely seen to be out of touch with their members and vastly over-paid. On key issues there has been a total capitulation by the current leadership in its dealings with this government, not challenging the continued imposition of the Universal Social Charge, and presenting no opposition whatsoever to the impending introduction of a water tax – even though ICTU has previously campaigned against the privatisation of water. The only argument the union leaders make concerning the sale of state assets is that if Fine Gael were in



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that the collapse of social partnership has opened for the radical left was debated. Activists spoke of reclaiming the trade union movement from a bureaucracy that seems increasingly removed from ordinary members. Importantly, those attending the meeting felt very strongly that this movement has to have a long-term agenda. An alternative political and economic model must be presented by any future body that might emerge. That body needs to be representative of union members. It also needs to connect with other campaigns and organisations in the wider community that share common ground with the trade union movement. A consensus on practical work also emerged on a number of fronts. Campaigns are to be mounted against pay cuts in the public sector, against cuts to public services; against any attempts to attack J.L.C.'s, R.E.A.'s, and E.R.O.'s; and against the privatisation of public resources by the government. The forum is now working towards setting up a publication, and intends to organise a conference in September and make its presence felt at the ICTU conference in Tralee in July.

government alone, there would be even more semi-state companies sold off than is currently being proposed. It is against this background that a forum organised by trade unionists on the radical left came together recently in UNITE's Dublin office to discuss how to build a grassroots movement that could overcome a failed trade union leadership and mount an effective and sustained opposition to the cuts being implemented. Encouragingly, a large number of trade union activists from both the public sector (CPSU, INTO, TUI, AST) and private sector (BATU, UNITE, SIPTU) were in attendance. In a broad-ranging discussion many issues were explored. The potential opportunities

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Now the real fight begins

Ed Walsh (ISN)

After the February election, with some strong performances by left-wing candidates showing support for radical change among part of the electorate, the Left now faces the challenge of building a movement in the streets that can obstruct the ruinous policies of the establishment parties, as Fine Gael and Labour follow exactly the same path as Fianna Fail before them. Looking at the number of seats won in the new Dail, the election seemed to be a wipeout for Fianna Fail and a landslide for Fine Gael. On closer inspection, the FF wipeout was certainly a reality: the Fine Gael landslide much less so. Fianna Fail's share of the vote declined by 25% compared with 2007. Fine Gael gained just 9%, despite its status as the main opposition party facing a government presiding over the worst economic crisis in the history of the state. The rest of the missing Fianna Fail vote went to Labour, Sinn Fein, independents (most of whom were to the left of centre) and the United Left Alliance. Overall, the two conservative parties got their lowest-share of the vote: if we include Labour as part of the Left, the left vote was over 40%. Unfortunately, Labour does not really consider itself part of the Left, although it is adept at throwing left-wing shapes while in opposition to win support from those disillusioned with conservative politics. Rather than take the opportunity to build a left-wing bloc that could challenge for power at the next election, Labour predictably opted for coalition with Fine Gael. This

will not come as a surprise for anyone familiar with Labour's record in the past. Nor should it come as any surprise that the new government has an aggressive right-wing agenda, with Labour politicians happily leading the charge against wages and public services. At the special party conference to decide on the coalition deal, over 90% of Labour delegates voted to support the agreement, with just one TD and a handful of councillors in opposition. For anyone who still hopes that Labour can become part of an alliance for radical change in Ireland, this should be a chastening sight. Unless there are drastic and unforeseeable shifts in the Labour Party, we have to assume that it will be as much of an obstacle to serious left-wing politics in this state as Fine Gael and Fianna Fail. Hopefully the Left outside Labour will be able to provide a credible alternative for those Labour supporters disillusioned with its performance in government. The new Dail will have the largest-ever group of TDs to the left of Labour, with Sinn Fein, the ULA and left-independents belonging in this category (the latter group is a mixed bunch, of course, but even the most moderate left-independent TD is still to the left of the Labour Party). Sinn Fein has certainly presented a radical face to the electorate in the last couple of years, ditching its pre-crisis efforts to fit in with the mainstream consensus. Yet its shaky commitment to left-wing politics – discussed in more detail elsewhere in Resistance – mean that we should be ready for another lurch towards the centre if Sinn Fein gets a whiff of government office. That means the ULA has a heavy responsibility.

The new alliance performed well in the election, with 5 TDs elected and some strong votes elsewhere. Perhaps the TDs would be elected anyway without the alliance having been formed: but the fact that they won their seats as part of a radical-left bloc ensured a greater impact. The ISN was not in a position to contest this election in Dublin North West, where we have previously run a candidate. Our members worked for the election campaigns of Cieran Perry and Joan Collins. There is now a real opportunity to build the ULA as a vehicle for radical politics that can attract people who want to fight back against austerity. There will be many debates about the programme of the new organisation: the ISN, while recognising that it is important not to leap too far ahead of the majority of workers, would certainly be in favour of the ULA committing itself to democratic socialism. But two practical questions will be very important. First of all, it will be important for any new party to establish decision-making structures that allow all members to have a real say in its direction. Members should be able to organise platforms within the ULA to promote their ideas in a constructive way, and there should be forums for debate. Secondly, it is vital that the ULA becomes a campaigning, activist party. Although the election results were promising, the unhappy fact remains that demonstrations organised by the radical left have generally attracted a low turn-out and made little impression. This will have to change if there is going to be any hope of stopping the Fine Gael-Labour suicide mission that is bringing us towards economic collapse.

what we stand for

- A transformation of power relationships, leading to democratic control of all aspects of society and an end to elite rule.
- Collective ownership and democratic control of all economic structures, wealth and resources, by the working class.
- Equality of all people and an end to all forms of privilege and discrimination.
- Vindication of all human rights: social, political and individual.
- A sustainable society, developing in harmony with the natural environment.

The Irish Socialist Network works to achieve this society on the basis of the following principles: Change is brought about by the empowerment of ordinary people not by a revolutionary vanguard or parliamentary elite.

- Openness, equality, internal democracy, consistent activism and a commitment to class politics are essential traits of a socialist organisation.
- Non-dogmatic Marxist thought is essential for analysing society and advancing the struggle for socialism.
- While acknowledging differences, we will work in a non-sectarian manner with, and promote dialogue between, all socialist and progressive organisations.
- A key component of socialism is internationalism in the struggle for justice, equality and the defence of the environment.

The Irish Socialist Network is a radical democratic socialist organisation, committed to the complete abolition of capitalism and its replacement by a socialist society, by which we mean:

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IRELAND PALESTINE SOLIDARITY CAMPAIGN
It is what it says on the tin – a national and very active organisation for Palestine solidarity activists.
www.ipsc.ie

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A newly formed campaign that aims to mobilise people in opposition to US plans to attack Iran. Critical of the reactionary Iranian government.
www.hopoi.org

CHOICE IRELAND
A campaign formed to advocate abortion rights in Ireland. Believes in a woman's right to choose.
www.choiceireland.blogspot.com

SHELL TO SEA
Set up to support the people of Erris, Co. Mayo, in their struggle to fend off Shell's government-supported plans to build a dangerous gas pipeline in a scenic part of rural Ireland. Very active on a national basis.
www.corribsos.com

RESIDENTS AGAINST RACISM
Dublin-based and long-standing anti-racism organisation that is particularly active in opposing government misbehaviour. A vibrant and committed group.
www.residentsagainstracism.org

INDEPENDENT WORKERS UNION
A small union, containing many activists of a socialist disposition. Strongly opposed to social partnership, it organises particularly among lower-paid workers and immigrants. A campaigning, left-wing trade union. Headquarters is in Cork.
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