

# After the two Irish elections

**T**HE two recent polls in Ireland, in the North on 1 May as part of the UK elections, and in the Republic on 6 June, suggest that many people in Ireland blame the British government for stonewalling.

The Provisional IRA's short ceasefire, and indeed all the efforts at negotiation and politicking since the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, have delivered no visible progress in Northern Ireland. In the North, the Provisionals won two seats, and in the South, one.

Caoimhghín O'Caoláin, elected with 19% of the vote in the five-seat border constituency of Cavan-Monaghan, will become the first Sinn Féin member to take his or her seat in the Dail since 1922, in a move which may sharpen the long-simmering division between politicians and militarists in the Provisional movement.

Fianna Fáil, traditionally the more nationalist of the major parties, has regained office from a coalition led by the less-nationalist Fine Gael.

Fianna Fáil will govern in coalition with the economic-rationalist Progressive Democrats; and it would be foolish to see the nationalist swing as likely to help break the political and social impasse in Ireland.

The swing was in any case slight. Fianna Fáil gained few votes. Sinn Féin still gets only 2.5% of the first preference votes in the Republic.

More fundamentally, all there is on offer from nationalist politics at present is the plan (backed, with variations, by all the major parties in the UK and the Irish Republic, and by the majority Catholic party, the SDLP, in Northern Ireland) for gradually-knitted links between North and South in the framework of and on the model of the European Union.

The fierce, concentrated and resilient resistance of the Protestant or Anglo-Scots majority in north-east Ireland to any subordination of their community to the island's Catholic-Gaelic majority stands in the way of any more radical or rapid nationalist moves. The Provisionals have, in effect, turned to a strategy of demanding that the British state, urged on by Dublin, overwhelm that resistance. No British government, nor any Dublin government wants to try that. They probably could not do it if they tried, and even if they should succeed that would produce no better than a renewed version of the current communal conflict, where the aggrieved minority would be the Northern Protestants (in all Ireland) rather than the Northern Catholics (in Northern Ireland).

Real progress, both on social issues and on the national and communal questions, depends on developing at least a degree of working-class unity and independent working-class politics. On this front the election results from the Republic were, if not unambiguously hopeful, at least interesting.

The big gainers in the poll were the independent and smaller-party candidates, winning a total 9.8% of the first preferences. Two Greens were elected to the Dail. In Dublin West, Joe Higgins of the Socialist Party (formerly Militant) gained one of the constituency's four seats, with 16% of the first preference votes.

These gains for left-wing candidates came at the expense of the established left parties. The Labour Party declined from 19% of first preferences overall to 10%. The Democratic Left — the bulk of what was the Workers' Party, which, originating from the Republican movement but moving in a sharply anti-nationalist direction, at one time outstripped the Labour Party as a left-wing alternative in Dublin electorates — continued its decline, going from 2.8% to 2.5%. Both Labour and the Democratic Left had been in coalition with Fine Gael. The Workers' Party rump got only 0.4%.

**Y**ET the fact is that the voters moving from Labour and the Democratic Left remained on the left. It would be over-optimistic to see Joe Higgins's victory as one for the "bold socialist programme" which Militant used to promote in its heyday: a lot of his vote was personal, he stood as part of the Taxation Justice Alliance, and even the Socialist Party's own election manifesto was very limited.

It said nothing at all on Northern Ireland. There is some sense here: working-class voters in Dublin, as against rural Catholics in Cavan-Monaghan, are not moved by green flag-waving. Yet even in its journals and pamphlets the Socialist Party has few answers on the democratic issues. It has advocated a federal solution which would unite Ireland and give relief to the entrapped Northern Catholics while allowing autonomy to the north-eastern Protestants — but only as something which might be devised "after socialism", and certainly not as a platform for immediate working-class unity. But it is precisely as a means of giving an answer to "the constitutional question" — a united Ireland; a partitioned Ireland? — *now* and thus creating a basis for working-class unity across the Catholic-Protestant divide, that this idea is of vital importance to Irish workers! All qualifications granted, though, Higgins' victory is a hopeful sign.

## What is Workers' Liberty?



The key Marxist idea is that the class struggle takes place on the three levels of trade union and social struggle, political struggle and the combat of ideas guides the Alliance for Workers' Liberty. The Alliance for Workers' Liberty exists to fight and co-ordinate the class struggle on every front: our supporters work in the trade unions, the Labour Party, in single issue campaigns, in the students' union.

**"The emancipation of the working class is also the emancipation of all human beings without distinction of race or sex." Karl Marx**

**If you want to know more about the Alliance for Workers' Liberty write to PO Box, 823, London SE15 4NA.**