

Sinn Fein loses ground in UK elections in Northern Ireland

By Jordan Shilton
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The main development in the May 7 UK general election results in Northern Ireland was a drop in support for Sinn Fein. A pact concluded by the two major unionist parties saw them gain ground.

Of Northern Ireland's 18 parliamentary seats, Sinn Fein secured four, down from five in the 2010 vote. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) maintained its eight seats, while the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) re-entered parliament with two. The UUP ran in alliance with the Conservatives in the rest of the UK in 2010 and secured no representation. The other nationalist party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), maintained its three seats. An independent unionist won the one remaining seat.

Sinn Fein's poor performance was in part due to the electoral pact struck between the DUP and UUP, a move marking an intensification of sectarian divisions. The agreement meant that in four constituencies the two unionist parties agreed to run joint candidates, and in three of these the unionist candidate achieved victory.

Both parties hailed the agreement, and analysts suggested that it could serve as a model for future elections.

DUP leader and first minister in the regional administration at Stormont, Peter Robinson, made an explicit appeal to hard-line elements by encouraging sectarian tensions. He said that the "most comprehensive electoral agreement between our two parties in the last 29 years" would help reduce the number of non-unionist MPs returned to Westminster.

Sinn Fein has been no less willing to exploit sectarian divisions. Its integration into the structures of capitalist rule in Northern Ireland on the basis of the 1998 Good Friday agreement was based explicitly on the partition of parties, political institutions and voters along

religious and sectarian lines.

Sinn Fein reacted to the DUP and UUP move by appealing to the SDLP for an equivalent pact between nationalist parties. Seeking to dress up this divisive proposal with left-wing rhetoric, Sinn Fein MLA (member of the Northern Irish assembly) Gerry Kelly suggested in March that such an alliance would be based on "progressive politics." The SDLP responded by rejecting the proposal.

Sinn Fein's own attempt to stoke sectarian tensions in its campaign was above all aimed at concealing its role in supporting the budget cutting policies it claims to oppose. This was ultimately the key factor accounting for its poor electoral result. Its posture as a left alternative to the austerity measures that have been implemented throughout Britain since 2008, including in Northern Ireland, is increasingly being discredited.

Since the reestablishment of power sharing at Stormont, Sinn Fein has governed in a coalition with the DUP. As part of the regional administration, it imposed many of the spending cuts demanded by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in London. Over the course of the last parliament, this amounted to a decline in the Northern Ireland budget of around £1.5 billion.

On December 23, 2014, Sinn Fein signed up to the Stormont House agreement along with the other four major parties, which committed the administration to launch an assault on public services and public sector jobs in exchange for the extension of loans by Westminster and the prospect of corporation tax varying powers being handed to Northern Ireland in 2017.

When the deal was signed, Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein boasted, "We're proud of our achievement, I think it is remarkable that

we managed against all odds, when people told us it couldn't be done to achieve this in the interests of those [vulnerable] people. I think that is something to be proud of."

However, prior to the election, aware that a continuation of the assault on the public sector would meet with widespread opposition, particularly in a part of the UK where over a quarter of workers are employed in public institutions, Sinn Fein made a tactical decision to distance itself from the deal. Asserting that it failed to provide protection to welfare claimants, party spokesmen called for a revised agreement and brought Stormont to a halt.

In February, leading Sinn Fein representatives asserted that the deal they had reached in December had somehow turned out to be a lot worse than they had realised at the time, and did not provide enough financing to offset some of the most controversial welfare benefit cuts. Significantly, they raised no concerns about the overarching goal of slashing government spending by a further seven percent over the coming years, on top of the nine percent spending cuts imposed since 2010.

During the election campaign, Sinn Fein employed anti-austerity rhetoric in a bid to appeal to popular dissatisfaction with the attacks on public services and job cuts. At an election event in Belfast, McGuinness claimed, "Following this election Sinn Fein will be seeking an immediate negotiation with the incoming British government to secure a viable budget and to deliver public services, return economic powers to promote growth jobs and prosperity and to protect those most in need.

"We will be calling on all of the other political parties [in Northern Ireland], and civic society to stand up against austerity and for growth and equality. Any incoming British government must get the message—we will resist austerity on our public services, our economy and our citizens."

Elsewhere, McGuinness has sought to seize on the growing regional divisions across the UK to press for more powers for Northern Ireland. In the wake of last Thursday's vote, the *Belfast Telegraph* reported that he spoke favourably of the achievements of the Scottish National Party and urged that parties in Northern Ireland follow this example to secure Northern Irish interests.

The key goal shared by Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland and the SNP in Scotland is their desire to obtain more regional powers so as to encourage foreign investment into a cheap labour economy. Behind all the verbal posturing about resisting austerity, the reality as experienced by workers who have seen these parties in power is that they loyally implement the demands of the ruling class to undermine working conditions and open up their own regions to global investors.

Sinn Fein's call for cooperation between all of the Northern Irish parties to pressure the new government in Westminster is revealing. Sinn Fein is in full agreement with the other parties, including the DUP, that the aim of any such talks will be to create the conditions for investors and big business to make increased profits at the expense of the working class.

Sinn Fein reached a deal with the DUP at the end of February, stipulating that corporation tax would be slashed to 12.5 percent when the powers are extended to Stormont from London. This figure is designed to compete with the Republic of Ireland, which operates with the same rate of business tax. Workers south of the border have endured years of vicious austerity dictated by the European Union and International Monetary Fund, resulting in an average decline in earnings of 14 percent. Similar attacks and worse on the social position of the working class will be required in Northern Ireland if it is to compete with Dublin to attract inward investment.

Symbolising the unanimity between Sinn Fein and the DUP on this issue, First Minister Robinson announced the proposed corporate tax rate at a business breakfast in west Belfast, a traditional Sinn Fein stronghold. The event was chaired by Sinn Fein MLA Paul Maskey.

Neither Sinn Fein nor the DUP has sought to conceal their motives in proposing the tax cut. As a DUP source commented on February's deal, "We need to have the dates and the rates to show the Americans, that is the most important thing."

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