

Ireland's Greens agree to join austerity coalition government

By Dermot Quinn
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Almost five months after Ireland's February 8 general election, Leo Varadkar's Fine Gael and Micheál Martin's Fianna Fáil have been able to form a coalition government after the Green Party membership voted to come on board.

On June 26, after weeks of negotiations, the membership of all three parties voted in favour of forming a coalition on a joint programme. Three quarters of the Green Party registered their support for an alliance with the architects of over a decade of austerity.

Micheál Martin will replace Varadkar as Taoiseach (Prime Minister) until December 2022 when the role will rotate back to Varadkar for the second half of the five-year parliamentary term.

The readiness of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil to sink differences rooted in the bloodletting of the Civil War following the setting up of the Irish Free State in 1921 is a measure of the desperate crisis facing the bourgeoisie. Amid an imminent recession in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, they need the Greens to secure a parliamentary majority and to have any hope of enforcing the savage attacks on jobs, wages and essential services now on the agenda.

In return for some environmental window dressing, the Green's leader, Eamon Ryan, spoke of the "sense of responsibility on us now because we do have a job to do," in "getting our country out of a really severe economic crisis." What this means is not the protection of jobs and livelihoods that is routinely invoked, but imposing economic policies that will favour the corporations, banks and the super-rich.

From 2007 to 2011, as junior partners in a coalition government with Fianna Fáil, the Greens were complicit in introducing billions of euros of cuts to health, education, and other social services to bail out

banks and protect the wealth of the super-rich.

Despite widespread opposition from working people, Fine Gael has been kept in power by Fianna Fáil under a "confidence and supply" agreement worked out three years ago by Varadkar and Martin. But the two-party system that has enabled Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil to control the Dáil (parliament) since the foundation of the Republic was rejected overwhelmingly in the February 8 election.

The combined votes of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael fell to an historic low, with Sinn Fein winning a majority of first preference votes, based mainly on promises to end austerity, provide affordable housing, fund the health service and social care, and to tackle unemployment.

In Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein has proved its ability to combine such vaguely left rhetoric with the responsible safeguarding of corporate interests, in collaboration with the Unionists. But this was not enough to secure their inclusion in government in the South, with both the main parties refusing any discussion. Sinn Fein not only competes for a nationalist vote, but its anti-austerity rhetoric sends out the wrong message to workers when the official mantra must be "sacrificed in the national interest."

Sinn Fein's exclusion will likely strengthen its standing among sections of workers and youth. Party leader Mary Lou McDonald said Sinn Fein would continue to "press for change." Deputy leader in the Dáil Pearse Doherty promised renewed opposition and to "stand up for ordinary workers and families."

But their successes are only an initial expression of a more fundamental shift to the left by the working class, which cannot be satisfied by Sinn Fein's pro-capitalist programme.

Varadkar's term in government was marked by growing social inequality and the worst housing crisis

in the country's history, as well as a severe deterioration in the health care system that left the country woefully unprepared for the COVID-19 onslaught.

Between 2008 and 2015 Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil introduced a massive €2.7 billion of health service cuts, with patients forced to wait on trolleys in overcrowded and understaffed hospitals.

At the beginning of March there were over 500 patients waiting on trolleys in Irish hospitals, a figure which only fell after thousands were kept away from hospital during the pandemic.

Now that the numbers of COVID-19 deaths have fallen, those waiting on trolleys has started to rise, doubling to 102 a day. Dr Fergal Hickey, spokesman for the Irish Association of Emergency Medicine (IAEM), warned that patients in corridors are at particular risk from a winter virus surge, adding that the Health Service Executive (HSE) was “passively allowing a return to the status quo while we are still living with COVID-19 in the community.”

The months of lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic will largely end on July 20. Travel restrictions were lifted on June 29 and the domestic tourism industry will reopen as well as cafes, restaurants and pubs.

The pandemic has decimated every sector of the economy, and economists are predicting a recession worse than the financial crash of 2008. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) predict investment will plummet by a third by the end of the year and consumer spending will fall by 13 percent, with unemployment spiralling to 17 percent of the workforce.

There are already 214,700 people claiming unemployment benefit, while almost a million people depend on some sort of state benefit—a fifth of the Republic of Ireland's population and just under half its working population. One of the first measures to be introduced by the new government will be to cut the Pandemic Unemployment Payment of €350 brought in by Varadkar after the country went into lockdown on March 27. Government estimates show €2.23 billion extra set aside for jobless payments for the rest of the year, but there is no provision for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment.

Central Statistics Office (CSO) figures show that the

top 5 percent now has 46.4 percent of national wealth, with 1 percent of the population owning 27.3 percent. This concentration of wealth at the top has been accompanied by growing rates of poverty. Over 760,000 (15.7 percent) now live below the poverty line, with those under 16 years of age accounting for 23.9 percent of those in poverty.

One of the first pledges made in the joint document drafted by Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party for the formation of a government is that there will be a continuation of Ireland's tax haven status. The corporation tax rate of just 12.5 percent will continue, around half the global average corporation tax rate of 27 percent and the European average of 25.3 percent.

Extra taxes will fall on those with low incomes, with the document stating that the government “will focus any tax rises on those taxes which tax behaviours with negative externalities such as carbon tax, sugar tax, and plastics.” The local property tax, which affects 1.2 million households and was introduced in 2012 during the financial and banking crisis, will be extended to include new homes which have been exempt.

The document pledges that the government will seek to negotiate a new public sector pay deal with the trade unions. These deals have long been used to reduce wages and undermine working conditions, including imposing recruitment embargos.

The treatment of health workers during the current COVID-19 pandemic brings into sharp focus the policing role played by the unions on behalf of big business. Of the 25,414 confirmed cases of coronavirus in Ireland, a staggering one third of these have been front-line staff, including nurses, diagnostic and therapy staff, and ambulance staff. This is the highest infection rate among health workers in the world.

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