

# Ireland: United Left Alliance Breaking Up

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The Socialist Party of Ireland has announced its withdrawal from the United Left Alliance (ULA). The Workers and Unemployed Action Group (WUAG) departed last year and only the People before Profit Alliance/Socialist Workers Party, along with non aligned activists, remain in the depleted ranks of the ULA.

The General Election 2011 had seen the recently formed ULA with five of its candidates returned to the Dail as members of Parliament (TD?s). This was a stunning success and was achieved on a clear anti cuts, anti capitalist and anti coalition platform. Subsequent public meetings in several areas showed a renewed interest among a growing number of people and local branches established.

An electoral breakthrough like this could have been the spark that was needed to organise a new mass working class party in Ireland. An anti capitalist alternative could have orchestrated a real fight back by Irish workers against unprecedented levels of austerity. Instead, it has failed miserably on both counts and a real opportunity has now been squandered.

Budget 2013 has continued an unrelenting austerity drive by the coalition government that has now been followed by the liquidation of IBRC, the former disgraced Anglo Irish Bank, and Irish Nationwide. The Irish taxpayer will continue to pay for the toxic debts of these banks. The leadership of the Irish Trade Unions, ITUC, has offered no prospect of a serious fight back. The ULA armed with a fighting strategy could have stood as an alternative pole of attraction for Irish workers in a situation where the Labour Party betrays workers' interests yet again for coalition government.

## Democratic Deficit

The ULA was formed by the SP, SWP and WUAG as an electoral alliance. A national steering committee with representatives from the main groups was formed to decide on all the major issues. This was an inauspicious start as it meant that control was vested in backroom deals away from the membership and between the leaderships of the two major organisations.

Far better to have organised a conference to launch the ULA as a national organisation at which both the non-aligned and members of groups could start the process of democratically deciding what issues to campaign around, what action to organise to beat the austerity attacks and what programme to stand on. Clearly, the stunning electoral success was not matched by any sort of ambition on the ground. Why? Because the SP and SWP had no perspective of building a unified left organisation.

This democratic deficit was key in reinforcing a status quo in which the two main groups held sway but took no initiative to take the alliance forward. Despite the SP?s avowed aim of a new mass working class party, neither of the two groups had any interest in working together to build this.

So, for two years, both groups organised their own campaigns and recruited to their own organisations and the ULA went on the back burner. No wonder the non-aligned membership became angry. Although politically disparate, they did gain some independent representation in the alliance and raised their complaints, but control was always out of their hands. Indeed, it is amazing that any non aligned activists were recruited at all, given the lack of commitment to building branches and minimal involvement in decision making at powerless national conferences.

### Sect Not Party Building

Left unity, then, has been sacrificed to building the sects. The problem is that both main groups think they are 'the party' so building a new party is somewhat superfluous. Unfortunately, there is no group in Ireland that has the vanguard of class conscious workers in its ranks and a degree of modesty would not go amiss in characterising their own groups' status. There is not an anti capitalist or socialist party of the Irish working class as yet!

The exciting prospect opened up by the ULA was that a new left unity would hasten the development of a mass workers' party. It is entirely understandable that an alliance could not become that party overnight. However, it was always equally understandable that an alliance would soon fly apart if there were no immediate moves towards building a democratically run and unified organisation that guaranteed the rights of factions and tendencies.

The SP and SWP were not prepared to 'lose' their organisations; their sects remained more important for them than the greater goal of a new workers' party. In such a party there would be no restriction on their ability to put forward their own policies, so what were they afraid of? Clearly, it was the prospect of losing organisational control! Sect building becomes the aim, not winning a new layer of workers to revolutionary socialism.

Rather belatedly, at the last conference, the SWP were won over to the idea of a single membership organisation in which they accepted they might be a minority. Unfortunately, however, their amazingly limited perspective for the ULA would lead to an organisation that was neither explicitly socialist nor even a party. Equally, although the SP did at least campaign for 'socialism', in reality, neither wanted to go beyond an electoral half-way house.

### Socialist Party Exit

The Socialist Party's exit hinges on its claim that 'some in the ULA, including TD's, have moved away from a principled left position and have ditched the collaborative spirit'. The lack of a fight back against austerity amongst workers according to the SP has meant that 'working class people weren't pushed towards getting politically involved and the ULA didn't grow'.

Clearly, however, the issue that has plagued the SP the most has been the relationship between Clare Daly TD, now resigned from the SP but not the ULA, and Mick Wallace, Independent TD, property developer and tax evader. The SP quite correctly claims that 'its elected representatives must be politically independent from business and capitalist interests or people who represent those interests'.

Yet, when this tax evasion scandal first broke, it was the SP and its TD's, including Clare Daly, that refused to take a clear stance against Mick Wallace. SP representatives were among those on the steering committee who vetoed the motion calling for the ULA to call for Wallace's resignation as a TD. This clearly damaged the ULA in many people's eyes.

The SP has subsequently distanced itself from Clare Daly, but her continuing role in the ULA has estranged her former party. Another clash occurred on the question of abortion rights. Clare Daly has been

prominent in tabling a bill relating to legislation on abortion in the Dail backed by the ULA and Mick Wallace. It allowed for termination of pregnancy where a real, or substantial, risk to the life of the woman existed. The Bill was heavily defeated for a second time.

The SP was in favour of expanding the legislation to include a 'risk to a woman's health' as grounds for abortion rather than the more restrictive 'risk to life'. They also claimed that Daly had retabled the Bill for a third reading without reference to the steering committee of the ULA. Clearly, the SP amendment was an improvement to the Bill but even that still lacked the demand for free and safe abortion on demand, whether the woman is ill or not.

The ULA campaign should be centred around free abortion on demand, the issue is not just what might be achievable but what is necessary. Achieving anything less might be progress, but not enough. The infighting within the ULA on this issue misses the point. If the ULA at its inception had opened up a debate amongst its membership on the question of women's rights and democratically agreed on the nature of a campaign then we wouldn't have been having these tantrums amongst the ULA TD's and leaders. Better that the TD's were held accountable to a ULA programme for abortion rights. In truth, women's rights didn't feature in the setting up of the ULA.

#### Where Now?

The SP exit may well have dealt a huge blow to the ULA but the ULA was already stagnating as an electoral alliance. The SP's claim that its reason for leaving is a lack of a fight back against austerity that has limited the ULA's growth, is totally cynical. In the same breath, it is claimed that the prospect of a mass struggle against the Property Tax will encourage the development of a mass workers' party. Why not wait then?

Clearly, the lack of workers' struggles against austerity will impact on the ULA's growth, and the SP's growth for that matter. But working class organisation has not been smashed and we are in a period where the opportunities for mass struggle continue to exist. A new political organisation with a clear strategy could well have a stimulating effect on working class struggle, not just the other way round.

Two TD's, Clare Daly and Joan Collins, believe the ULA can be salvaged and moved towards a party but their bloc's proposals go nowhere near that goal. They are seeking to relaunch the ULA as a bloc of existing elected representatives (2 TD's and some councillors) alongside the non-aligned within the ULA and the Sligo People First Group. The political platform would still be anti cuts, anti coalition and anti capitalist market. The democratic structure would boil down to a bimonthly branch council, based on delegates from the branches, as the key decision making body, with national meetings (not necessarily conferences) maybe twice a year. There would be a coordinating committee with the SWP/PbPA.

These proposals do not challenge the present electoralist nature of the Alliance. They are based on a hasty need to 'develop an election strategy for 2014'. They are more concerned with how the ULA can back its TD's/councillors than about developing a new party based on the independent activity and interests of the working class to which its elected representatives are held accountable. Only workers' action will defeat austerity and change society. A new party should prioritise discussing how we can intervene in the working class around this perspective. What policies do we fight for and what forms of action are we proposing? A new democratic structure must decide on a definite way forward and there is no better way for that agreement to be made than at a national conference, which should be the supreme decision making body.

#### Proposals for Unity

Clearly, an alliance that is mainly based on a non-aggression pact at elections is not going to build a

political organisation. Building branches and recruiting to an alliance that has no defining organisation or programme is inadequate to the tasks of promoting left unity. At the end of the day, real democracy is measured by the organisation's commitment to implementing a definite programme. This applies to its leaders and TD's, as it does to the branches and the general membership.

So how can we build for the future? The first step in establishing a new national organisation would be agreement on how to stop the austerity offensive on Irish workers. A national conference would need to agree a way forward to be fought for within the trade unions, workplaces, estates and colleges.

But, if a new party is not to be a Labour Party Mark II, then such a way forward needs to be based on workers' direct action, not just electoral advances. A bold revolutionary policy of building Councils of Action committed to all-out action, including a General Strike to defeat the government's and the Troika's plans, should be adopted.

The next step is vital. A new organisation has to define itself; it can't exist in a vacuum for long as we have learnt by the demise of the ULA. It can only define itself by the programme it seeks to take into the working class movement. There will always be arguments and clashes on this, so we need a democratic means of addressing the different policies and traditions of the component groups and individuals.

There needs to be maximum discussion and the freedom to organise as a minority through factions and tendencies. Maximum unity in action when a line has been agreed, the kind of unity workers on strike would expect of all their comrades. This is broadly what democratic centralism is all about.

The ULA steered clear of an honest discussion on programme, no doubt thinking that would wreck the alliance. In fact, it was the lack of such a discussion that contributed to wrecking it. A new initiative has to open up a debate on the key programmatic issues facing Irish workers in their fight against native and imperialist capital. Workers Power believes three main issues need to be addressed in any such discussion.

The first is the crisis of leadership within the trade union movement. How can the rank and file wrest control of their unions, the better to fight for their interests? What strategy is needed to defend workers now and how is that to be linked to the fight for socialism?

Secondly, what action programme do we need in the fight for women's rights in the two reactionary, failed states of Ireland? The mobilisations around Savita, who died after being refused an abortion in Galway, and the Dail debates highlight the importance of a struggle for a working class women's movement.

Thirdly, we need a new, all-Ireland party that fights against the repression regularly handed out to republicans and their communities in the six counties as well as the twenty six counties. The continued internment of Marian Price, Stephen Murney, and raids on republicans in the south, are gross violations of civil liberties and point to collusion between both states. Socialists should be leading a campaign against this repression.

### Revolutionary Alternative

Any discussion of a new party and programme requires an understanding of Ireland's position in the world. The crisis-wracked Irish economy has starkly revealed the continued dependency on imperialist powers such as the US, EU and Britain. Socialists should be at the fore in demanding the confiscation of the multinationals' wealth and, indeed, that of native capital, and placing it under workers' control. We need a coordinated Europe wide struggle against austerity.

The fight against women's oppression is central to any new programme. The recession will undoubtedly

hit women the hardest. We must be in the forefront of the fight for women's rights, in particular for free abortion on demand.

Equally important is the British imperialists' grip on the north. If the south's semi colonial status is highlighted by this crisis, then the Good Friday Agreement's use as a vehicle for cuts as well as copper fastening British occupation is also revealed. Any new socialist formation in Ireland has to address the national question head on and call for the withdrawal of Britain and the dismantling of the sectarian state in the north.

Failure to address the need for a new workers' party in an open and democratic manner will let the hopes of many militant workers down. Failure to adopt a revolutionary socialist programme that fights to end capitalism and imperialism in Ireland, will inevitably lead down the road of reform and compromise that has tarnished the likes of the Labour Party and Sinn Fein.

Now is the time to build a revolutionary alternative ? for a 32 County Workers' Republic!

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