

# Rethinking the road to power in Ireland

Thu, 30/01/1997 - 11:59

Maureen Harrington reviews the new programme of Socialist Democracy\Ireland: The Promise of Socialism is by written by three members of Socialist Democracy ? the Irish section of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI).

The book claims to be a programme for revolutionary socialists in Ireland. This alone makes it something of a milestone for the USFI, which has long contented itself with occasional genuflections to the Transitional Programme of 1938 while in reality tailing Republicanism.

The positions expressed here represent a definite break ? to the left ? from the historic positions of the USFI in Ireland. After almost a quarter of a century of seeing the Republican struggle as objectively embodying the entire ?process of permanent revolution? they have now adopted a far more formally orthodox position: that only a revolutionary workers? party can lead the transformation of the national struggle into the struggle for working class power.

Socialist Democracy now recognises the importance of the Southern workers? class struggle, and even the necessity of breaking the Protestant workers from Unionism, for the victory of the struggle against imperialism in the North. In the unions, after long supporting left elements within the bureaucracy, they now come out for an anti-bureaucratic rank and file movement.

But despite these changes there is no accounting in this book for the failings of the USFI internationally or for its long and shoddy record of tailing Republicanism in Ireland.

Today with Sinn Fein/IRA hovering on the verge of a historic abandonment of its armed struggle against British imperialism the pressure to continue to accommodate to it is much weakened.

But tomorrow a return to full scale guerrilla war ? either by the IRA or via the emergence of a new incarnation of Republicanism ? could recreate the temptation to return to the old methods. Those who do not learn from the mistakes of the past always run the danger of repeating them.

In general there are three key points of difference between the LRCI and Socialist Democracy: Ireland?s role in the EU (see box p50), the dynamics of the national question, the ?reformability? of the USFI

## The National Question

On the IRA?s military campaign Socialist Democracy do break with the old tailist position of the USFI towards the Republican strategy. They criticise it in terms that the IWG has been doing, consistently, for the last two decades:

?Socialists similarly, for sound strategic reasons, oppose any republican militarist campaign which of necessity confined to a small number of people, is incapable of defeating a militarily much more powerful enemy but which does impose a more and more desperate militarism on the struggle. Indeed so much so

that it has been, and even still is seen as the struggle by many republicans, who elevate it to a principle. Not only can it not remove imperialism but it has proved totally incapable of defending Catholic workers from either British or loyalist violence. Instead it erects obstacles to the broadening and deepening of the struggle which is the best way to promote defence as well as advancing the struggle.? (p56)

This is well put. It is essential also to recognise that the IRA?s entire guerrilla strategy disastrously subordinated the struggle of the masses to that of a supporting role in the heroic, but ultimately doomed struggle of a few hundred guerrilla fighters against the 20,000 British troops and the reactionary Unionist majority in the Six Counties.

At the same time this strategy resolutely ignored the 26-County working class in favour of vain hopes that the Irish ruling class, or a section of it, would remember its ?national duty? and come to the aid of the struggle in the North.

Likewise, the need to fund the armed struggle with Irish-American dollars acted to keep Republicanism socially conservative.

This whole strategy constituted the major subjective obstacle to the development of an all-Ireland revolutionary party, rooted in the struggles of every section of the Irish working class. Its logical outcome ? not in reality its betrayal ? was the turn by the Adams? leadership towards negotiations for an end to the armed struggle, the ?Pathway To Peace? launched as early as 1988.

In *The Promise of Socialism* there is no balance sheet of what Trotskyists have been doing during the past 25 years.

This is a glaring defect. There is no mention of any other groups by name here ? an unwillingness to open up a Pandora?s box that would force the three authors of this book to account for the centrist practice of the Irish USFI over a quarter of a century.

For the question has to be asked: what did Socialist Democracy (under their previous names) themselves do at key points of the national struggle in the last three decades?

Nevertheless, at the level of strategic principles in relation to Republicanism and the national question this book represents a welcome and significant step in the opposite direction to that of the USFI leadership, despite its lack of a clear revolutionary programme for today that could translate those principles into a course of action.

Socialist Democracy do address the key question of how to break the Protestant working class from their Loyalist bosses:

?Only in . . . combining the struggle for democracy with that for socialism, and not limiting it solely to the north, is there any hope of defeating imperialism and winning Protestant workers . . . Only this programme can unite workers and reach out to the British working class and others for the international solidarity that will be required for victory.? (p 60)

And:

?Only a programme of uniting all workers north and south offers an alternative to both Loyalism and bourgeois Nationalism. It would represent real proof that a Workers? Republic would not be a ?Catholic Republic? where Protestant workers would suffer the sectarianism that Catholics suffer in the north.? (p 92)

It is pleasing to see Socialist Democracy adopt a position that the IWG has fought for over the last twenty

years.

We have always argued that Republicans have no strategy for breaking up the reactionary Loyalist bloc along class lines, and that only the fight for a workers' republic can do this. Any version of a bourgeois republic can only offer the Protestant working class semi-colonial servitude combined with the abolition of their present privileges.

We agree that workers' unity must be forged by fighting for a real improvement in the lives of the working class on both sides of the border, whatever their religion. But the goal of unity must be concretised by transitional demands otherwise it is an abstraction.

What does this mean? It means workers' joint action, wherever possible, across the sectarian divide, above all in the struggle against cuts, against mass unemployment and against threatened redundancies and a fight for a massive scheme of useful public works by direct public sector labour ? under the control of rank and file workers.

It means mass struggle in the streets and around the workplaces for work for all, Catholic and Protestant, at union rates of pay or full maintenance from the British state at the average industrial wage.

A revolutionary anti-capitalist strategy can relate to the real fears that the Protestant workers have of an imperialist deal: scaling down of subsidies and the economic underpinnings of their privileges. These privileges are privileges only in relation to the discrimination that exists against the nationalist community. However, Protestant workers do not have to pass through a stage of 'reconciliation' to Irish nationalism before becoming a force fighting for socialism in common with Catholic workers.

Once they have been won to such common struggles the decisive elements of the Protestant working class will realise that have nothing to fear from the republic that they and their nationalist fellow workers will establish under a revolutionary communist leadership. They can ensure that it will be a totally secular workers' republic integrated with workers' states in Britain, Europe and indeed the world. Such a workers' state in Ireland would be more consistently democratic than any bourgeois state and this includes its solution to the national question.

Once British imperialism is driven out and the artificial Six Counties state is smashed, then an Irish Workers' Republic could even grant to any part of Ireland, where a majority did not wish complete integration, the form of autonomy (up to and including separation) wanted by the majority living there and democratically decided upon by that majority.

The only condition would be that it did not entail economic or political privileges for the new majority or oppression for the minority within that area. The Irish workers and their vanguard today do not insist on the forcible integration of the northern Protestants into 'the Irish Nation?'. They do insist that the Protestant/Unionist minority is deprived of its veto on the completion of the unification of the Irish people.

On such a basis progressive Protestant and Catholic workers can be united in a revolutionary party

Such transitional and revolutionary democratic demands are missing from The Promise of Socialism. Its authors fail to spell out in any practical detail how Protestants could be won over. They are expected to buy class unity in much the same way as Republicans are supposed to buy national unity. They are asked to be happy with a general promise of a revolutionary socialist way forward.

## **Dynamics of Revolution**

In their analysis of the Irish Revolution up until they wrote *The Promise of Socialism* the Irish section of the USFI used the abstract schema of the 'epicentre'.

The epicentre of revolution could be designated to have shifted to whatever area of ferment the centrist USFI wanted to trail behind and act as cheerleader for ? at one time China, at another third world insurgency, at another still students.

Within this schema the predecessors of Socialist Democracy, under various names, viewed the epicentre of the Irish revolution as located in the anti- unionist insurgents from 1968 until the launching of the peace process.

Under the pressure of the peace process and the success of the Sinn Féin leaders in selling it to the anti - unionist masses, the authors of *The Promise of Socialism* have shifted the epicentre to the South and locate its focus in the Southern working class.

As part of this 're-think' they have gone to the other extreme and question whether the anti-unionist insurgency in the North, irrespective of its mass scale and leadership, can ever bring the southern working class behind it in a revolutionary upsurge against imperialism.

This view denies, for example, that the nine month all-Ireland mass H-Block struggle of 1980/81 had this potential. In our view, it did have such potential. What was absent was a revolutionary party to lead it to victory.

This adaptation to the conjunctural success of the counter revolutionary peace process, if not corrected, will leave the comrades of Socialist Democracy disoriented in face of the inevitable eruptions of resistance by the anti-unionist masses of the North and especially of the Northern anti -unionist working class.

These are inevitable because of the nature of the Northern Ireland state, the general oppression of all anti-unionists within it and by it and the double oppression of the anti-unionist working class.

The authors of *The Promise of Socialism* are led to the equally schematic position of seeing the southern workers, and their economic struggles against multinational capital, as the new revolutionary 'epicentre' in Ireland: the new key to building unity between the workers of the North and south:

'As the majority of the working class exists in the south it is vital for socialists to understand the dynamic through which the southern workers will develop a revolutionary consciousness. This will not come through simple solidarity with the northern struggle, although this will be necessary, but primarily through their own struggle within which the raising of transitional demands can point the way to the necessity for workers to take control not only of their workplaces but also of the state and their country.

'Through this the rotten and undemocratic nature of the present Irish state will be revealed and so will its ultimate dependence on imperialism, especially British, which, as in every other previous revolution everywhere in the world, will attempt to intervene to save it. Only in this situation can southern workers fully appreciate the link between their own struggle and that in the North.' (pp 59/60)

No Trotskyist would deny that a pre-revolutionary or revolutionary situation in Ireland could arise in this way.

But a correct analysis of the H -Block struggle would also show that a pre -revolutionary situation could be triggered by the southern working class? solidarity with a heroic struggle of the anti-unionists in the North fighting back against renewed imperialist or Loyalist attacks. To ignore such a possibility for the sake of a

new, inverted, schema is a serious mistake.

## Conclusion

The book contains many other sections that, for reasons of space, we have not dealt with in this review ? women, the environment, the struggle against ?social partnership? in the south.

On most of these questions, however, despite the criticisms we would have, the direction of the comrades is towards the left and away from the right centrism of the USFI.

As with the comrades? evolution to the left on the national question, however, each step taken away from USFI orthodoxy begs the question: why remain in the USFI? The answer is given at the end of the book:

?The organisation to which we belong, the Fourth International, set up by Leon Trotsky in 1938 is by no means perfect. However, we are committed to it as the best framework from which to fight for the mass revolutionary international that is necessary to achieve socialism around the world.? (p 138)

This marks the current limitation on the comrades? evolution to the left. It marks their continuing adaptation to centrism.

The Fourth International set up by Leon Trotsky in 1938 bears no resemblance to today?s USFI. Unlike Trotsky?s International it has systematically abandoned the revolutionary programme and perspective in every major revolutionary crisis.

Unlike Trotsky?s International it has hailed endless alien class forces ? from factions of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Eastern Europe and Cuba, through the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, even the Islamicists in Iran to the Republicans in Ireland ? as the legitimate leaders of ?the revolutionary process?.

The USFI has confined its own role to advising such leaders, not challenging them in the name of socialist revolution and the fight for a workers? republic. (For a full account see Death Agony of the Fourth International Workers Power/IWG)

In short, the USFI is an organisation that has long since broken its ties with genuine Trotskyism. To believe that it can become a vehicle for rebuilding the world party of socialist revolution is a hopeless utopia. It has repeatedly proved itself immune to reform by countless ?left? factions in its long history. It has proved itself to be an ossified centrist current.

The question of the party cannot be divorced from the fight for the revolutionary programme. In a vital sense, the party is the programme. A centrist party or International, like the USFI, cannot be the means by which we fight for the revolutionary programme. They stand in sharp contradiction to one another.

If the comrades further develop their programme in a revolutionary direction they will soon realise that far from being the ?best framework? within which to fight for genuine Trotskyism they will have to break from their International.

For our part ? without any ultimatums ? we will seek, through joint work and fraternal debate, to hasten that break so that the forces of revolutionary Trotskyism in Ireland can be strengthened and the socialist alternative to Republicanism built in the years ahead.n

[b]Ireland, imperialism and the EU[b]

In the chapter ?Imperialism and Ireland? Socialist Democracy argue that:

?The chronic failure of the Irish economy can be measured in terms of poverty, unemployment and emigration.? (p 29)

And:

?It is only by understanding that the Irish economy is a semi-colonial one that we can understand how it works and how it has failed . . . ? (p 31)

And yet again:

? . . . the southern capitalist class is small and relatively weak and its representatives are not in a position of equality with imperialist capital and its representatives.? (p 37)

There is no doubt that southern capitalism has failed the working class historically. Southern capitalism has certainly not closed the gap on the imperialists since initiating the 'open door' period thirty years ago.

Nevertheless, during these years the Irish economy has expanded under the impact of foreign direct manufacturing investment and protected (assisted) state directed capital investments.

Has this combined process of capital accumulation lifted the capitalist class out of its semi-colonial condition? No. Has the Irish semi-colonial bourgeoisie been strengthened, both in comparison with its past position and in relation to its imperialist masters? Yes.

Membership of the EU has been of enormous advantage to the Irish bourgeoisie. It has had subsidised markets for its agricultural goods, access to funds for state directed investments and social services and regional grants. In return the Irish government has removed all barriers to multinational penetration into the Republic, especially from the US.

The benefits from this have not come to the Irish working class, whose wage rates remain low and whose 'surplus' numbers are still compelled to emigrate. But high growth rates, EU infrastructural projects and the subsidising of a more modern welfare state, as well as the availability of jobs for skilled workers in Europe, have in this period altered the position of Ireland from a hopelessly backward state, languishing because of its division and continued tutelage to Britain, into a relatively advanced semi-colony.

That Ireland still remains a semi-colony is clear from the domination of its manufacturing base by US and EU multinationals and from their extraction of profits from the country.

But its current relatively privileged semi-colonial status is integrally linked to its position inside the EU, the largest and most fully developed of the imperialist economic blocks.

This is the material underpinning of the international interest in the peace process and of Sinn Féin's hopes (particularly those of the Adams leadership) for a peaceful resolution of the Irish national question.

Socialist Democracy's analysis is not based on such a detailed materialist analysis of the economy. It is both dogmatic and catastrophist, adding up to little more than a bald assertion that nothing has changed. (For the Irish Workers' Group's analysis see Class Struggle no 22 'The Paradox of Irish Economic Development?').

Socialist Democracy argue for a rejection of the Maastricht Treaty in referenda. They give an outline, as they see it, of the inability of EU to converge:

'The Maastricht agreement contained a brutal realism about its goals but the means of achieving them

were dressed up in a bourgeois idealism designed to disguise the difficulties and disagreements that lay in its path. There was never any hope that the disparate capitalist classes and their economies would gradually converge.? (p 21)

We do not deny the existence of economic unevenness within the EU but we do believe that the combined development over the last years has been toward convergence.

Low growth, divergent economic cycles, high labour costs and slow progress towards European industrial integration all put Europe at a disadvantage vis-a-vis its main rivals in global terms ? the United States and Japan. Clearly, there will be contradictions and differences between member states on the road to convergence, especially between Britain and Germany.

But convergence and EU unity is a strategic imperative of French and German imperialism. Germany will press for a twin track approach. France and Germany, together with Benelux countries, will strain to achieve the 1999 deadline. The drive towards a form of convergence is a reality, not a fiction.

While correctly detailing what the whole Maastricht project means for workers, Socialist Democracy draw the wrong conclusions. They say:

?The whole Maastricht process ? designed to create and strengthen a European imperialism ? must be rejected . . . the move towards a united European imperialism is neither inevitable nor progressive. European capitalist integration is not just directed against the US and Japan but also against the European working class?For Irish workers especially it means that the attractiveness of Ireland as a site for mobile multinational investment will depend on relatively low wages and a docile workforce. Thus in any referenda seeking the acceptance of such a programme . . . we recommend a categorical no.? (p 25)

This position is in danger of promoting, rather than combating, nationalist ideology amongst Irish workers. The nationalism of a semi-colony ? when it acts not in a real struggle against imperialism but as a cover for isolationism, and a lack of struggle against illusions in a ?pan-nationalist bloc? ? is crippling for the class independence of the proletariat.

Yet it is precisely this sort of nationalism that the ?vote no? position encourages.

We argue that the working class should not vote either for or against the EU in referenda. To vote yes is to favour one form of capitalist development against another. Each form of development has anti-working class implications and must be resisted by the working class. For the working class to line up behind a nationalist bourgeoisie arguing for the rejection of Maastricht, and, as a consequence, espousing national protectionism and economic development would be equally disastrous. It would fatally undermine the independence of the workers and weaken the chances of effective international solidarity between sections of the European working class.

We reject a united imperialist Europe, a ?Fortress Europe? ? in increasing conflict with its rival imperialist blocs ? exploiting the world and condemning whole regions of it to massive poverty and famine. Likewise we reject the alternative system of ?independent? rival European imperialisms.

What workers across Europe must do is establish their class independence from both their national capitalists and from the institutions of a would-be European imperialist superstate. Workers should use the heightened transnational consciousness in Europe to build organisations, linked from below, fighting for working class demands and fighting against all the reactionary legislation and constitutions of the EU states.

You cannot evade capitulation to nationalism by arguing for a United Socialist States of Europe in an abstract fashion, as Socialist Democracy do, while marching shoulder to shoulder with the anti-EU chauvinists and Irish isolationists, in any campaign around a referendum.

Obviously we should oppose and vote no on any concrete anti-working class measures, budget cuts and so on, if the bourgeoisie were ever to be stupid enough to put these to a referendum. Likewise when a national bourgeoisie is opposed to the application of limited, but progressive social rights (as Major was for Britain and the Six Counties on the working hours directive) then we are for their application and, if there was a referendum would vote for them.

But when it comes to 'in or out of the EU?', for or against Monetary Union, for further moves towards a federal state etc., then abstention is the only revolutionary and internationalist course. Getting out or staying in, maintaining the Punt and the sovereignty of the Dail do not represent either gains or goals for the working class since it does not control the Irish state any more or any less than it controls the EU.

The working class can defend its social gains, its TU and democratic rights and ultimately struggle for power just as easily within the EU as outside it.

Even the solution to the national question in the North will be no more difficult to achieve inside the EU than outside of it. Given the EU bourgeoisie's attempted development of semi-state institutions, the task of the Irish workers' movement is to go forward faster than the bourgeoisie towards unity with its class brothers and sisters in Europe.

Staying in the EU does not prevent Irish workers from fighting all anti-working class measures emanating from Brussels. Indeed they can do so in common with the workers of France and Germany who have demonstrated their strength and capacity to fight.

The national Labour movements are no repositories of class struggle which will be ruined by integration. Facing a common enemy, the EU bourgeoisie, is already tending to link workers' struggles. This common struggle should come before, or rather stand instead of, all pan-national alliances and all insularity.

The economic and social changes in Ireland, its much greater integration into Europe is the objective starting point for a transcendence of the narrowness and provincialism inevitable in a tiny semi-colonial state.

The comrades of Socialist Democracy need to rethink the USFI's position on Europe and not cling on to a dogmatic belief that nothing fundamental has changed or can change in Ireland's political and economic situation short of the socialist revolution. n

---

**Source URL:** <https://fifthinternational.org/content/rethinking-road-power-ireland>