

# ***LEFTLINE***

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***From struggle to sell-out  
- new partnership deal***



# New social partnership deal is the worst yet

Perhaps it was naive to imagine that we had seen the death knell of social partnership when the battle lines between the classes were clearly drawn during the Irish Ferries dispute. Not since the tax marches of the late 70's had the Irish trade union movement been so united and focused as it was then.

Hundreds of thousands of trade unionists, their families, friends and fellow workers of all nationalities, even kids in their school uniforms, took to the streets of Ireland's cities. The attack on basic workers' rights by Irish Ferries management exposed social partnership for what it was: a hollow myth. Surely there could be no more partnership deals after this - how wrong we were.

It's clear now that the union bureaucracy was cynically using the mass mobilisation of our movement as a bargaining tool. Union leaders blew hot air in speeches to the many thousands of workers who were genuinely angry. We know now how sincere they were. Let's dissect the pathetic deal that has been hobbled together over the past four months of negotiations – it shows the union leadership in their true colours.

Before looking at the elements of the new deal, we have to ask when

the union bureaucracy received a mandate to negotiate a 10-year deal? They had absolutely no right to do so and must be challenged over this.



**Social partners Bertie Ahern and David Begg deliver for IBEC**

The new partnership deal offers a pay element of 10% over a 27-month period: this means workers are being offered a pay rise of 4.4% per annum. Inflation is currently running at 3.9%. The inflation figures do not take the recent rise in interest rates into account. Nor are house prices (which have increased by 270% over the last decade) included in the Consumer Price Index.

The Combat Poverty Agency recently informed us that 21% of the Irish population was at risk from poverty. It's no coincidence then that Mandate, which

represents many low-paid workers, withdrew from the partnership talks long before the deal was concluded.

Mandate argue that the pay element falls far short of tackling the issue of low pay in one of the most profitable sectors of our economy - the retail and service sector. The average wage for retail workers is €9 an hour.

An extra half % (less than 2 euros a week!) is being offered to those on less than €10.25 euros an hour. Mandate have published figures showing that employer profits in the retail trade had increased by 338% over a 10-year period, while wages had only increased by 160% over the same period. Mandate have now opted for free collective bargaining and lodged a 13% pay claim on all their major employers.

The pay elements of the new agreement for public-sector workers differ radically from any previous partnership deal. Previously, pay awards were made on the basis of benchmarking. In the new deal, pay awards will only be made if employees in the public sector agree to a process where "ongoing changes are agreed".

The aim of this clause is clear:

to allow management to force through new work practises without any risk of conflict from the workforce. If employees in the civil service take any form of industrial action in opposition to new work practises, this will put their pay awards in jeopardy. This opens the door to complete “flexibility” in the civil service, with contracts being renegotiated and employees forced to work unsociable hours.

No extra resources are to be made available for any of these “ongoing changes”. When new work practises are put in place, employees must cooperate while any challenges to the changes go through a lengthy appeal process. On top of this, outsourcing of public-sector work is permitted under the terms of the deal - the union bureaucracy have agreed to allow outside agencies to carry out work that was previously carried out by unionised public-sector workers.

The union negotiators did not achieve one of their stated goals – an “ability to pay more clause” for workers in profitable firms. This means that workers can’t take a claim for further pay increases even if the employer has the ability to pay, but employers can still claim an inability to pay up under the terms of the new agreement.

One of the key issues in recent months has been the outsourcing and subcontracting of work through agencies. Case after case was brought to light by the trade union movement in the run-up to the talks, proving that employers were abusing workers’ rights and attacking employment standards.

When it comes to outsourcing, the

new agreement will only tackle the question of “compulsory redundancies”. It specifically allows employers to continue using agency workers. It will not apply to “the employment of agency workers, for temporary or recurring business needs, or the use of outsourcing/contracting-out, or other forms of business restructuring”.

Where a dispute arises with an employer in relation to “compulsory redundancies”, a union can appeal on behalf of its members. But the workers must show that they complied with restructuring, and that no industrial action took place. The only sanction an employer will face if the redundancies are found to be illegitimate is that the State’s contribution to redundancy payments will be withdrawn. The workers can then take a case of unfair dismissal: this process is always lengthy and hardly ever leads to reinstatement.

This element of the deal will further erode worker militancy and solidarity. It ties workers into a long and extremely bureaucratic process, preventing them from taking immediate action against an employer. The mobilisation that we saw against Irish Ferries management would be impossible.

In all previous agreements, the issue of the social wage was a mere afterthought. Now it has been put centre stage. To put in context the pledges now being made, we must look first at what was not delivered in the previous agreement “Sustaining Progress”.

A promise of 10,000 affordable homes was made in the previous agreement. This has not been delivered, and is no longer

mentioned by any of the parties that agreed the previous deal. Childcare costs are now running at five times the rate of inflation, but no serious effort has been made to tackle the issue.

Our health service is in chronic meltdown. Things are so bad that the Irish Nurses’ Organisation have not only decided to withdraw from the partnership process, but also passed a motion of no confidence in Minister of Health Mary Harney at their most recent annual conference.

Before the new talks on a social partnership agreement took place the union bureaucracy made grand threats that if the Government went ahead with its planned privatisation of Aer Lingus, they would immediately withdraw from the partnership talks. The Government has now gone ahead with the sell-off, but the union leaders forgot about the walk-out.

So what can the radical left do? Our first response must be to argue that within a capitalist economy, there can be no such thing as “social partnership”. Any dilution of that fundamental point means losing sight of the battle. It is the duty of the radical left to be honest and to make its message very clear from the outset.

The radical left must help instigate a grass-roots movement both inside and outside the trade union movement. This movement must have a number of clear aims and objectives: to expose the trade union bureaucracy, to bring the bureaucracy to account, and to make the union movement democratic from the bottom to the very top. **SL**



# Green Party on the march towards government

Many wise thinkers predicted that the affluence of the Celtic Tiger would kill off left-wing politics in Ireland, with a conservative consensus underpinned by the new middle classes. Things haven't gone according to plan, and there's been a shift to the Left

values haven't spread far beyond Michael McDowell's D4 stamping grounds.

While the newspapers concentrate on minor shifts between the two rival conservative alliances, recent polls have shown that a clear

by the Irish state to its citizens. The red-hot anger generated by the health crisis is the clearest example of this. There's a reservoir of discontent in Irish society, ready to be exploited by progressive forces.



## From protest to power? Green TDs John Gormley and Dan Boyle

since the Tiger first roared.

With the trade union movement shackled by “partnership” with employers and the state, and community groups increasingly absorbed by the same process, it's sometimes hard to see what's going on beneath the surface. But anyone who looks at the opinion polls with a discerning eye can see that anti-social Thatcherite

majority (60%) of voters identify public services as their priority for the next election. Twenty years after the foundation of the Progressive Democrats, their creed finds little favour with the electorate – just 7% put low taxes at the top of their wish-list.

It seems as if the private wealth generated by the Celtic Tiger has sharpened dissatisfaction with the shoddy public services offered

Inevitably, this feeling has had an impact on electoral politics, as shown by the rise of Sinn Féin and the success of left-leaning independents like Catherine Murphy and Jerry Cowley. In fact, the centre of gravity in Irish politics would probably have shifted much further to the Left, had it not been for two self-inflicted wounds: the implosion of the Workers Party in the early nineties, and Dick Spring's

disastrous decision to enter government with Fianna Fail after Labour's unprecedented success in the 1992 election.

The Green Party has been one of the main beneficiaries of this trend – without Labour's record of unprincipled coalition with conservative parties, or the paramilitary baggage of Sinn Fein, the Greens can use their cuddly-yet-challenging image to soak up support. If the FG-Labour alliance comes to power after the next election, it will almost certainly contain Green ministers.

This journey towards political power has prompted the usual array of clichés from media commentators. It's time for the Greens to make the transition from "party of protest" to "party of government", they assure us. And the Greens haven't been slow taking the advice on board.

So keen are they to win plaudits, the Greens have bowed to the neo-liberal consensus on tax, pledging that neither personal nor corporate tax bills will be increased under their watch. The new emphasis was sign-posted with the conference slogan "Greens mean business". But their leading figures would take great offence if the shift on tax was damned as an unprincipled sell-out.

On the contrary, they say, it's a necessary step towards implementing their policies. Better environmental regulations need not harm business: in fact, by encouraging the private sector to become more efficient, the Greens will help the Irish economy in the long run.

On paper, they may well be right. But experience shows that the

business class has little patience for enlightened self-interest. After having its collective ego massaged by Ireland's political parties for many years, it's hard to imagine Irish capital bowing to new government regulations without kicking up an almighty fuss.

The Greens may imagine that by suspending long-term ambitions for change, they can achieve more limited goals. But it's more likely that their modest objectives will be crushed between the wheels of IBEC and the *Sunday Independent*.

The response of the corporate media to last year's re-branding exercise gives a taste of what will be in store. Far from rushing to embrace the new, mainstream Green Party, the pundits charged them with not going far enough, the *Irish Times* informing its readers that "facing up to the difficult business of compromise is some way off for the Green party."

Although Thatcherism hasn't penetrated the popular mind anything like as much as its champions pretend, there's no denying the grip of neo-liberal ideas within the political and media elites. By accommodating themselves to this consensus, the Greens are effectively abandoning any hope of changing society. Progressive change can only come about if the right-wing consensus is challenged with confidence and energy.

It would be naïve to expect the Green Party to lead the way. The Greens have no firm ideological or social base: class politics doesn't feature in their world-view. Their hostile response to the bin tax campaign showed what this means in practice. Without

the conviction that there's a solid constituency of working-class people ready to support left-wing positions (and take part in struggle themselves), nobody can resist the pressure of conservative ideas for long. The constant din of the media will see to that.

Their stance on international affairs still puts the Greens well to the left of the political establishment. But this may have a limited shelf-life. If they wish to enter government with Fine Gael and Labour, the Greens will find it very difficult to maintain their critical view of the European Union. And Fine Gael's aggressive contempt for Irish neutrality won't sit well with Green pacifism. The journey of the German Greens from anti-nuclear protests to NATO summits may find an echo in Irish politics.

In the meantime, it's hard to disagree with the view of Green TD Paul Gogarty: "It does not matter which of the larger parties is in government following the next election. Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats are tired and need to be given a break but the supposed Fine Gael-Labour Party alternative is more of the same." **DF**

# Democracy and the Left - practise what we preach

The internal organisation of a left group is not something of minor importance. History has shown repeatedly that organisations which are undemocratic, hierarchical, unequal and patriarchal tend to perpetuate those flaws on a broader scale. A group which has no real internal democratic life can hardly help to create a grassroots democracy. A group led by a self-perpetuating leadership clique can never play a constructive role in establishing participatory structures. An organisation which is completely male dominated or riddled with sexism is hardly in a position to advance gender equality.

As the Irish left regroup and struggle to build new alliances it is vital that this question is put on the agenda. Confronting this issue is essential in ensuring that genuinely democratic

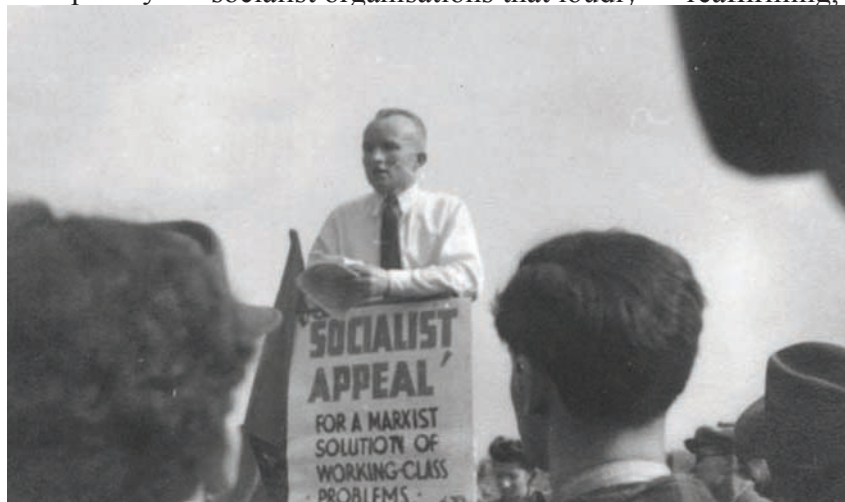
forces, rather than hierarchical self-appointed vanguards or parliamentary cliques, play the leading role in forging new alliances. Even groups that are organised on a democratic basis are not immune to some of these flaws.

The negative traits that beset many far-left organisations are not simply caused by 'bad politics' or 'nasty leaders'. Often left groups tend to replicate

the structures of the society around them, no matter how oppositional they are: constant vigilance is necessary to prevent this from happening. Many young people join left groups in rebellion against the prevailing structures only to submit meekly to similar structures in a new guise: religious faith is replaced by revolutionary faith where the party is always right and the future is bright indeed if only you work hard enough and are loyal enough to the party. Women join socialist organisations that loudly

organisations are concerned is all one way: workers must follow the vanguard on the one true path to socialism. There is little place for fruitful interaction, for the militants to learn from the struggle and for the party to review its tactics in light of what it has learnt from the workers in struggle.

The small size of the far-left in Ireland compounds this isolation: small groups of people constantly meeting and working together, reaffirming, uncritically, their own worldview all the time. So the interests of the group and the class become one and the same thing: what is good for the party is good for the class, so no matter how unprincipled the manoeuvre, if it is to the short-term advantage of the group then it must serve the long-term interest of the class.



**British far-left leader Gerry Healy, whose bullying style of leadership was notorious**

denounce patriarchy only to find that almost all the leaders are men and that they are often faced with the same sexism that exists in society in general.

These negative traits are often compounded by isolation from the working class. Partially cushioned from the reality of life for the mass of people, living in an almost make-believe world of impending revolutionary change, the interaction as far as these

This is all further compounded by the use of outmoded and irrelevant models of party organisation, which perpetuate and reproduce these traits. In particular, the top-down structures of internal organisation usually known as 'democratic centralism' are still popular with far-left organisations.

While one could argue that such a model might be necessary in the struggle against a dictatorship (and personally I don't agree



with such an analysis), this does not justify the conclusion that this is the best way of organising in a bourgeois democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In fact all the evidence indicates that the reason so many left organisations cling to this model is to maintain rigidly undemocratic regimes, to vaccinate them against the virus of dissent and genuine debate.



## Lenin lives, according to the Simpsons

Of course, the best antidote to authoritarianism on the left is the existence of a healthy, active and numerous democratic revolutionary left. By this I mean not necessarily one organisation but a whole range of ones that are transparently democratic and non-hierarchical in their practice. This might include anarchist, democratic Marxist, and broader left formations but the key here is that people can see that there are real functioning alternatives to the centralised groups and that the contrast is apparent in their day to day work.

Regardless of the theory and intention of those involved, the pressures of the struggle and of the structures and culture of

capitalist society can produce structural flaws in the internal organisation of any group. A leadership cult can develop, sectarianism can take hold and structures can be manipulated, even in the most democratic of organisations. The only safeguard against such distortions is constant vigilance: fine-tuning and testing the checks and balances, continuous vigorous debate and a constant immersion in the class struggle.

No matter how good our organisation looks on paper we must do exactly what the membership of centralist groups are never encouraged to do: subject our own organisation to critical evaluation. *CB*

## Bolivia takes a turn to the Left

When Bolivian president Evo Morales sent troops into his country's oil and gas fields on May 1<sup>st</sup> of this year to reclaim hydrocarbon reserves from foreign corporations, the usual suspects were enraged. A chorus of condemnation rang out from elite spokesmen across the western world, and Morales was sternly informed of the error of his ways at a subsequent EU summit.

"The most important thing is that everyone uses the power they have responsibly, that is what we want to have happen," said Tony Blair. "All of us have a responsibility to the world community to try to manage this sensibly." Mr Blair's own record of responsible conduct towards the world community is, of course, beyond reproach.

**Let us speak plainly. Historically, the errors committed by a truly revolutionary movement are infinitely more fruitful than the infallibility of the cleverest Central Committee - Rosa Luxemburg**

EU Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso sketched in the details a little better when he informed Morales and his ally Hugo Chavez that "we are a Europe that is against populist tendencies". Morales need only have asked the people of France and the Netherlands if he wanted to find that out.

The hostile response was natural, when you take account of the colonial mentality that holds sway in western power centres. These gentlemen are used to a certain pattern of behaviour from Majority World leaders: they expect them to tailor their policies to the needs of western business interests. The notion that they might consider the needs of their own people is very sinister indeed.

A few trouble-makers pointed out that the original contracts signed between foreign oil companies and the Bolivian government were almost certainly illegal, not having been brought before the

of his government's position. While the Vice-President of the new government, Alvaro García Linera, sought to reassure foreign capital ("the decree doesn't confiscate or annul the production

extraordinary upheavals since the turn of the millennium, placing it at the cutting edge of social struggles in Latin America. In 2000, the people of Cochabamba revolted against the privatisation



## **Bolivia's President Evo Morales - the first indigenous head of state in a Latin American country**

country's parliament. But most sensible commentators agreed that there could only be one explanation for the despicable conduct of Bolivia's president, and pointed the finger at the chief source of evil, wrongdoing and slack conduct in the region, Venezuela's Hugo Chavez.

They might have thought to listen when Morales himself explained what his inspiration was: "If the people have voted for nationalisation, for me, the voice of the people is the voice of God, and so we have to respect it."

Most people on the Left will rightly have welcomed the steps taken by Morales. But we should note the ambiguity

capacity of the companies, what it does is reduce the extraordinary profits"), Evo Morales put forward a more ambitious vision: "This is just the start. Tomorrow or the day after it will be mining, then forestry and eventually all the natural resources for which our ancestors fought."

These conflicting statements reflect the position of the new Bolivian government, caught between the pressure of its own supporters and the demands of capital, both foreign and domestic. The way in which these contradictions are resolved will be critical for Latin American politics in the next few years.

Bolivia has experienced

of their city's water reserves. The revolt came after almost two decades of extreme neo-liberal policies that had the backing of the country's political elite. When the government was forced to revoke the water contract, it was widely seen as the first big victory for popular struggles against corporate globalisation.

The fight-back spilled over onto the electoral stage in 2002, when Evo Morales ran as the candidate of the MAS (Movement Towards Socialism) for president. Morales had come to prominence as a leader of coca farmers; his party was only founded in 1997. Bolivia's working class has a strong tradition of political organisation,



but this had been undermined by neo-liberal cutbacks that slashed industrial jobs, especially in the mines. But a revival of political consciousness among the indigenous peoples of the country helped filled the vacuum in the 1990s.

scores of protesters. His deputy Carlos Mesa acceded to power, but could not satisfy the demands of the popular opposition either. He was forced to resign in June 2005 after a fresh round of protest brought the country to a halt.

... the project of economic and social transformations that this organisation wants to carry through cannot be described as either communist or socialist.” But the process in Bolivia may render such predictions redundant.



**Protesters in Cochubamba during the “water war” of 2000**

Morales was running at 4% in the polls for much of the campaign, and the other candidates didn't want to debate with him. But the MAS ran an energetic campaign, and the US ambassador helped by attacking Morales in the Bolivian media. Morales stunned the political class by winning 20% of the vote, just 3% less than the victorious candidate Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada.

Sanchez de Lozada did not enjoy his triumph for long. In September 2003, Bolivian social movements launched a wave of protests demanding the nationalisation of the country's hydrocarbon resources. The president was forced to resign and flee the country after state forces killed

During both periods of crisis (September-October 2003 and June 2005), embryonic forms of popular power took shape in many parts of the country. But the MAS was determined to follow a constitutional road to power. After the resignation of Mesa, a transitional government took power until early elections were held in December. Morales won a decisive victory, elected on the first count with 54% of the vote.

So far, the new government has not signalled any ambitions to challenge the capitalist system. The Vice-President Alvaro Garcia Linera, a left-wing academic with a guerrilla background, has said that “Bolivia will still be capitalist in 50 or 100 years

The Chavez government in Venezuela also came to power with limited ambitions: eight years on, its determination to overcome reactionary opponents of the Bolivarian revolution has put the question of socialism on the agenda.

One thing is certain: the Bolivian people have acquired a rich experience of struggle in recent years. The path followed by their country will largely depend on the use to which they put that experience in the coming months and years. **DF**