

Irish Politics after the Elections

Interview with Kieran Allen and Seán Mitchell

Following the election of three People Before Profit TDs in the South and two PBP MLAs in the North, Irish Marxist Review has interviewed Kieran Allen, PBP National Secretary, and Seán Mitchell, PBP North-South Coordinator, regarding perspectives for the future.

IMR: The recent elections have a significant advance for the radical left north and south. Can you begin by putting this in historical perspective and explaining the background to this important development?

Kieran Allen: It is quite significant but it is only the start. The radical left in Ireland has traditionally been a marginal force. One writer once compared it to a pinch of salt thrown into the making of a cake. It added a little interest but nothing of substance.

It was not just the revolutionary left—but the wider left. There was never a mass Communist Party in Ireland and there was not even a substantial Labour Party. Throughout its history, the Labour Party received just about 10% of the popular votes. The only exception to this pattern was in the late sixties when it pushed its vote up to 17%; 1992 when its vote rose to 19%, after it adopted a rhetoric about breaking the ‘golden circle’ that linked the political and corporate elites; 2011 when it reached 20% in the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger collapse.

Activists often came to think that the Irish were a naturally conservative population. It was claimed that they had been so indoctrinated by the Catholic Church that would always reject left wing ideas. In later years, as the power of the Catholic Church declined, it was suggested that the population had imbibed so much of the consumerist culture during the Celtic Tiger years, which they could never move left. These views were, however, mistaken. The Irish working class had a revolutionary tradition that reached its high point in struggle against the British empire between 1918 and 1922. Those revolutionary instincts were largely suppressed by a victorious counter-

revolution that accompanied the formation of the Free State and the Orange state in Northern Ireland.

In the South, the conservative hegemony rested on the twin pillars of the Catholic Church and Fianna Fáil, who forged a close alliance with each other. But their grip on the population even in the dark decades of reaction was never total and there were occasions — like in the 1960s — when left ideas grew. The problem always, however, was that the social democratic focal point for these aspiration was too weak, too compromised with the state structures of a weakened capitalism to carry them forward. Every time that Labour won support, it immediately threw it away because it saw itself primarily as a prop to support one or other of the right wing parties in Coalition.

The emergence now of different forces which are competing for the electoral allegiance of Southern workers is a dramatic illustration of how Irish workers are both moving left and have not yet decided on where that journey will take them. The election of 2016 showed there was at least four different currents who are fighting for the support of workers.

There is AAA-PBP which stood on a clear left wing programme that stated openly that they favoured a unilateral write down of the bankers’ debt that was foisted on the Irish population. They ruled out any deals with the traditional right and argued openly for a strategy of ‘people power’ to bring change. It won 4% of the popular vote.

There was a smaller grouping of individual left wingers who were grouped together as ‘Independents4Change’. These shared many policies in common with AAA-PBP but tried to relate to an anti-politics mood that had grown among some activists. Irish workers often looked to ‘Independents’ in the past to express their disgust at the conservatives. But what is clearly needed now is a more all embracing party that seeks to pull together the sinews of opposition to the current elites and develop strategies for over-

throwing them. Independents4Change won 1.2% but were concentrated in small number of constituencies.

There is also Sinn Féin who have adopted a strong anti-austerity rhetoric in the South but seek to combine it with a desire to work through the existing state structures and the EU. The most notable feature of SF's electoral intervention is that it fell far short of their own expectations, achieving 14% of the popular vote. They were subject to a massive media hate campaign and this accounted for their lower than expected votes. But there is also a growing suspicion among a minority of workers that they are not to be trusted.

There is also the remnant of the Labour Party which remains the party of the union bureaucracies in SIPTU, and, unofficially, unions like IMPACT. Both these unions are addicted to social partnership and have formed close working relations with the upper tiers of the Southern state. Their leaders want a mildly social democratic party as a vehicle for enhancing their relationship with the state bureaucracy. The Labour Party won just 7% of the vote but are hoping to combine with the newly formed Social Democrats who won 3%.

Given these competing perspectives, we are clearly at the start of a process of left radicalisation. How it will develop has yet to be determined.

Seán Mitchell: The background in the North is not identical to the one that Kieran outlines, but the underlying causes are fundamentally the same, and it's worth expanding on this and describing the relationship between the two.

As Kieran says, both states in Ireland, North and South, are products of the defeat of the Irish Revolution. In the South a conservative Catholic state was created, ruled by the twin pillars of post-civil-war Irish politics, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. These organisations had deep roots in Irish society, backed up by the overarching influence of the Catholic Church. In the North, an Orange State emerged from partition: where Ulster Unionists led a de facto one party state, underpinned by the power of largely Protestant owned industry, and gelled together by

the sectarian populism of the Orange Order. Again, neither of these hegemonic constructions was without challenge. Unionism, for example, developed serious fissures during both the Great Depression and World War 2. And there were intermittent outbreaks of struggle.

Ultimately, however, both Ulster Unionism in the North and Civil War politics in the South were able to enjoy large periods of stability, and to stave off any emerging threats for a period of decades. Both of these bourgeois formations were based upon the combined and uneven development of Irish capitalism. Capitalism emerged in the North earlier than its southern counterpart, leading to deep links between Ulster industrialists and the British Empire. Politics became shaped by these material realities. The strength and cohesiveness of Orange Capital in the North meant that the Unionists were able to construct an all class alliance of Protestants based on sectarianism and preference in employment. Again, this was not without challenge, but it was a formidable force. In the South, a sort of clientelist politics emerged—best typified by the Nationalist populism of Fianna Fáil, that nullified the development of an even vaguely social democratic left—that ruled the state for decades.

By the 1960s, the capital formations that these political movements were based on—an economy based on heavy industry in the North, and a kind of economic protectionism in the South—were no longer viable. Attempts to reconfigure Unionism in this period, most obviously around the botched premiership of Captain Terence O'Neill, led to disaster. Unionist leaders found that if they attempted to reform themselves they would lose much of their base. But at the same time if they did not they would face massive opposition from Nationalists. The result—and of course there were other factors as well—was the protracted period of conflict known as the Troubles. In the South, the consequences were much slower and less dramatic, but the same process was under way, as society underwent a major reconstruction.

This reconfiguration of Irish capitalism had political consequences too, particularly

as it intensified in the neoliberal era of the 1990s. In the North, it meant a serious weakening of the project of Ulster Unionism, where its ability to dictate the political agenda, without support from sections of the Catholic middle class, was severely undermined. Think of the defeat of the Orange Order at Garvaghy, for example, that would have been unthinkable in decades past. Of course, the North remained, and remains, very much a sectarian state: but this is hinged on a much less stable equilibrium, based now on both sections of Orange and Green politics, as was agreed in the Belfast Agreement, who are often in competition with each other.

A similar process was underway in the South. There, society underwent massive changes that transformed Irish society. For example, rural areas—long seen as the bastions of the Catholic Church—altered significantly; moving away from their agricultural base towards a tourist driven service industry, and consequently proletarianising and urbanising (in terms of social structure) these areas. The Irish ruling class benefited greatly from this reconstruction. But it also had the consequence of eroding many of the political roots that underlay their power. Membership of both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael declined. And the power of the Catholic Church was severely weakened: as was evident in the mass movement in the 1990s around the X Case, or the defeat of the Church in the divorce referendum.

Normally, such changes might lead to a massive social upheaval. And there were rumbles. But the extraordinary growth of Irish capitalism in the 1990s and early 2000s allowed the ruling class on both sides of the border to avoid dealing with these underlying problems. A similar process was underway in the North, where the growth of the economy was not as rapid as in the South, but was still very real. There are interesting parallels between this economic growth and the emergence of power-sharing at Stormont. Take the housing market for example. There was a massive construction boom in the 2000s in the North, that drove the economy forward for a number of years, and in a way this was reflected politically. As Marx-

ists, we understand that this property boom was a bubble that allowed capitalism to grow for a period on very little except speculative bombast, without really resolving its underlying contradictions. The same thing happened politically. When Adams and Paisley sat beside each other—at the height of the property boom—it was the political equivalent of the housing bubble: where speculation and wilful exaggeration hid the fact that none of the underlying contradictions of the sectarian state had been left unresolved.

It was the economic crisis that laid bare these contradictions, and intersected with the long term weakening of the traditional political blocs that I outlined above. In the North, this has caused intermittent convulsions within Unionism; where the Big House Unionists turn to sectarianism to make up for their shortcomings, only to cause fissures within their own ranks, and outbreaks of social disorder, best typified by the so called Flag protests. Nationalism entered this crisis in a much more confident position, but there is no doubt that the forward march of Sinn Féin has been halted; wherein it seeks to square its strategy of promoting a united Ireland by working within the state, for which it has to implement a programme of austerity that impacts upon its mainly nationalist working class base. This means that the political system in the North has constantly descended into crisis.

A favourite leitmotif of Northern Ireland's liberal chattering class is that 'our politicians need to get their act together'. The implication of this is obvious: the solution to the political impasse in the North is for Nationalist and Unionist politicians to come together for one last round of inter-party talks, wherein the lingering legacy of the past could finally and definitively be dealt with. This was, in theory at least, the motivation behind the ill-fated Haass Talks in 2013, the Stormont House Agreement in 2015, and most recently the Fresh Start Agreement. Political pundits constantly imagine that there is some final agreement between Unionism and Nationalism that will resolve these disputes. But it isn't happening, because there is a much deeper malaise at work.

The constant instability in the Northern State is about much more than a communal spat or whether or not the IRA still exists. There is, what I like to call, a *Long Organic Crisis of Northern Irish Politics*. What does this mean? First of all it means that the political contradictions outlined above are all interrelated. The economic crisis is the driving force, but this is then mediated through the unresolved sectarian structures of the state and the political crises of the two main bourgeois blocs. Thus, the crisis presents itself as both a political and economic crisis. Secondly the crisis is ‘Organic’ because it is rooted in the system. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci insisted that we must distinguish between a crisis that is ‘Conjunctural’ (temporary) and a crisis that is ‘Organic’ (relatively permanent). The crisis in the North is Organic (relatively permanent) because the sectarian divisions in the Northern state and the economic crisis are not likely to be resolved anytime soon.

Why, then, a long crisis? Firstly, long because the underlying motive forces of the crisis, namely the sectarian division of the state and the constant drive to austerity, will be endemic in the political situation for the foreseeable future. Secondly, long because no social force exists in the North — on either the Right or Left of the political spectrum, or within Unionism or Nationalism — with the social weight to resolve the crisis from the outside, and because the system itself is not on the verge of complete collapse. This means that the Assembly will stumble along from crisis to crisis, with the main communal forces content to maintain their communal fiefdoms for the time being. And we should not expect that the political forces that make up the sectarian state will ‘get their act together’ and resolve their differences: communal division is, after all, the very foundation of Stormont’s house of cards.

In this context alternatives can grow, including within Nationalism and Unionism. But a crisis of hegemony also means that counter hegemonic forces can emerge on the left. The nature of the crisis means that this kind of alternative will not grow overnight—and indeed will have to compete

with other oppositional forces within Loyalty and Republicanism—but the Left can begin to sink roots in working class areas. The 2016 Assembly election was a reflection of this.

IMR: What were the more immediate reasons for the electoral breakthrough? Obviously the crash of 2008 and the subsequent austerity were central – were there other factors involved as well?

Kieran Allen: The 2008 crash was certainly the key cause of the dramatic changes in Irish society. The immediate political victim of the crash was Fianna Fáil, who were one of the main pillars of the conservative hegemony as Seán says. The FF party had been in office for eighteen years before the crash. Before that, they held office for most of the period between 1932 and 1973, with just two brief interludes.

FF is an unusual party in European terms because it was able to garner votes in almost an equal proportion from all the major social classes. In its heyday, its support stood at about 41% of the popular votes from farmers, workers and upper professionals. The key to its success was its initial willingness to challenge Ireland’s role as a neo-colony of Britain and to develop a particular style of ‘economic nationalism’ which promised social ascent for all classes. It was quite pragmatic on how it sustained this project. Up to 1958, it adopted a protectionist strategy to build up Irish capitalism. After that it embraced the multi-nationals and sought to expand Irish capital through the dynamism they injected into the Southern economy.

The crash, however, tore away the mask and showed that FF was a party of speculative builders and bankers. Their willingness to foist the gambling debts of these strata onto the wider population was met with disgust and they paid dearly for it in the 2011 election.

The initial beneficiary was Fine Gael, traditionally the ‘spare wheel’ of Irish right wing politics. They gained some support because they adopted a mild but totally fake ‘we will burn the bondholders’ rhetoric. But the main reason they grew was simply be-

cause they were the quickest and easiest way of getting rid of FF. The new government that came in after the 2011 election was made up of Labour and Fine Gael. They continued the same policies of FF but towards the end of their period of office they BEGAN to boast about an economic recovery.

In statistical terms, there certainly has been a recovery. Despite a calamitous crash, the Irish ruling class benefitted from low interest rates, currency changes between the dollar, sterling and the euro and, crucially, an influx of foreign capital that was looking for a respectable tax haven. A rhetorical crack down on global tax havens from Obama and the OECD has led many corporations to move away from riskier areas like Bermuda. They too find a location that has an aura of light regulation while giving full benefits to the tax dodgers.

These developments meant that there was a recovery that went beyond purely statistical calculations. But it was more modest than claimed. More importantly it was uneven. The numbers of workers on low pay, for example, rose considerably as did numbers on temporary contracts. Despite all the talk of recovery, there was no recovery in wages or working conditions. The real consequences of the draining of state revenues to fund bondholders profits became apparent in the chaos created in the hospitals and the lack of council housing.

Broadly speaking, there is a political and social pattern in how working people respond to economic crashes. At the start they tend to keep their heads down; they give away many work conditions that were fought for in the past. But they do so, with great bitterness in their hearts. And at the first opportunity when there is again a slight pickup in economic conditions, the bitterness comes back to the surface and a new mood of anger can develop.

In Ireland, the destruction that has been wrought on working class organisation by social partnership meant that community struggles provided an outlet for this anger. And so the water protests became the key focal point for all the bitterness that had built up in the austerity years. These protests

in turn led to a tremendous politicisation in some of the poorest section of the working class who had previously been prey to clientalist politicians or 'apathy'. Yet in 2016, the voting turnout in deprived areas like Neilstown in Dublin Mid West increased dramatically and the winners were Sinn Féin and People Before Profit.

Seán Mitchell: During the boom, the economy in the North did not grow as quickly as the economy in the Republic. And for that reason it did not fall as drastically following the crisis either. That said, the effects of the crash have been substantial. Officially, the recession in the North ended in 2014, with the NI economy recording a small rate of growth. According to researchers at the Institute for Fiscal Studies, however, the North has been 'hit hardest by the recession'. For example, between 2008 and 2013 average living standards fell by 10%, compared with a 3.3% fall in South East England. Despite the depth of the crisis in the South, the average wage in the North is £8,000 lower than in the Republic (average wage of €36,079 or £29,931 in ROI, £26,664 Britain and £21,836 in NI)

The 2008 crash laid bare some of the already existing contradictions of Northern Irish politics. But it also intensified them. The Peace Process was based on the idea that things were going to get better for people and prosperity was on the horizon. And whilst the economic growth of the early 2000s didn't bring this prosperity to working class people, it did at least create the conditions where it felt like it might come. The economic crash brought this misplaced optimism to an end. For that reason there has been intermittent crises at Stormont, as the power-sharing executive continuously tinkers on the brink of collapse.

This never ending impasse at Stormont, combined with the increasing levels of austerity enforced on working class people, has caused frustration to rise. Frustration, however, can be a double edged sword: it can lead people to see the problem as emanating from the elites at the top, or it can cause people to fight amongst themselves, to blame one community or another. One consequence of this was a resurgence in sectari-

anism, particularly around Orange marches in North Belfast and the so called 'Flag Protests'. But another consequence was a growing frustration with the political parties up at Stormont, and an amorphous class discontent about the state of politics.

Herein lay the conditions that gave fuel to the rise of PBP. Eamonn McCann and Gerry Carroll were both elected in the two most deprived constituencies in the North. Fiona Ferguson, our other candidate—who polled 1300 votes, a tremendous effort for a first outing—stood in another deprived constituency, North Belfast. All of these areas had high levels of unemployment and deprivation, and well as significant concentrations of public sector workers, who were bearing the brunt of austerity.

These were, therefore, very much working class votes. And left wing votes too. Those on the left who waffle on about whether we should relate to 'privileged' public sector workers or 'precarious' private sector workers should come out around the doors in West Belfast: where you will find low paid hospital workers—who have no idea of how many hours they will get week to week—and low paid private sector workers—who often rely on the public services all around them that are being slashed. The key for the left is finding a narrative that relates to both and links it all together: to always and everywhere represent the interests of the working class as a whole, as the *Communist Manifesto* puts it. Neither Eamonn nor Gerry made any secret of their anti-capitalist, and socialist politics. On the Falls Road we had a huge billboard erected, that read 'Building a Socialism for the 21st Century — Shankill and Falls Unite' — with the first line written as Gaeilge.

Of course there were subjective factors as well. Eamonn McCann has been a well-known socialist for decades, and his stock has risen further in the last few years with a new generation. Eamonn has stood in a number of elections before, but there was no doubting that this time it was different. And Gerry Carroll, who was already an elected Belfast City Councillor, probably deserves an award as the Stakhanovite of the Belfast Left, with his seemingly never ending energy

for door knocking and campaigning. But no subjective factor alone can explain these victories. A space has opened up; there is no doubt about it.

IMR: How do you place the rise of PBP in an international context? To what extent does it parallel the rise of Syriza, Podemos, Sanders and Corbyn?

Kieran Allen: Clearly, there is a return of left wing ideas. It has different characteristics in different counties. Broadly, we can say that working people are looking for a government that will stand up for their interests. There is not as yet a confidence to carry through and enforce their demands on any government through their own actions. In brief, the mass of people still want some party to act on their behalf – rather than acting for themselves. This is not a criticism – it simply is a description of the current conjuncture.

This leads to a quite a contradictory situation. On one hand, working people are gravitating towards what might be termed a left reformist perspective – yet the left reformist parties or individuals face major problems or obstacles. This is most clear in the case of Syriza. After their ascent to government, a type of 'Syriza mania' swept the international left and all the theoretical discussion about the structural limits of the bourgeois state was forgotten. It seemed that it was enough to talk about building 'broad parties;' and break away from the older 'sectarian' debates about reform or revolution. In reality, however, Syriza's belief that the EU was their 'partner' destroyed them. They really thought that rational Keynesian arguments would persuade those charged with looking after European banks to grant some debt relief to Greece. Such pitiful naiveté and fear about what might follow a mass mobilisation of Greek workers brought about their downfall.

In similar manner, the current wave of enthusiasm for Corbyn in Britain or Sanders in the US also reflects the contradictions inherent in the popular desire for a real left leader. Corbyn has a decent left and anti-imperialist record. He was exposing the activities of the British Army in Northern

Ireland even when this was highly unpopular. But his vehicle for change is the British Labour party. If he is not stabbed in the back before he reaches Downing Street, he will be de-gutted as a left winger by the time he gets there. The same applies to Sanders. Only a lifeless sectarian could not feel a certain joy at his rise. But then uncomfortable questions arise—will he back Hilary Clinton as the ‘lesser evil’ and suck another generation back into the Democratic Party?

Ireland has been a late starter on the road to radicalisation. But one of the advantages this gives is that it does not have to repeat the mistakes of others. This is why People Before Profit has formal similarities to the other left forces you mention. It advances a minimum programme of ‘reforms’ but unlike these others it does not stress governmental influence as the key to change. From very start, it has argued that ‘people power’ and mass workers mobilisation is the key to change. This is not just a matter of rhetoric—the whole method of PBP is not a traditional electoralist formation. It is the political expression of those who want to really fight for reforms even if that brings us up against the limits of capitalism and the EU.

The SWP is organised as a strong revolutionary force within PBP. It argues that late capitalism is no longer capable of delivering the aspirations that the majority of workers seek. The SWP openly states that only by adopting a revolutionary strategy and going beyond the limits of capitalism can even an elementary programme of reforms be won. It seeks to spread this understanding to wider layers. In these ways, PBP differs from the other force you mention.

IMR: In terms of PBP strategy what were the key factors in its success? Were they the same North and South?

Kieran Allen: The first element of the success was a desire to break out of the sectarian ghetto that much of the far left has found itself within.

I go back to a generation that became radicalised in the post-68 period. When we started out, we had a real confidence that we could reach thousands of workers and win people to the idea of overthrowing the sys-

tem. Later, we had to go through the period of reaction, what we called the ‘downturn’ during the Reagan–Thatcher years. Many did not survive as left wingers—they became demoralised or simply returned to their private lives. Those who did survive carried a cost. We relied on discussing big ideas and theoretical debates to clarify our arguments. Left wing politics became defined simply as a critique or ability to develop extended arguments. We became used to small propaganda groups where 20-30 revolutionaries met to work out their arguments, sell papers and recruit the odd individual.

After the collapse of the USSR, the SWP became even more convinced of our arguments. We never associated socialism with this tyranny, claiming always that it was a state capitalist regime. We watched how former Stalinists like Eamonn Gilmore dropped all pretence of wanting a different society and moved into the Labour Party. We knew that there was a new space available for the radical left.

At first, we tried to occupy it by sheer daring and audacity. But we also learnt that the best way to mobilise people was through a united front. The Irish Anti-War Movement brought 100,000 people onto the streets but at the core of it were a small group of revolutionaries who were willing to work with others – Labour, Sinn Féin and Greens, without conceding an inch to their wider ideas.

These experiences led us to a method that sought to self consciously break out of the ghetto that far left politics had become entrapped in. We encountered hundreds of activist who agreed with us about the evils of neoliberalism and about the links between war and capitalism. Later, as we shifted towards mass work in local communities, we met many who agreed with us in standing up to corporate greed and privatisation. But in both cases, they did not necessarily draw Marxist or revolutionary conclusions. Remember these were the days of the Celtic Tiger when capitalism appeared to be working. The idea of creating a broader political vehicle where revolutionaries could work with those who were anti-corporate or anti-neoliberal without necessarily even being ex-

PLICIT socialists was born. This led to the rise of People Before Profit.

I think our current relative success is down to three factors. First, we speak the language of working class people. We have consciously set out to move beyond the deadened jargon-ridden language and mechanical forms of thinking that many of the far left still inhabit. As a corollary, we have also sought to move beyond a type of academicism, which privileges a constant commentary divorced from a desire to win real influence.

Second, PBP is motivated by a confidence that while it has a radical left core to its politics, the issues that it takes up can be popular. There is an assumption in the main stream media that those on the centre ground of the political spectrum are more likely to have popular appeal. You often hear this around elections time, when the media suggest that electoral success only comes to those who ‘move to the centre’. We make the opposite assumption. We think left politics can be popular and can be translated into a fight on issues which expose the corporate greed and addiction to profit that lies at the heart of our society.

Thirdly and very simply: People Before Profit does not sell out. It has a conscious strategy of not being co-opted or entangled in the tentacles of official state politics. Its councillors do not go on junkets; they do not socialise with any supposed ‘colleagues’ of the right. We do not restrict our politics to the confines of official legality. PBP, for example, called for a boycott of water charges when the former guerrilla fighters of the IRA were urging people to send back their registration forms to Irish Water.

Many people are tired of a radical rhetoric being followed by respectability and sell outs.

Seán Mitchell: For many years the left in the North was forced into isolation during the Troubles, when prospects for socialism and working class unity seemed far off. After the ceasefires and the Belfast Agreement were signed, the left grew more optimistic. Talk of the national question being solved was prevalent, and there was a belief that politics would normalise, and that sectari-

anism was no longer an issue.

The SWP shared this optimism. We insisted, however, that sectarianism had not disappeared but had instead been institutionalised. We supported the peace, certainly, but we did not support the sectarian structures that the peace process created, and for this reason we refused to endorse the Belfast Agreement. Very few on the left agreed with us. But it stood us in good stead. When sectarianism reemerged, around the Holy Cross dispute, for example, much of the Left was thrown into confusion. Again, when the crash happened, it was presumed that this would normalise politics, and that sectarianism would decline. In contrast, however, the SWP insisted that the economic crisis could open up opportunities for the left, but it could also lead to an increase in reaction. We adopted a position that the kernel existed in the current period for both potential sectarian resurgence and for class politics.

This prognosis was proven correct on both fronts. When the Loyalist ‘Flag Protests’ exploded onto the streets of Belfast, most of the Left, including the trade union leadership, fell into a familiar pessimistic passivity after these events. Where the unions had responded to Republican attacks on the Army and PSNI, they fell silent in the face of Loyalist reaction; only releasing a statement (as meek as it was) months after the events began and refusing to initiate any mobilisations. At the heart of this passivity on the Left were three inter-related weaknesses. Firstly, the prevailing economism led most to believe that the economic crisis would see an automatic decline in sectarianism. The resurgence of Loyalist reaction, therefore, caught most of the Left by surprise.

Secondly, there was an overestimation of the strength of the ‘Flag protests’ caused, in part, by the long-term tendency amongst the trade union leadership to see in Loyalist groups the authentic ‘voice of the protestant working class’. Socialists reject the idea that paramilitaries have an inalienable right to speak for Protestant workers. Furthermore, our understanding of the historical crisis of Unionism (discussed below) allowed us

to understand the weaknesses of the Flag protests: Loyalist reaction certainly was a massive problem, and one that should not be ignored, but it was far from intractable and the numbers on the protests (at most a few thousand) denoted a relative weakness of Loyalism rather than an enduring strength in the movement.

Thirdly, most of the Left misunderstood the driving force behind the resurgence of sectarianism, seeing it simply as a 'clash of cultures' emanating from the insecurity of Unionist 'identity'. By contrast, we insisted that the underlying motor of sectarianism was economic degradation—though misdirected into an anti-Catholic narrative that 'the other side are doing better'—and as such, the space for class politics still existed.

This perspective, then, was based on a sanguine realism; sectarianism is a very real problem, and must be challenged, but the Left can still make gains even when it raises its head. And it was this understanding that led us to launch People Before Profit.

IMR: The FG plus independents government in the South is clearly very weak. How can the left and the workers movement take advantage of this?

Kieran Allen: It is not just a weak government — welcome and all as this is. It is always good to see a government frightened of the people rather than a people frightened of the government.

But there is more to it. The political system of the 26 counties is based on a 'two and a half party' model. Two right wing parties, FF and FG, with almost identical politics took turns at leading the government and the opposition. The Labour Party was simply the 'half'. However, since the crash this has changed. Between them FF and FG can only garner about 52% of the popular vote. Both know that in the future there is only room for one major right wing party. They will not be able to dominate BOTH the government and opposition forever.

A temporary solution for their dilemma has been reached by FF agreeing to support an FG minority government while reserving the right to advance its own policies. This however is highly unstable and means

that from a bourgeois point of view, there are real difficulties in pushing through the 'structural reforms' they want. So for example, one day the government announces their support for a student loan schemes or linking children's allowance to school attendance – and then they back down the next week.

There is an added problem from a ruling class point of view. FF is currently putting their distinct party interests ahead of those of the wider ruling class. Don't get me wrong. They still want to serve the rich as enthusiastically as they can – but they figure that they must adopt a 'left face' at the moment to re-build their base. This explains why they pretend to oppose water charges – even though they were the first to agree to them.

This situation gives the left two main opportunities. First, the weakness of the government can help fuel the growing confidence of working people to fight back. The more they retreat, the more an ethos of 'people power' politics can grow,

But, second, the current situation gives people an object lesson in the limitations of bourgeois democracy. Let me give you an example, The Labour Party, in a bid to rehabilitate its image amongst workers, recently put forward a resolution in the parliament which stated that Dáil Eireann will 'stand up for working people' and bring in a legislative package to enhance workers rights by 'preventing unilateral reductions in pay'.

Now this is amazing stuff on many levels. The obvious question is why did the Labour Party not bringing this resolution forward when they were in government. Then they were actually imposing 'unilateral reductions in pay'! But let's leave cynicism aside. More astounding is that the majority of the elected representatives voted for this resolution. FF's desire to put on a fake left face led them to support Labour's resolution. So now an Irish Parliament has mandated its government to stop pay cuts BY LAW. But here is the rub: there is no time frame, the minority right wing FG government can hum and haw for years ahead. In other words, nothing will happen.

If ever there was an object lesson on why

we need a different type of democracy to express the real will of the people, there you have it.

IMR: What is the government situation in the North and how should the left respond?

Seán Mitchell: The NI Assembly has for the last decade or so been run by a multi-party power-sharing arrangement. This was led by the DUP and SF, but also included the SDLP, UUP and most recently the Alliance, each with ministerial positions. One result of this was that every party would pass the buck of responsibility on to other parties. So they would all agree a programme of austerity. But when an unpopular cut was made, the other parties would blame the individual minister, and the individual minister would in turn blame the other parties for not giving their department enough money. This allowed the bigger parties to deflect from their implementation of neoliberalism.

Now, however, we have a government comprised of only SF and the DUP, as well as one independent. This means that it will be much clearer who is doing the cutting. The ‘Fresh Start Agreement’—a deal agreed between SF and the DUP in late 2015, designed to create a framework that would allow them to remain in government together—is an austerity programme plain and simple. Its effect will be devastating. For a start, some 20,000 workers (or one-in-ten public sector jobs) are to be made redundant, mostly from the civil service. To rub salt into wounds the Assembly has borrowed £700 million from the Tories to pay for the redundancy packages. There will be huge cuts to education, to infrastructure, to the arts. As many as 2000 teachers, and perhaps up to 1500 non-teaching staff may lose their jobs, whole schools as well as outside auxiliary services, including those in Special Educational Needs, are also under serious threat. In the community and voluntary sector scores of workers and organisations have been told that their funding will cease.

The Assembly’s strategy for economic growth to make up for this—aggressively promoted by both Unionist and Nationalist parties and uncritically regurgitated by

the North’s fawning media—is to create a low-tax economy, consciously modelled on the Celtic Tiger, based on Foreign Direct Investment, a reduced public sector and lower tax on corporations. To do this the public sector is to be gutted; Belfast Harbour has been earmarked for sale whilst other public assets, including state owned Bus company Translink and former British Army Land, have also been mooted for a potential asset strip. Service charges are also, no doubt, on their way.

Given the likelihood that this Programme for Government will be deeply unpopular, we can also expect sectarian manoeuvres in Stormont to intensify. Take the Irish Language for example. There is no doubting that the DUP will go after Irish speakers by cutting provisions to Irish language schools or community groups. Of course this will be designed to deflect from their own role in implementing austerity. And we should say that. But at the same time the cuts and the bigotry that Irish speakers will endure will be very real. And we will have to defend them as part of a wider fight against austerity. So we have to fight this austerity, but always be on our guard against attempts to divide us.

Unfortunately, because socialist politics has not existed in the North for decades, many activists tend to parrot the Northern Irish liberalism of the state; the idea that we must accept the ‘identity’ politics of Loyalism and Nationalism, that we should ignore contentious questions, and only focus on ‘bread and butter issues’. In the end, however, you can ignore sectarianism, but sectarianism won’t ignore you. The whole history of the labour movement in the North tells us this. If the Left is going to have any chance in the North it must create a network of principled anti-sectarian socialists, capable of challenging reactionary ideas within the working class.

We have to make agitation against this austerity programme central to our perspective, and combine this with challenges to sectarian ideas. We can do this through campaigns big and small. And we must also fight and insist on the trade unions getting involved in the struggle. As Gerry Carroll

said in his maiden speech in the Assembly; ‘What Stormont does, the people and the workers can undo.’

IMR: Is the election of Gerry Carroll and Eamonn McCann a signal that sectarianism is on the decline?

Seán Mitchell: It is most certainly a signal that anti-sectarian politics is on the rise. PBP was one of the only parties to have its posters up in both Catholic and Protestant areas during the elections. And we canvassed in every community. Just recently Gerry Carroll hosted a public meeting on the Shankill, and has hosted meetings on the Falls too. So there is a serious opening now for class politics.

Some Nationalist pundits have suggested this is untrue. They point to the fact that very few of Gerry Carroll’s transfers went to the DUP. Fair enough. But are we really saying that the validity of the cross community nature of a socialist project is to be judged on whether its voters transfer evenly to nationalist and unionist parties? Obviously not. But it is an indicator of just how deep the indentitarian analysis has seeped, including within those who should know better.

Gerry and Eamonn both got elected in working class areas. These constituencies also happen to be predominately Nationalist, but with significant pockets of working class Protestants as well. Because the left has been isolated for so long, its image of what class politics might look like is romantic and abstract. They expect that workers unity will emerge perfectly and evenly formed: with its Catholic battalion on side, and its Protestant battalion on the other, both in equal number. Reality, unfortunately, is rarely as linear as this. Working class unity can and will emerge, but it’s always a messy process, and usually begins in an uneven way.

Take the period of class struggle in Belfast during the 1930s: when thousands of Catholics and Protestants famously united to fight for the rights of Outdoor Relief (ODR) workers. There is an oft repeated story about this struggle, that during one of the unemployed demonstrations, an Orange band and a Catholic band came to-

gether and played a pop tune (Yes We Have No Bananas). A beautiful story, and emblematic of how a long isolated left pictures class politics emerging. There is some truth to the story of course. But what is less well known is that during many of the early ODR demonstrations, Loyalist bands refused an invitation to attend. Which says nothing of the fact that Loyalists attacked some of the earliest unemployed demonstrations in 1931. Still, by October 1932 men and women from the Shankill and the Falls were uniting together to fight the RUC. So yes, working class people on both sides of the divide came together in a magnificent movement, but it emerged in an uneven way. Those who wait for this perfect unity to emerge fully formed before they throw themselves into a struggle are waiting for Godot.

We should recognise, therefore, that there can be an unevenness in the way class politics emerges. It’s just as vital, however, that the left doesn’t adapt itself to this unevenness. It must always strive to overcome it, and create a base on both sides of the divide. And in the end, as the ODR struggle will attest, the great equalizer will be struggle.

IMR: What is relative importance of community and workplace struggle North and South?

Seán Mitchell: Community struggle has been crucial to the growth of PBP, and the wider radical left in Ireland. In the South there has been a long litany of struggles of this type. In the 1990s there was the first water movement. In the early 2000s the struggle against the bin charges. Both of these struggles helped create a culture and experience of community agitation inside sections of the Irish working Class. When the crash happened, there was a deep anger inside the trade union movement. But social partnership, and the relationship of some unions to the Labour Party, acted as a block on the development of workplace struggle.

In that circumstance, class discontent spilled out into community struggles, with hundreds of campaigns emerging around the country. There were also movements with a more national character. The Campaign against the Household Charges was one ex-

ample of this. But obviously the most developed was the struggle against water charges. In the North this experience has been less pronounced. But the sectarian divide inside the working class means that even small struggles can have a big impact. And local agitation was crucial to breakthrough for PBP in the North.

PBP threw itself into these community struggles for the past decade, with some success. But that doesn't mean we think this is a replacement for workplace struggle. For all the strengths of social movements like that around water charges, they have not involved strikes or workers action. For this reason, the movements tend to generate a sort of generalised left populist consciousness, rather than a more explicitly class consciousness: that tends to place the overwhelming emphasis on the government, and getting a better one for the people, rather than on the capitalist system itself. It would be madness for revolutionaries to absent themselves from this process of radicalisation because of these limitations. That said, if we really want to build a movement that can go beyond capitalism, the workplace is crucial.

One of the possible consequences of all this talk about a recovery is that workers become more confident in making demands. We have seen this with the Luas workers in the South and with the threats of strike action for a living wage in the Health service in the North. Whether or not these disputes generalise remains to be seen.

Kieran Allen: I would love to see a strong shop steward/grass roots led union movement. I think we will eventually get there but at the moment the decades of social partnership have done terrible damage to workers organisation.

Let me give you an example. A union representative that I know was suspended for a minor trumped up offence. She had stood up for workers and was popular. So you would think that the immediate response of even a moderate union would be to hold a meeting to consider action to defend her. Yet it transpired that the union in the workplace had not met for three years and had no tradition of coming together to even

defend the rep. The union had become a 'committee' and this committee was headed up by people who were either looking for promotion or had become union hacks that enjoyed days off to attend official meetings on full pay and expenses.

Given this situation, we had no choice but to orientate to working class communities – to do community work. So we fought on planning issues; on bin charges, water charges – you name it, we fought. In the course of these struggles we also found working class militants who were also fed up with the style of unions like SIPTU. They too had displaced their energies onto communities rather than workplace struggles.

In terms of a left strategy, this shift cannot last forever. You can occupy city squares or engage in big marches or civil disobedience, but if you want to really rock the system you have to organise in the arena where profit is made – the workplaces. Fortunately, there is not a Chinese wall between the workplace and the communities. There is not a caricature class that is struck in the groove depicted by socialist realist art or the good old days of sixties militancy. The real flesh and blood working class fight back where they can and if they can. When they win, however, this feeds back into a confidence that spreads the desire for struggle to other arenas.

This is what is starting to happen now. The partial victory that we achieved over water charges is filtering back into the workplaces. This occurs against a background of talk about 'economic recovery. So workers are asking when will we see a real recovery in wages and conditions? Seán is right that the talk of recovery is good for us because it gives workers a message that they are needed and cannot be thrown away like disposable hankies.

This is now the moment where People Before Profit has to make a strategic re-orientation to build up a network of militants in the unions.

IMR: Obviously socialists have always supported a womans' right to choose and LGBTQ rights and opposed racism as a matter of principle. But at the moment these issues seem

to have acquired a particular strategic significance. Is that true both North and South?

Kieran Allen: Very much so. The political elite in the 26 counties have a peculiar culture. They pride themselves on being cosmopolitan and European – and this is the reason that is most commonly advanced for why they LOVE to pay water charges. How could you be so provincial as to think water is free – screams the Irish Times liberal?

But the political structures that uphold this spurious liberalism rest on a backwoods political apparatus that is shaped by the legacy of Catholic fundamentalism. Your average rural FF or FG apparatchik is still horrified at the very idea that women have a right to control their own bodies. They do not want to even talk about a practice whereby there is a ‘baptism barrier’ discriminating against children in entering schools. The idea that young people might have the right not to be subjected to religion classes in schools is beyond the pale of discussion.

So, yes, there is a huge radicalisation going on over a woman’s right to choose. How could there not be when you live in a society where a woman can get 14 years in jail for taking an abortion pill. As for racism, there are many who look with disgust on EU which uses a language of humanitarianism but then builds a Fortress Europe that leads to thousands of refugee deaths.

We are living in an era where the barbarities of capitalism are coming into full view – and it is not lost on a new generation who are being radicalised.

Seán Mitchell: I spoke earlier about how the reconstruction of Irish capitalism over many decades has weakened the old conservative pillars of society. But of course the struggle of people themselves has been crucial to this process as well. The vote for Equal Marriage in the South was a result of this intersection. And the emerging movement for LGBTQ rights in the North — with thousands of people marching in the streets for equal marriage, and many more out marching against the homophobia of the DUP — is a reflection of this as well.

Abortion rights is a central wedge issue for us. Not only because defending the

rights of women to bodily autonomy is a basic tenet of socialist principles, and human rights in general. But also because of the issues that it reflects. Winning the right to choose is key to finally defeating the power of the old conservative hegemonies. And for that reason, it’s one of the key issues that separate genuine socialists from those who have not broken with these orthodoxies.

In the South, the movement for choice has developed quite rapidly since the tragic death of Savita Halappanavar. In the North, the movement is a little behind. But people are starting to wake up to the reality of the issue. When a woman was recently prosecuted for taking the abortion pill, there was widespread shock. There is now a majority of people—with roughly equal numbers on both sides of the border—for the liberalisation of abortion laws. But to win the full right to choose the mass movement will be crucial. The streets will dictate in the end.

IMR: While SF is one party with a single leadership it nonetheless finds itself in a different position in the North where it is in government and in the South where it is in opposition. How does this affect its policy and rhetoric and how does it affect how socialists should relate to it?

Kieran Allen: There is an old left expression that nationalism is Janus faced – it looks two ways at once. Ireland provides the classic example. In the North, there is a government composed of Sinn Féin and the arch reactionaries of the DUP. They are involved in a joint project to run down the public sector, cut corporation taxes and impose austerity.

In the South, though, Sinn Féin adopt an anti-austerity rhetoric and claim to stand up for workers’ rights. It is the same party – and on the same journey. Most nationalists eventually make their peace with the political establishment because they fight only for their national rights within capitalism. But the timing and the entry price paid for getting onto the inside track varies.

In the North, the IRA have dumped arms; embraced the police; and their political wing has adopted neoliberal policies. In the South, they have not yet been invited

into the political establishment. They are hounded by the Irish Independent group and journalists who inhabit the culture of Dublin 4.

So while we offer a radical left alternative to the nationalism of Sinn Féin on both sides of the border, we have to deploy different tactics in how we relate to them. It would be wrong, for example, in the South to convey any impression that we have joined with the current establishment in attacking Sinn Féin every day as if they were the main enemy. This is the mistake that sectarians sometimes fall into because they are so wrapped up in their own truths that they never look at how their rhetoric appears to broader layers of workers. We go further – where SF activists really want to fight against austerity, we join with them. But at all time, we point to the contradiction between their leaders embracing austerity and a reduction in Corporation Tax in the North, while opposing austerity in the South.

There are real limits to the growth of republican politics in the South. In the North, the IRA arose from a mass movement that was fighting discrimination and oppression. In the South, Sinn Féin stepped into a vacuum in the immediate aftermath of the crash because they were the only visible anti-austerity force at the time. But the reality is that republican politics is not comfortable with the idea of people power. They have always thought of themselves as the ‘cutting edge’ in any struggle. They shifted from being guerrilla to becoming parliamentarians but in both cases believe that they must act ON BEHALF of people rather than working people liberating themselves.

Seán Mitchell: Whereas Unionism has been typified by intermittent crises in the last decade, Republicanism has, on the surface at least, been boastful of its political gains; the end of Unionist rule, the release of republican prisoners, the removal of British Troops from the streets of Nationalist areas and the entry of Sinn Féin into government creating the veneer of Republican advancement in the post-ceasefire era.

The growth of the party in the South has also lent some credibility to its claim that it is on the road to its much vaunted

‘United Ireland of Equals’. However, Sinn Féin’s hegemonic control has not gone without challenge. The abandonment of its Republican principles—including meeting the Queen, signing up to support the Police and wining and dining with Imperialists throughout the world—has caused many of its most ardent supporters to turn their backs on the movement. This has caused some splits and the emergence of dissident republican forces. The party’s enthusiasm for the neo-liberal re-ordering of the Northern economy has caused problems too; pitching it against trade unions and community groups, including from supposed strongholds like the Irish Language sector. These cracks in this hegemonic control—caused by the economic crisis, increasing disenchantment with SF’s role in the government and the emergence of rival forces including on the Left — are set to grow deeper, creating significant opportunities for the Revolutionary Left.

For now Sinn Féin continues to enjoy a comfortable electoral position in working-class nationalist areas, but in the short- and long-term they face serious problems. Firstly, the Fresh Start Agreement will make it increasingly difficult for the party to present itself as consistently anti-austerity. How can a party claim to be on the Left whilst simultaneously agreeing to end one in ten jobs in the public sector? Certainly SF will continue to maintain that austerity is caused by the Tories. A line, however, is being drawn in the sand: are you against cuts or are you implementing them? We can expect, therefore, that Sinn Féin will come into conflict with large sections of its support base in the coming period.

It would be folly to expect a massive decline in support for Sinn Féin; the party has deep roots within Nationalist areas that will not disappear overnight. However, we can expect that the political space to its Left—that was most acutely reflected in Gerry Carroll’s election—is now likely to expand. Anti GFA republican forces—including those ‘dissidents’ who would like to see resurgence in armed struggle—are also seeking to grow at SF’s expense. In light of the urgency for class

politics in the current crisis, this would be a highly regressive development. Socialists have to be clear; dissident militarism can only strengthen the hand of both the state and reactionary forces on the ground.

Faced with a choice between a return to armed conflict or support for the status quo many working class people will choose the latter. We call, therefore, for its immediate cessation. They also opportunistically exploit the working class concerns over crime and ‘anti-social’ behaviour; providing a ‘law and order’ response that even the most hardened of Conservatives would blush at. Their relationship to the Protestant working class is at best ambivalent and they prefer to present austerity in terms of the Nationalist community losing out. However, the fact that class concerns are driving this growth means that the Left is in a good position to pose an alternative. The election of Eamonn McCann and Gerry Carroll showed how to do this.

None of this means that socialists should drop our principled position on questions like state repression. State paramilitaries have not gone away either. If the police police us, who polices the police? We need to stay independent of the state, and oppose reactionary repression like the Stop and Search laws, and effective internment of republicans. We must also stand by those on the receiving end of state injustice, and support campaigns like that around the Craigavon 2. Socialists must be consistent fighters against oppression, even if we disagree with the politics of those on the receiving end of it.

IMR: Earlier you mentioned that one of the key features of the crisis of Northern Irish politics is the contradictions of 21st Century Unionism. Can you elaborate on this?

Seán Mitchell: Yes. Unique to our analysis of politics in the North, has been our identification of what we call the *Permanent Crisis of Unionism* as one of its main driving forces. There are three key features of this.

Firstly, the relative weakening of Unionism’s social weight, disturbing its ability to offer anything tangible to Protestant workers, which then forces it to resort to open

sectarian appeals and agitation to maintain its base of support. This weakening also opens up the possibility for the development of the Left. This factor has been intensified by the economic crisis.

Secondly, a periodic fracturing of ‘Big House Unionism’; increasing discontent, fuelled by the economic crisis, with the larger unionist forces such as the DUP, particularly in working class areas, has caused a fracturing of Unionism and the development of loyalist forces who utilise increasing class discontent to intensify sectarianism, and claim to pose an alternative to the DUP, but ultimately fall in behind them.

Lastly, a permanent historical crisis: Loyalist agitation will come and go, (particularly if a genuine working class movement emerges), and even though groups like the PUP can grow they will ultimately fall in behind the DUP. But this will not solve the problems inherent in 21st century Unionism. This is a historic crisis from which Unionism cannot escape (short of completely re-rendering its *raison d’être* as a movement), forcing it into intermittent crises, and opening up the possibility of winning Protestant workers to class politics.

For now the DUP does not face a massive challenge from the left. The increasing rightward trajectory of Unionism can create an atmosphere (as well as practical dangers from paramilitaries) that makes it difficult to operate in ‘Protestant’ areas. However, this right-wing shift of Unionism also increasingly puts it at odds with the ideas and interests of thousands of Protestant working class people. This is most evident on class questions like cuts and austerity. But it’s not just on economic questions that the DUP finds itself at odds with the feelings of many Protestant workers. On questions like a woman’s right to choose, the conscience clause or equal marriage the party is far to the right of most Protestant workers, particularly amongst the youth.

Certainly the party finds an audience for these ideas within right wing section of the Protestant community (and no doubt amongst right wing Catholics too), including some within the working class, but increasingly the DUP is a minority on these

positions. The PUP seeks to exploit this by presenting itself as the working class Loyalist ‘progressive’ alternative to the DUP. It supports equal marriage and abortion rights for example. But like all Loyalist movements the PUP will fall behind the DUP in favour of ‘Protestant unity’. Long term therefore there are opportunities for the Left.

IMR: What do you see as the immediate and medium term tasks facing socialists in Ireland? Are they essentially the same North and South?

Kieran Allen: The immediate tasks often change because we are in quite a fluid situation. At this point, there are a number of areas where PBP is focussing on in the South.

First, we are trying to develop a network among grassroots trade unionists. There is a Rise Up conference which Brid Smith is sponsoring to get a discussion going on what type of trade unionism we need in the present period. But we need to move well beyond that. There is a need for a solidarity network among grassroots union members which can function also as a school for advice on tactics and strategy. There is a need for a real union organising drive among the new layers of precarious and under paid workers. Although it is difficult because of the sheer lack of democracy, we need to uproot Labour Party infiltration and control of the official union apparatus of the main unions.

Second, there are a number of flashpoints that have arisen as a direct result of the nature of the Southern recovery. The strategy of the political elite is to amplify Ireland’s role as a respectable tax haven for global multi-nationals. The second, element, however has been to re-stimulate the conditions for a new property boom. The Irish rich have a love affair with property speculation – and the state is doing everything to help them get their money back after the bankruptcies experienced during the Celtic Tiger.

This second factor has led directly to a housing crisis. The state deliberately cut back on building council housing and has instead sought to subsidise private landlords. They have resisted all calls for rent controls

even though rents have again hit Celtic Tiger levels. They have also embarked on a campaign of evictions to help ‘lubricate,’ the property market. All of this has caused huge social suffering and PBP has been pressing for major housing agitation. This will remain one of our key immediate tasks in the months and years ahead

Third, we still have to finish off the water charges. The state has retreated but there is still a chance that they may try to hide behind an EU directive to keep water charges in place. If they do that, all hell will break out.

Seán Mitchell: Long term, the tasks for socialists North and South are the same: to build a 32 county socialist movement, capable of challenging both rotten states in Ireland. Any emerging left that does not set this as its ultimate goal is doomed to failure. Short term, however, the tasks can be very different. Partition means that the rhythm of events in both areas is not always the same. In the South, as Kieran noted, water charges have been the central issue there for the past two years. And for that reason the immediate task for socialists was to agitate against those charges. But in the North, where water charges have been deferred, it was hardly the day to day issue for socialists to be agitating on. So the immediate task, and the long term task can seem to be contradictory.

The wider left usually falls into two mistaken responses to this conundrum. The first is to become partitionist. This has been the corner stone of Labourism in Ireland for the last century. At its height, there were two separate Labour Parties in Ireland, both dedicated to relating to the day to day economic issues facing workers on both sides of the border. There were some positives in this tradition. But its partitionism meant that it was ultimately entrapped and unable to overcome sectarianism. When communal division raises its ugly head, Labourism always retreats. Today, the Left must be more ambitious than this. Northern Ireland Labour Party re-enactment societies simply won’t do.

The second response, usually more prevalent among left republicans, is to ignore

the day to day realities by constantly harking on about partition. This perspective was starkest amongst sections of the Republican movement in the 1980s — summed up in Gerry Adams statement that the only difference between Ballymurphy in Belfast and Ballymun in Dublin was that the Brits were more visible in Ballymurphy. Here, it was believed a struggle against partition would simply spill over into the South. But nothing of the sort happened. One result was that it was the Officials — who had a more grounded sense of the realities in the South — that grew quicker than the Provisionals in the 1980s.

In contrast, the revolutionary socialist tradition insists on the relevance of relating both to the immediate day to day issues, and of the necessity of linking this with a fight for a wider socialist transformation of Ireland. This was the position of Connolly. He decried the ‘Gas and Water Socialism’ of those like William Walker, who solely focussed on economic issues to the detriment of questions like partition. Some republicans, however, have drawn a completely one sided view of this: turning their noses up at small campaigns around class issues because they don’t mention British imperialism This has nothing in common with Connolly’s position. In truth, when he was in Belfast, Connolly spent 90% of his time working on the day to day issues like wages, union organisation and workplace conditions, and he never demanded that anyone involved in these struggles first accepted his position on imperialism. But he did insist on attempting to link these day to day issues with wider political questions and to the fight for a Socialist Ireland. This is the ABC of the revolutionary socialist tradition in Ireland.

So a contradiction exists between the short term and the long term. To overcome this we need 32 county revolutionary political organisation. The situation might not always be the same in Ballymun as it is in Ballymurphy: but we can create a layer of cadre in the South that understand the North and vice versa. To borrow again from Gramsci, we need to create a party of ‘organic intellectuals’; activists rooted in struggle, in their communities or workplaces, who can

fight for revolutionary socialist politics. We aren’t there yet, but we have made a start.

IMR: How does the left’s electoral breakthrough change the dynamic of Irish politics? Does it enable us to pose the question of a united Ireland in a new way?

Kieran Allen: In recent years, Sinn Féin claimed to be the only 32 county party and was to the fore in promoting a united Ireland. In the past they said that this would come about through the overthrow of both Irish states. Today, however, they talk banal nonsense of working through the institution of the Belfast agreements. We are supposed to believe that cross border tourist agencies and water way management boards will eventually morph into a united Ireland.

Revolutionary socialists are opposed to the border because it produced a ‘carnival of reaction’: where right wing politics hides itself under Green and Orange flags. We want to see a united Ireland – but not one that becomes an all-Ireland tax haven for the multi-nationals. You don’t end the poison of sectarianism by linking up the evangelical dinosaurs of the DUP with the Catholic fundamentalists of the South. You could not have a united Ireland which is just a replica of the 26 county state where control of 95% of primary schools is in the hands of Catholic priests.

Like Connolly, we have always argued that our goal was a ‘workers republic’ or a ‘socialist Ireland’. Connolly’s prophetic words about Protestant workers still ring true:

When the Sinn Féiner speaks to men who are fighting against low wages and tell them that the Sinn Féin body has promised lots of Irish labour at low wages to any foreign capitalist... what wonder if they come to believe that a change from Toryism to Sinn Féinism would simply be a change from the devil they know to the devil they do not know.

We boldly proclaim that our aim is the replacement of both the 26 county and 6

county states with an Ireland that puts people before profit. For years, that was just a nice sounding piece of rhetoric. But when you have elected representatives sitting in both Irish parliaments making the one argument, you are at least beginning to reach a mass audience.

IMR: Are there any other lessons or conclusions you would like to draw?

Kieran Allen: Yes. Bourgeois ideology functions today though incorporating a large dose of cynicism. The anti-hero of the cultural industry knows ‘the real story’ but also recognises that nothing can be done. Yes, sure it is a filthy world where corporations buy politicians and destroy the environment, but there is nothing that can be done about it. Fatalism is the key to the success of this ideology. This fatalism finds its echo chambers among union bureaucracies who will tell you ‘ah sure it could be worse’. You got a pay cut of 7% , but just accept it because ‘it could be worse’.

The Left will only advance when workers break out of this insidious fatalism and come to realise their own power.

But even before that happens the genuine Left has to break out of its own inward, defensive posture and recover a sense that it can speak the language of working people.

Perry Andersen once made the valid point that the post WW2 European Marxism was very different to what went before because it was rooted more in the universities than the workplaces. As the neoliberals took control of these universities those who were marooned there – not just physically but mentally - adopted an ever more pessimistic approach. Every slight struggle of workers was pregnant with difficulties rather than opportunities. Neoliberalism it was claimed had entered the very soul of working people and only a retreat to pure theory – even literary criticism – was where a left winger should be comfortable.

This is a caricature – but not totally. The main point is that I do not think we can afford such luxuries any more. The far right is growing across the continent and you only have to look at the massed ranks of Jobbik in Hungary to see that the storm trooper can re-emerge.

The real left must set out to give voice to the popular grievances of society in late capitalism. It has to re-connect with the workers’ movement – whether in workplaces or communities. Above all it has to liberate itself from its own fatalism that assumes real change will only come centuries hence.