

Resistance

irish socialist network

NUMBER 15 – SPRING 2012
www.irishsocialist.net

Take back the unions and take back the streets

Steven Morris (ISN)

As the economic crisis gets worse, the fighting spirit of Ireland's trade union movement is slowly draining away. This has to change—and fast. In 2009 Ireland saw more than 120,000 workers and their families take to the streets in opposition to austerity. It was a mobilisation that only the trade union movement could have mounted. The union hierarchy came under strong pressure from its members to offer both leadership and an alternative economic strategy. The result was a 10-point plan called 'A Better, Fairer Way'. Yet the document conceded ideological ground to the right-wing government, stating that 'workers did not create the problem, but will contribute to resolving it'.

With that defeatist attitude, it was hardly surprising that a second mobilisation of workers against the government saw numbers begin to fall, from 120,000 to a still impressive 100,000. If further proof were needed that workers weren't listening to the leadership, both SIPTU'S Jack O'Connor and David Begg of ICTU were roundly booed while they delivered their speeches. The union leaders refused to consider a national strike which many workers were calling for as a response to the austerity measures. Instead they tried to revive the failed 'social partnership' model—without any mandate from their members—by negotiating the Croke Park agreement. It was claimed that the pact was necessary to protect public services and public-sector workers. One of its main outcomes has been a freeze on recruitment and pay. 8,000 workers have recently left areas like education and health, compounding the crisis of the public service.

When the FF / Green government finally collapsed after being forced to surrender Ireland's economic sovereignty, the union leadership



endorsed the Labour Party in the election which followed, urging their supporters to vote for Labour. This was predictable, as many figures in the trade union hierarchy are members of that party themselves. Labour rode a wave of popularity among working people, increasing its share of the vote; but once in power, the Labour-FG coalition followed the same austerity policies. A series of pre-election pledges

were abandoned or reversed. There is a real feeling of betrayal among those that voted for the Labour Party. But the union leadership has said virtually nothing about Labour's volte face in office, not even proposing to fight against the Household Charge, despite their stated opposition in 'A Better, Fairer Way' to the introduction of a property tax on private homes. It's no wonder that confidence in the

The current leadership of the movement have become largely redundant for resistance to the austerity measures. Their record speaks for itself. Our trade union movement needs to be reclaimed.

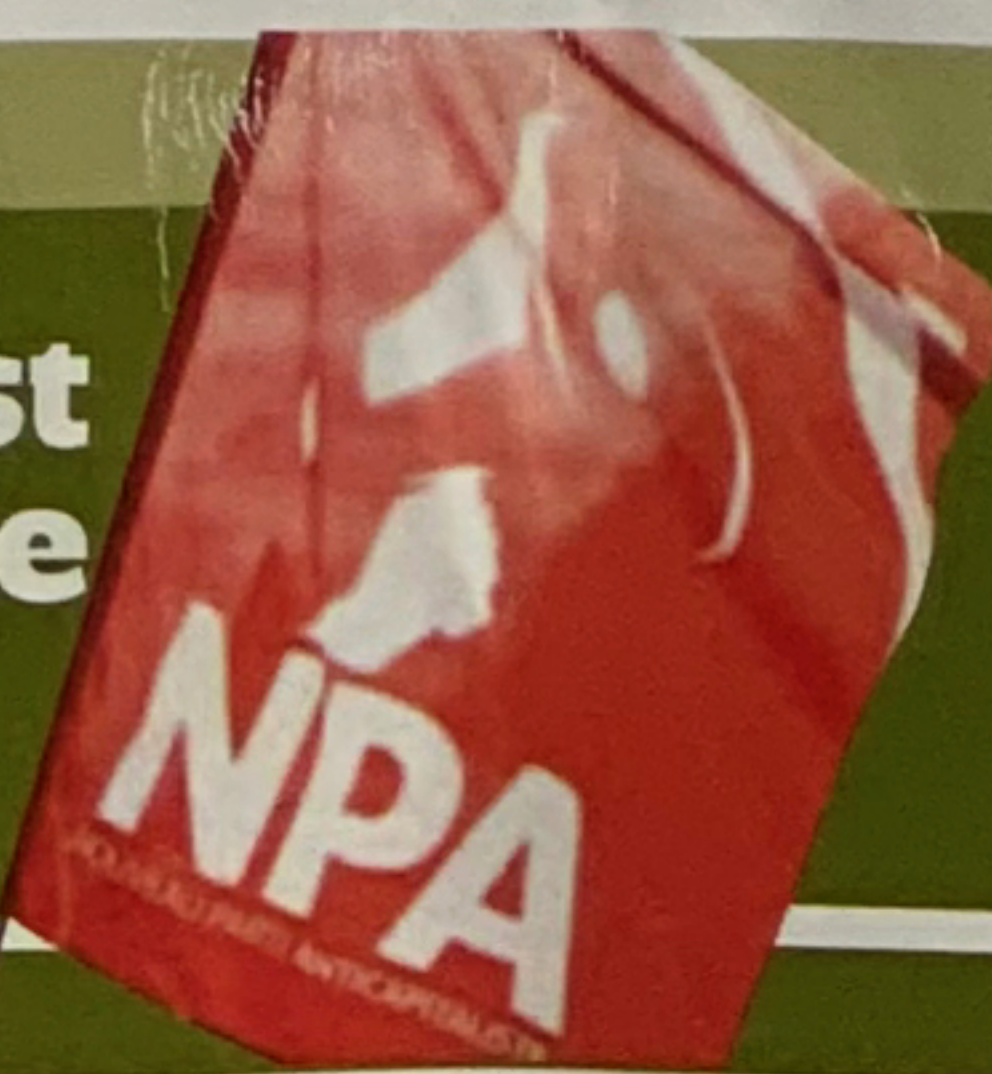
leadership has plummeted. Their most recent demonstration against austerity in late 2011 brought less than 3,000 people out in Dublin. That figure is shocking when compared to the hundreds of thousands on the streets only a year or two before. It was widely believed that the trade union hierarchy had no serious intention of mobilising against the Labour Party. Many union members also claimed not to have been informed of the march, or had only received word a day or two in advance. The current leadership of the movement have become largely redundant for resistance to the austerity measures. Their record speaks for itself. Our trade union movement needs to be reclaimed. This is not going to be easy: it won't happen overnight. Grassroots activists must be working together with common goals and a radical, explicit and coherent agenda. This work has already started with the formation of the Trade Union Activists Network. This forum is bringing together trade union activists from the left in both public and private sectors. Since its formation, the Network has held a number of successful meetings. This work will need to continue and spread if we are to have any hope of reversing the policies that are wrecking Irish society.

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Anti-capitalist
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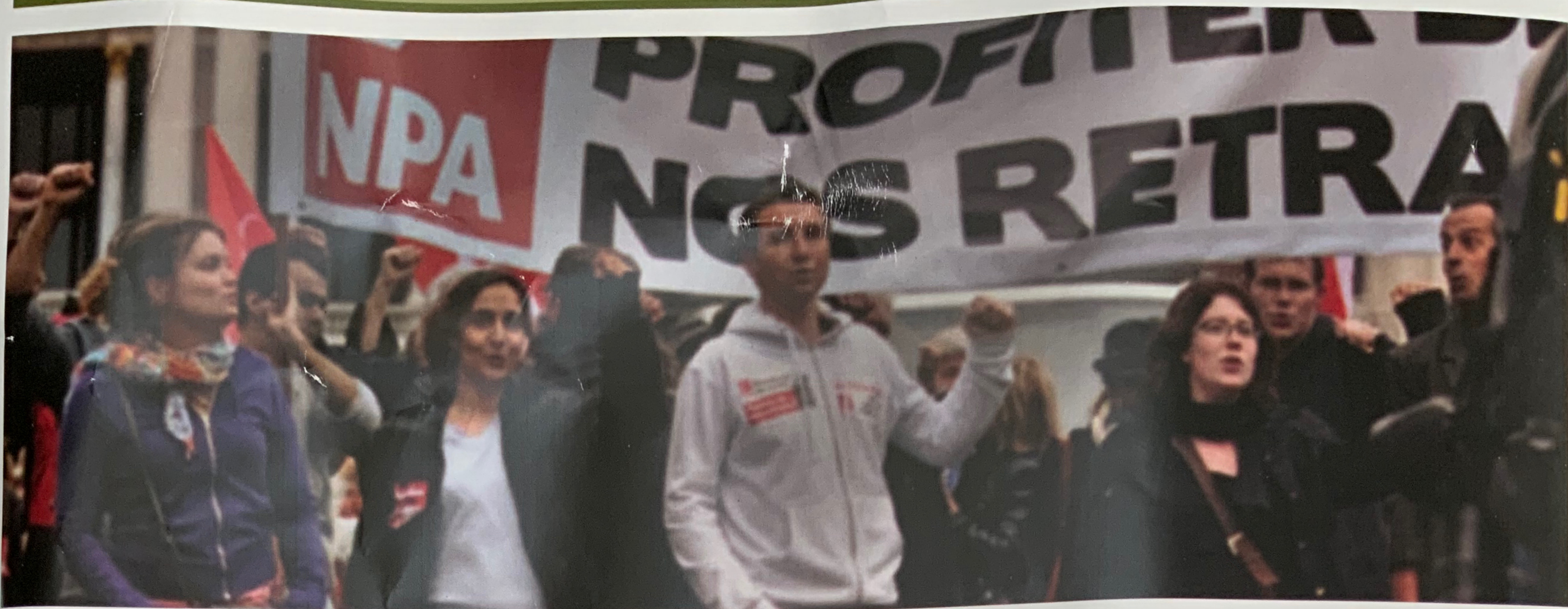
Scotland -
breaking the
Union?



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New Anti-Capitalist Party stumbles in France

In 2009, France's Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) dissolved itself into a 'broad' organisation, the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA). Where does the new party stand today? Bigger and younger than the LCR, it is easily the healthiest party on the far left. NPA members support strikers, migrants, squatters and Roma, and play a leading role in united front campaigns to defend public services and women's rights, oppose racism and the National Front (FN) and support international struggles. And—though the issue has not been fully resolved within its ranks—it has begun to play a (somewhat timid) part in the developing opposition to Islamophobia. However, against a backdrop of recession and cuts, an unpopular right-wing president and rising support for the FN, numbers are down from 9,000 to around 4,000. Last year's conference was unanimously judged a 'catastrophe'. The NPA's 'star' speaker, Olivier Besancenot, later announced he would not stand in the 2012 presidential election, leading to furious arguments between factions. An organised minority (the Anticapitalist Left) openly opposes the party's strategy and works towards unity with former NPA members and others outside the party. A new coalition, the Left Front, grouping the Communist Party, the Left Party—which broke away from the social democrats—and former members of the NPA, has grown in influence, and in late March was able to mobilise 100,000 supporters in an impressive show of strength on the streets of Paris. Its champion, the ex-Socialist minister Jean-Luc Mélenchon, has revamped himself as a 'tribune of the people'. The NPA's candidate, car-worker Philippe Poutou, is currently credited with 0.5% of the vote.

So what happened? I can only suggest some possible explanations. After Besancenot's creditable score of 4% in 2007 many in the LCR believed they had an open road before them because, they claimed, there were no longer any serious forces between it and the Socialist Party (PS). The theory of the

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'two lefts' (one social-liberal, one anti-capitalist) was combined with the idea that illusions in the PS were rapidly disappearing and that left-reformist attempts to fill the vacuum were doomed to failure. This led to errors such as under-estimating Mélenchon's split from the PS.

The LCR leadership was aware of the gap between Besancenot's popularity and their real influence, which is one reason why they decided to launch the NPA. But the distorted mind-set—and the divisions over strategy which it engendered—carried over into the new party. Inevitably, new problems emerged, compounded by the difficulty of integrating recruits coming from different traditions alongside the former LCR 'cadres'. For some, the party is too 'workerist'. For others it is too 'soft' and not clear on the question of class. Some hold semi-anarchist or 'eco-socialist' ideas, while others are closer to the Leninist tradition. Members may hold opposing views on, say, the right of Muslim women to wear the veil in public or support for Hamas. The NPA has a democratic culture which allows members to express widely diverging views and branches to decide their own priorities and alliances. This has positive and negative sides. With a divided leadership and no clear method for setting priorities or resolving conflicts, groups of members often just 'get on with it' without referring to the party as a whole. The byzantine system of permanent factions inherited from the LCR leads to endless discussion and manoeuvring (usually resulting in obscure compromises and tactical alliances) and consumes inordinate amounts of energy and resources. The



new 'open' party has proved hardly more welcoming than the 'sternly Trotskyist' LCR.

In 2010, millions mobilised against Sarkozy's pension 'reforms'. In terms of militancy, the NPA responded brilliantly, but was too small to decisively

influence events. Unfortunately, in the heat of the action, the NPA failed to emphasise political recruitment. A series of open debates—organised when the movement was in terminal decline—was presented more as a 'forum' than as a means of proposing a revolutionary alternative.

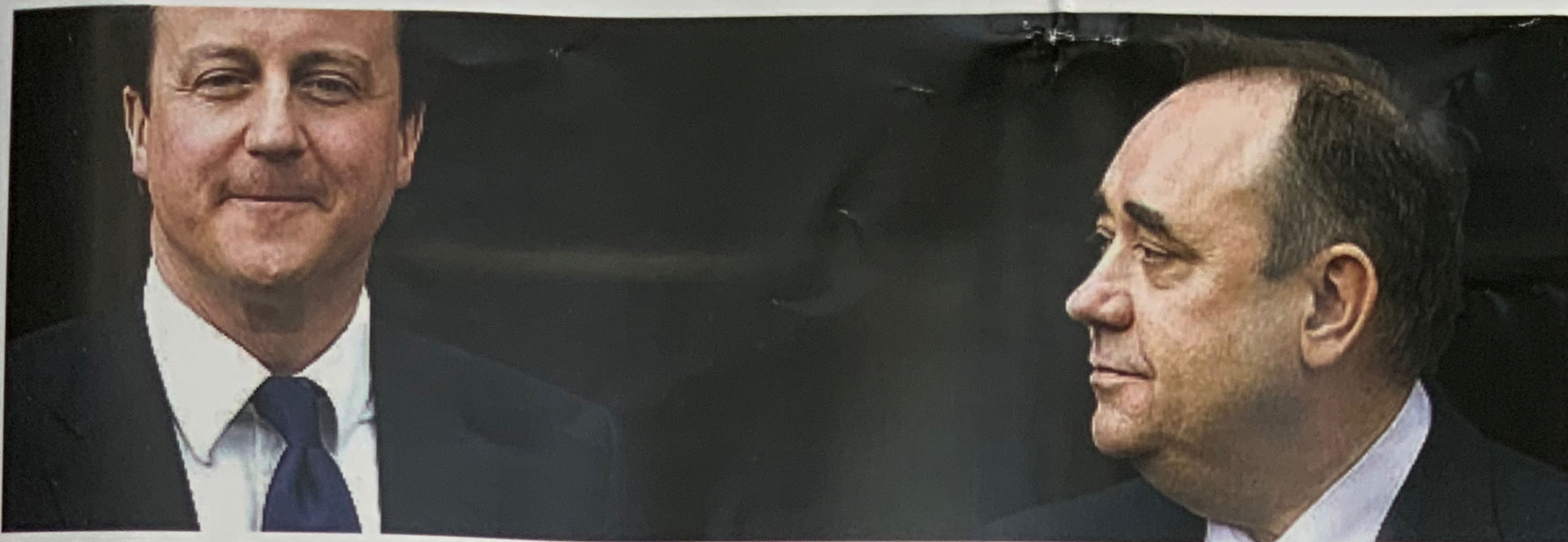
A wider question must be asked here: why did the strikes and demonstrations not lead to a shift to the left politically? 'Autonomist' movements inspired by the Arab revolutions and the Spanish Indignados have not taken off significantly in France either. Few of us realised the consequences of the pensions setback for militancy and political consciousness. What no longer seemed possible through striking began to seem feasible through the ballot box. The PS revived and the Left Front began to occupy the 'boulevard' to its left. For the NPA, this unexpected scenario led to further demoralisation and division, from which the majority hopes to escape via an active election campaign.

While much of the impetus has been lost, the NPA is still a vital part of the radical left, with its insistence on mass struggle—rather than parliamentary combinations—to challenge pro-capitalist policies, whether they come from Sarkozy or (in a diluted form) his main challenger, the Socialist Party's François Hollande. Lessons must be learnt, but the NPA—with others—can still play an important role in building an alternative.

Colin Falconer is a member of the NPA's Saint-Denis branch. He writes in a personal capacity.



Scottish independence a key issue for Left



If Scotland leaves the Union, David will be jolly well annoyed

As the battle lines are drawn for the upcoming referendum, the issue of independence and its consequences has taken on a new urgency for the Left. The radical left in Scotland is united in support for a 'yes' vote for independence: this is an important development which could revive the fortunes of a movement so badly damaged by the Sheridan debacle. Campaigning on independence will encourage the Left to act together and could lay the groundwork for the re-emergence of a broad formation. Recent opinion polls have shown that working-class voters are more strongly in favour of independence than others, so in an independent Scotland, it is likely that a Left that had played a positive role in the campaign would have gained prestige amongst the class, undoing the enormous damage done by the split. If Scotland becomes independent it will

Colm Breathnach (ISN)

remain a capitalist society. However, given that the centre of gravity is well to the left of England, the pressure on both SNP and Labour to maintain or initiate social-democratic reforms will be significant, as will opposition to any austerity measure that those parties might impose. So in tangible ways, independence will have a positive impact on working people's lives in the short term. But, since both parties combine a strong neo-liberal element with a weak reformism, in the medium-term there would be a real opening for the radical left and social movements to take off.

The viability of Scotland as a separate state provides a strong basis for a socialist transformation. Although the peak of oil and gas production in the

North Sea has passed, there is still plenty left. Scotland is also set to become a major producer of alternative energy, especially wind energy, an important factor in the future when carbon-based energy production declines. In themselves these factors do not guarantee a progressive outcome, but they do provide the possibility of a strong platform should an independent Scotland undergo a revolutionary process in the future.

An outcome of independence that's been overlooked is that it will lead to the end of the UK. This will not happen immediately but there can be little doubt that the situation in the remaining peripheral parts of that state will change dramatically. The pressure for greater autonomy in Wales will undoubtedly increase, while the outcome in England will not necessarily be the gloomy 'Tory dictatorship' that

some predict. How long will the Northern English working class tolerate the prospect of such an endless Tory government? Faced with the same prospect, won't there be enormous pressure on the Left in England to overcome its perennial sectarianism and build some kind of united organisation? The impact on Ireland is unpredictable but given that many in the Protestant community look to Scotland as their cultural home, independence could have a profound effect. Will loyalty to the UK remain unquestioned when that state does not include Scotland? What will happen to British identity if there is no British state? Scottish independence could prompt a re-orientation of identity in the Protestant community along an Ireland-Scotland axis that could create an opening for socialist politics in that community.

This likely collapse of the UK would have geo-political ramifications well beyond these islands. Since 1945, Britain has proved to be a vital ally for the US, ensuring that the US was not isolated in its imperialist wars and has a staunch ally within the EU. It matters little whether the rump state maintains its formal title; it will be much reduced in prestige and ability to wield influence on a European or world stage.

To date the majority in opinion polls have been against independence but that is whittling away. A few more years of austerity may swing working people decisively in favour. That would be the beginning of the struggle for socialist transformation in Scotland, and a decisive defeat for imperialism at a regional and global level.

New Parties of the Left: Experiences from Europe –

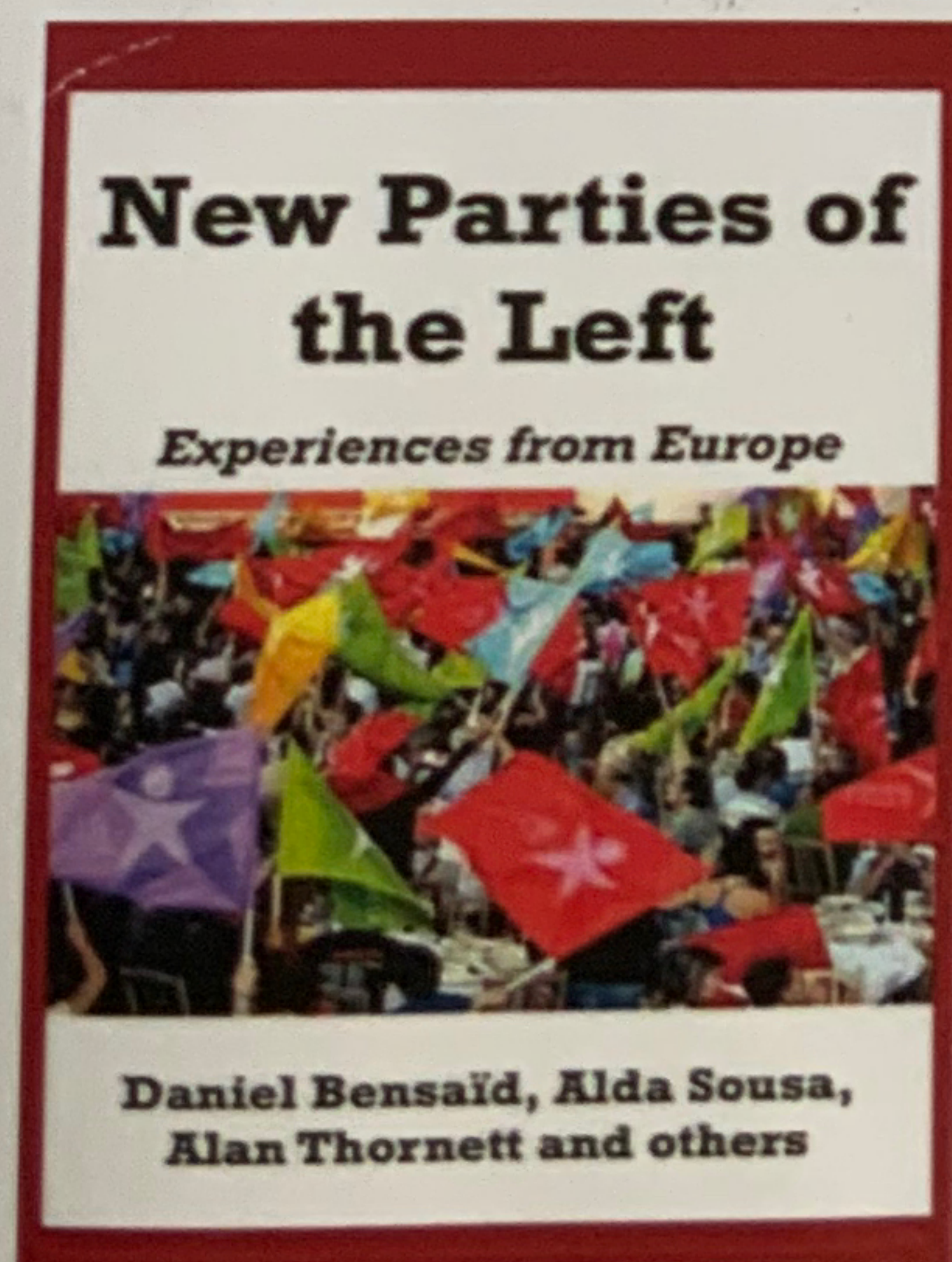
Daniel Bensaïd, Alda Sousa, Alan Thornett and others – Resistance Books, 2011 - €9

Ed Walsh (ISN)

For the past two decades, socialists in a number of European countries have been trying to build new left parties to fill the political vacuum created by the demise of Communism and the right-wing shift of social democracy. This book sets out to provide an overview of their experiences: it does not cover every notable case study, but includes chapters on all the major European states—France, Germany, Italy and Britain—along with one country each from Scandinavia and southern Europe. It comes at time when it's important for Europe's radical left to take stock of achievements and setbacks. Some of the parties that were considered promising role models have collapsed, others have lost ground. Even the most successful groups have thus far been unable to develop an effective response to the crisis of European capitalism.

There is not enough space in this review to go through all the individual countries; instead, I will make some general observations about the experience of new left parties since the early '90s. All of the groups discussed in this book have taken elections seriously and tried to win a foothold in national politics. Where they have been able to hold together and work consistently for a number of years, they have usually been able to win a reasonable share of the vote (between 5 and 10% in most

book review



cases). If the national political system gives any kind of fair representation to small parties—the French and British systems don't—this translates into a presence on the national stage. They have also sought to build campaigning parties that can organise strikes, demonstrations and other forms of mass action. Yet in most cases, these parties have been trying to find their feet at a time when social struggles are at a low ebb (the chapters on Portugal,

Another problem for radical-left parties is the difficulty of arguing for socialism. If we say that we want to set up a democratic economy based on social ownership and workers' self-management, that sounds very abstract to the majority of people.

Italy and Germany all make this point). Even in France, which is a partial exception, the main victories for mass action have been defensive ones. The working-class movement has sometimes been able to frustrate right-wing policies, but it has not gone on the offensive anywhere. This makes it harder to resist being absorbed into the political establishment. There is constant pressure to be 'pragmatic' and enter government by forming alliances with social-democratic parties. Such coalitions have usually been harmful, if not disastrous—Italy is the most striking example. The problem is not simply that the social-democratic

parties are 'reformist' in their approach: in most cases, that would be a big improvement. Centre-left governments have often set about undoing reforms that were introduced in the past. Since the crisis began, every social-democratic party in Europe which has found itself in government has gone along with right-wing austerity programmes, from the Irish Labour Party to PASOK in Greece.

Another problem for radical-left parties is the difficulty of arguing for socialism. If we say that we want to set up a democratic economy based on social ownership and workers' self-management, that sounds very abstract to the majority of people. There is no clear sense of how to get there. It is hard to go beyond defence of the welfare state against neo-liberalism and talk about how radical or revolutionary change might come about in today's Europe. In the new conditions created by the global economic crisis, there is an urgent need for socialists to develop a programme of demands that can link immediate battles against austerity with the long-term struggle for a new social system. That programme may differ from one country to the next, but everywhere the radical left will have to address similar questions—one prime example being their attitude towards the European Union and its institutions. Irish socialists should start the debate now, recognising that nobody has a perfect map for the road ahead.



Ireland's elite laughing all the way to the bank

Kevin Quinn (ISN)

In 2008, Ireland was brought to its knees by our own Axis of Evil: builders, bankers and their Fianna Fáil cronies. It's now a good time to ask who the winners and losers in the crisis have been. Let's start with the banks. You would think that by now, all the idiot CEOs and imbecile board members would have been purged from their posts. Yet many of those who were central to the collapse remain at the helm, including Richie Boucher at Bank of Ireland and Michael Gallagher of the EBS.

The same people who persuaded Fianna Fáil to give them a blanket guarantee covering their huge liabilities, saving them from certain bankruptcy, now refuse to co-operate with the state. The banks continue to obstruct the government's pay guide-lines for top earners. Their boards refuse to pass on interest rate cuts granted by the European Central Bank. Despite a massive re-capitalisation programme, the banks stubbornly refuse to lend money and have defied calls for mortgage debt relief.

The Cowen and Kenny governments

have insisted that we need to bail out the banks in order to maintain the supply of credit for the real economy. This is pure fantasy. Anglo Irish Bank received the largest cash injection of all: €29 billion. It has not pumped one cent into the economy since it was bailed out. In a decade's time, the bank formerly known as Anglo Irish will end its days fully solvent, having paid off all its bond-holders, creditors and depositors. The Irish state on the other hand will be paying the cost of this bail-out for decades.

What of the developers and land speculators? Many upped sticks and moved to the USA or the Gulf States in search of new opportunities. Their losses have also been covered by the state, with junk property assets bought up by NAMA at a cost of €32 billion. At least 100 developers are being paid more than €100,000 a year in project management fees. Many property tycoons are suspected of flogging off their assets to NAMA at an inflated price, then having their business associates buy back the properties at a discount. One deal involving Johnny Ronan's Treasury Holdings was turned down because NAMA smelt a rat, but there are bound to be many others slipping through

under the radar.

While our economic elite are a protected species, Fianna Fáil had to face the people at the ballot box last year, and suffered the heaviest losses for any Irish political party since 1918. But satisfaction at ousting Fianna Fáil's top table from office was short-lived when news broke of their ministerial pensions. Bertie and the boys walked off into the sunset with a payday which will cushion them from all the deprivations which ordinary citizens have to endure. In Ireland, failure pays big time judging by the fate of our builders, bankers and politicians. The super-rich, the tax fugitives and the foreign multinationals can also be placed among the winners, as they all evaded special taxes designed to pay for the crisis.

So who were the losers? Everyone else. The PAYE worker who has been crippled with penal taxes, the pensioners who have lost 6 weeks' fuel allowance, the one in seven mortgage holders who cannot afford to discharge their monthly payments, the 400,000+ people who have lost their jobs, the tens of thousands who have been forced to emigrate—the list goes on. They will be picking up the tab for years to come.

what we stand for

The Irish Socialist Network is a radical democratic socialist organisation, committed to the complete abolition of capitalism and its replacement by a socialist society, by which we mean:

- A transformation of power relationships, leading to democratic control of all aspects of society and an end to elite rule.
- Collective ownership and democratic control of all economic structures, wealth and resources, by the working class.
- Equality of all people and an end to all forms of privilege and discrimination.
- Vindication of all human rights: social, political and individual.
- A sustainable society, developing in harmony with the natural environment.

The Irish Socialist Network works to achieve this society on the basis of the following principles: Change is brought about by the empowerment of ordinary people not by a revolutionary vanguard or parliamentary elite.

- Openness, equality, internal democracy, consistent activism and a commitment to class politics are essential traits of a socialist organisation.
- Non-dogmatic Marxist thought is essential for analysing society and advancing the struggle for socialism.
- While acknowledging differences, we will work in a non-sectarian manner with, and promote dialogue between, all socialist and progressive organisations.
- A key component of socialism is internationalism in the struggle for justice, equality and the defence of the environment.

web links

INDYMEDIA IRELAND

Independent news and postings, by activists and for activists. An indispensable resource.
www.indymedia.ie

ANTI-WAR IRELAND

A national, democratic, non-hierarchical antiwar organisation in which the ISN participates. Has branches in Dublin, Belfast and Cork, and can be contacted by emailing
info@antiwarireland.org
www.antiwarireland.org

IRELAND PALESTINE SOLIDARITY CAMPAIGN

It is what it says on the tin – a national and very active organisation for Palestine solidarity activists.
www.ipsc.ie

HANDS OFF THE PEOPLE OF IRAN

A newly formed campaign that aims to mobilise people in opposition to US plans to attack Iran. Critical of the reactionary Iranian government.
www.hopoi.org

CHOICE IRELAND

A campaign formed to advocate abortion rights in Ireland. Believes in a woman's right to choose.
www.choiceireland.blogspot.com

SHELL TO SEA

Set up to support the people of Erris, Co. Mayo, in their struggle to fend off Shell's government-supported plans to build a dangerous gas pipeline in a scenic part of rural Ireland. Very active on a national basis.
www.corribsos.com

RESIDENTS AGAINST RACISM

Dublin-based and long-standing anti-racism organisation that is particularly active in opposing government misbehaviour. A vibrant and committed group.
www.residentsagainstracism.org

INDEPENDENT WORKERS UNION

A small union, containing many activists of a socialist disposition. Strongly opposed to social partnership, it organises particularly among lower-paid workers and immigrants. A campaigning, left-wing trade union. Headquarters is in Cork.
www.union.ie

RED BANNER

An independent socialist magazine that has been produced regularly for the past 10 years. Always worth a read.
www.redbannermagazine.com

Title: Resistance, No. 15

Organisation: Irish Socialist Network

Date: 2012

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