

# Ireland: Build a broad and pluralist party of the left?

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In the last issue, Cian Prendiville, in his article ‘End of the [party] line?’ wrote about the questions posed by the socialist left’s inability to grow since the 2008 financial crash. Decades of isolation and obscurity have left would-be revolutionary parties with stultifying organisational and political problems. But even leaving their self-inflicted problems aside, these organisations are unlikely to be the beneficiaries of working-class anger given the low level of radical class consciousness today. This idea was also explored in the last issue by Jessy Ní Cheallaigh and Paul Murphy in their article ‘By the fight and in the fight’ in which they described a “triple crisis” facing the working class; a crisis of political leadership, class consciousness and, crucially, of organisation.

It’s clear that the ‘political centre’ is eroding as the working-class look to vote for anything that can deliver change. It means that even some previously stable formations, like the Democratic Party in the US and the Labour Party in the UK have been rocked by leftwing figureheads like Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn leading to large numbers of young people, in particular, getting involved in the politics of these previously zombie organisations. We have to think about what this can teach us about how people’s views may develop and what will be the likely milestones as working-class people fight back against the prospect of further rounds of austerity and climate shocks in the medium term.

## **The case for Marxists to turn their attention to a broad left party**

The development of a broad left party in Ireland would be a very significant step forward given that broad, likely reformist, organisations are attractive for many people engaging in struggle. Of course, you can’t will a broad left into existence. Some will argue that investing in this project is not the best use of resources and instead we should concentrate our efforts into building our own revolutionary group, herein known as the ‘sect’. Why would we spend time arguing and compromising with others on the left? People with this point of view will describe what is essentially sect building as the method of the Bolsheviks (see box) and would prefer to take what they see as a revolutionary approach by criticising bigger, reformist left parties from the outside. It’s certainly not difficult for Marxists to do this where such parties exist. It is easy to be critical of the policies and record of broad left parties around Europe today, or of the DSA in the US. Many sects take the approach of criticising these formations when they make mistakes and hope it will attract the most radicalized people to their party as a result. They believe it is very important to keep a spotless banner and if they do things their way, they are not implicated in the mistakes from bad decisions of others.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Heavy Red*, 1924.

However, I would argue that you are less, not more, likely to attract radicalised people by maintaining a distance from these organisations. If a broad left organisation fails or collapses, the next 'thing' is more likely to flow organically from that or from a section of it. Furthermore, if the question of starting something new or what went wrong is being discussed afterwards, you won't have the credibility to weigh in seriously to this discussion. You are much more likely to get a hearing from other activists if you were seen to genuinely contribute to a broad left organisation for its own sake, not for what you could recruit out of it. There are no kudos for standing on the wings and 'being proven right' if things are unsuccessful.

Capitalism has won a series of ideological victories over the last 30 years that give it an assumed normality and permanence in people's lives. There is much more buy-in now to the idea that capitalism can be reformed or made more equitable or even to the idea that no alternative is possible. What we've learned from the last couple of years in Irish politics is that the working class will pick up any tool at its disposal to oppose capitalist oppression. But, like a river, most people will likely forge a path through the line of least resistance, quite reasonably looking for what appear to be relatively achievable solutions rather than jumping straight to dramatic social transformations. Even when people engage with reformist ideas and those ideas fail, they tend to look for other reformist ideas. There is no guarantee of a linear progression from 'mistake made' to 'lesson learned', from a failed reformism to revolutionary socialist ideas. If you reminded likely Green Party voters before the February 2020 election about the disastrous anti-working class policies they enacted the last time they were in government, you were likely to be met with indifference because many feel that there's not a viable alternative presented to them. Trying to carve out a strong influential socialist left within a broad left party can be an absolutely critical factor if that party is to be the benefactor of a surge from an upswing in class struggle. Revolutionary socialists can greatly contribute to such a party and in doing so gain a better hearing for their own views.

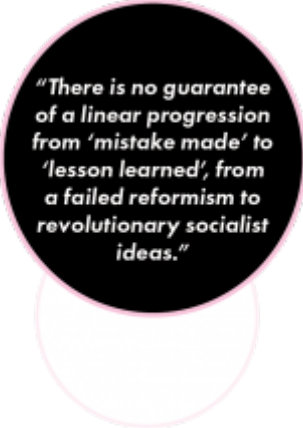


I also think experience battling in these kinds of arenas is a necessary education for Marxists. In day-to-day work, instead of being ensconced in a small group of like-minded people, you will have to deal with all the theories; dead-end theories, revelatory theories, great insights and bad ideas from a section of the working class that is not in full agreement with you. It requires you to argue against other people's formulations and clarify your own ideas. It is frustrating, difficult, eye-opening, educational and you will stay in touch and stay humble in the process. It also means assuming that we are there to learn too, not just provide all the answers.

## **The case for a multi-tendency broad left party**

Often in broad campaigns, you will arrive at a meeting and you will be implored to leave the party politics at the door. "Please! We're here as individual activists, not as representatives!!" Sometimes it can get tense if parties or groups are selling their papers or leafleting at the door and there's palpable hostility. It can reflect a frustration with political parties showing up and engaging in competitive recruiting, flexing their numbers to win as much influence and control as is possible. Even if it's an unfair characterisation, this perception of political parties can lead to ill feelings within a campaign.

There has been talk recently on the left in Ireland of calling for left organisations to dissolve themselves and start something new. Well, that kind of suggestion is always floating around. Practically, this is a non-runner because anyone who is aware of the Irish left knows it is made up of multiple small parties and they exist because of the dedicated work of activists trying to build their respective parties on the basis of their particular beliefs and they absolutely will not dissolve themselves. Politically, I think this is a draconian demand even if it comes from a good intention to stamp out bitter sectarian competition between political groups. What we need is a way for those who can work together usefully to do so. That will inevitably mean the ability to retain some kind of caucus or network structure that allows for groups, whether pre-existing or arising from new positions, to organise for their views and keep their identity while constructively working as part of a greater whole.



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Some people may see this as a recipe for endless factional division and navel-gazing. But in any organisation with a real, democratic, internal life there will be debate. And members will naturally gravitate to certain ideas or perspectives and they should have the right to caucus around them, produce written material, and advocate within a broad organization for them. After working together, some activists will convince others of their positions and barriers between different positions will start to dissolve or groups will merge. But there is no organisational solution or

measure that can overcome a political difference. You can't make disagreements disappear by stopping minorities from organising, you can only cover them over with a skin-deep unanimity behind the ideas of the leadership.

This is not a call for uniting everyone on the socialist left. There is a genuine problem of toxicity and bitterness between left groups that can make prolonged and close interaction unbearable and anxiety-inducing. There are and will be groups that are simply incapable of working constructively with others. There are other groups that just have fundamentally incompatible political outlooks. If your perspective is that you continue to build your own revolutionary party, that your superior politics will elevate you above the rest and YOU will become the pole around which the mass workers' party will be built, then you won't be convinced of the need to build a broad left and you won't behave constructively within one.

I think broader, looser organisations, probably with a more reformist stance are the most likely benefactors as the working class move into struggle. I think it should be a priority for Marxists to be a part of or engage with these organisations, trying to push the organised left along within that so there is a 'left' position in key debates and there is a counter to disillusionment and despair when reformist strategy fails.



So how to get there from here? Looking across the parties and groups of the Irish left, all are small but some are very much smaller than others. All are marked by the experience of swimming against the tide. None are perfect future mass parties in miniature. Some are more sectarian than others.

It is clear for instance that People Before Profit is the largest and most widely organised organisation of the socialist left. It originated as a project of the old Socialist Workers Party, but it has to a considerable degree developed beyond that narrow sect model. Those involved deserve congratulations for building a party with a strong activist focus, a large membership by the standards of the Irish left, a well known "brand", some electoral success and what appears at least from the outside to be some real internal debate. The simplest route to a genuinely large party of the broad socialist left would be for PBP to "open up", pull in other activists and grow into one. To achieve that, the Socialist Workers Network, the network which succeeded the SWP, would have to take what is a substantial risk of letting go and losing control. But doing so would both enable the SWN to more clearly express its distinct Marxist politics, distinct from the more minimal political basis of PBP and would enable it to be a bigger fish in a bigger pond. Alternative approaches to reaching a really substantial party of the sort I'm talking about are trickier. The trade unions could take the initiative and set one up, but there's little reason to think that the unions in Ireland would be at all willing to. Smaller groups could come together, but that is a long and hard road to travel.



The argument goes that the Bolsheviks stood outside and in opposition to a weak, confused and reformist broader left. When a revolutionary crisis came, the working class abandoned the reformists and turned wholeheartedly towards the Bolsheviks and the Bolshevik party rapidly multiplied in numbers becoming a mass workers party. This is referenced to comfort the membership of small and isolated revolutionary groups.

In fact, the Bolsheviks were precisely a group within a broad party, the RSDLP, for most of their history. They built their forces and their influence as a current within that party. Even as late as 1917, their split with the Menshevik faction had not been fully complete. They were not a hardened sect criticising the broader organization from the outside.

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**P.S.**

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