

Left- Horizons

‘Labour’ candidate in Northern Ireland For workers’ unity and socialism

Having an independent candidate standing in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, on what is more or less a ‘Labour’ ticket, is potentially a significant development in Northern Irish politics. For too long, working people in that part of the UK have had only sectarian candidates from which to choose and it is long-overdue for the UK Labour Party to stand official Labour candidates in Northern Ireland.

The candidate in this election is herself a member of the UK Labour Party, but she is not allowed to describe herself as a Labour Party candidate and for that reason alone she is standing as an ‘independent’. But she has given a commitment to support the Labour manifesto and take the Labour whip in the House of Commons if elected, so she is a Labour candidate in all but name.

Working class people in Northern Ireland suffer from poor wages, a housing shortage, an NHS in crisis, local authority cuts and all the other austerity nightmares faced by workers in Britain, although in most cases the problems are *worse*. Wages are the second-lowest in the UK, above only the North-East of England, and in real terms they are still below the level of 2009.

Homelessness is an increasing feature of life in the North. According to a 2017 report by the Northern Ireland Public

Service Alliance, the largest trade union there, “Nearly 20,000 individuals and families apply for housing each year because they are homeless”. The NIPSA report outlines that the number of houses lacking at least one basic amenity has been rising and is at its highest level since 1987. There are over 37,000 waiting for social housing, of which a record number are in housing stress. In the last two years there have been homeless people dying on the cold streets of Belfast. Yet house-building in Northern Ireland is at its lowest level for forty years.

Food bank use risen by a third

The Trussell Trust, which operates a network of food banks throughout the UK, revealed that the number of people in receipt of food parcels in Northern Ireland has increased by almost a third, to 17,571 in the sixth months to September. As many as 41% of these (7,260) were children.

As it is in the rest of the UK, the NHS in Northern Ireland is facing an acute crisis. Waiting lists and cancellations of non-urgent procedures are at an all-time high. Years of underfunding and wage freezes have resulted in a drastic shortage of key staff, leaving those NHS workers who are still in post to face intolerable levels of overwork and stress. As a result of this situation, NHS unions have been balloting members for strike action. Unison members, on a 23% turnout, voted 92% in favour of strike action. The RCN, in a 43% turnout, also voted 92% in favour. The decision had not been taken lightly, the Unison Regional Secretary has said, but staff had been “pushed to the

brink". This means that in the next few months, Northern Ireland will be hit by walk-outs of NHS staff.

Labour could advance a *class* alternative to sectarianism

All these issues mean that the day-to-day problems faced by working class people in Northern Ireland can be summed up in two words: *endless austerity*. It is in this situation that the Labour Party could cut right across sectarian lines by advancing a *class alternative* to the traditional sectarian parties. Socialist ideas and policies have never been more relevant than they are today in Northern Ireland. Labour could and should advance policies 'For the many and not the Few' in Northern Ireland as much as it does in the rest of the UK.

Despite the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, deep sectarian divisions run right across Northern Ireland today and the paramilitaries are still there, although not for the most part in public view. Indeed, the Agreement itself enshrined sectarian divisions in the manner in which the Northern Ireland Assembly and its Executive were established.

The process of British withdrawal from the EU has now thrown that whole arrangement into doubt. The big majority of the population of Northern Ireland voted Remain, clearly putting a high value on the economic, social and personal benefits of a completely open border between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland.

Now, thanks to Boris Johnson's Brexit deal, which treats NI differently from the rest of the UK, there is a lot of debate about the unification of Ireland. As the correspondent of the *Belfast Telegraph*, Pearse Doherty put it (November 15), "The issue of Irish unity is now a matter of almost daily conversation". There are now regular calls by academics, economists and political leaders North and South to hold a referendum on Irish unity. Last weekend, at a special conference in Derry Sinn Fein leader Mary Lou McDonald called for a referendum on Irish unity "in the next five years".

No free health service in the Republic

But the question of the Irish border will not be resolved by a party or parties steeped in the politics of decades of sectarianism. On the contrary, raising the issue of the border, even by means of a democratic poll, will be used by unionist parties and paramilitaries to raise the spectre of a 'forced' unification. There are many aspects of life in the Republic which are better than in the North, but there are many that are also worse and that is something that has no appeal to traditionally unionist communities. There is no health service free at the point of use, for example. There is a housing problem at least as bad as that in the

North and, not least, there has been a drive to the bottom in wages and conditions for workers. Unless the issue of Irish unity is raised in the context of a resolution of the problems facing working people, which means a *unified working class struggle* for socialist change North and South, it will risk a return to the sectarian strife of the past.

Working class unity is still the key question

As it has been since the Civil Rights marches of the late 1960s, the key question today remains *working class unity* and that issue is indissolubly linked the fight for a programme of socialist change. The working class in the North of Ireland is potentially stronger than its counterpart in the rest of the UK. The Northern Ireland Committee (NIC) of the ICTU is the representative body for 34 trade unions with over 215,000 members. NIPSA, the largest trade union, is in membership terms, the biggest civil organisation in Northern Ireland. We should demand that the Northern Ireland Committee endorse labour movement candidates in elections.

Over 35,000 Northern Irish trade union members opt to pay the political levy to the UK Labour Party. *Left Horizons* supporters will also demand that these tens of thousands of Labour-supporting workers should be properly *enfranchised*, by having the opportunity to vote for Labour candidates.

We wish every success to Caroline Wheeler in Fermanagh and South Tyrone and we urge our website readers and supporters to offer their support on the ground and financially. We hope that whatever the election result in that constituency that it is the beginning of a fight-back against the sectarian traditions that have plagued Northern Irish politics for many decades.

For working class unity and socialism!

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