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Ireland

Breakthrough for Sinn Fein

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Description:

Sinn Fein was the big winner at the European elections in the Republic of Ireland. The party practically doubled its score, going from 6.3% in 1999 to 11.4% in 2004. As a Sinn Fein European MP was also elected in the north of Ireland with 26.1% of the vote, the organization became the first European political party to have deputies elected from two different member states.

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The big loser was the governing Fianna Fail party led by prime minister Bertie Ahern, which won only 28.8% of the vote, nearly 10% less than in 1999. The municipal elections took place at the same time as the European poll, and the defeat for Fianna Fail was even more crushing at the local level. The setback opened speculation on the future of the government as the opposition Fine Gael maintained its vote (although it lost one seat in the European parliament) and the Labour Party won 11.50% and two seats as against 8.75% and one seat in 1999. Sinn Fein also performed well in the local elections, increasing its vote from 3.5% in 1999 to 8% in 2004 and adding 33 local council seats to the 21 it held already. The Green Party fell back to 4.5% as against 6.7% in 1999 and lost one of its two seats in the European Parliament.

On the left, there was a good result for Joe Higgins, the candidate of the Socialist Party (SP, the Irish organization of the Committee for a Workers International) which doubled its vote in the Dublin European constituency, going from 10,619 votes in 1999 (3.8%) to 23,218 votes (5.5%) this year. The SP won four local council seats (as against two in 1999). This success is largely attributable to its involvement in the campaign against a controversial "bin tax". The other radical left organization, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP, Irish section of the International Socialist Tendency - IST) registered some good scores in some local elections (11.75%, or 1,094 votes in Ballyfermot/Dublin) but did not win any seats.

Both the European and local elections witness to the degree of popular rejection of the anti-working class attacks and privatizations of the Ahern government. However neither Fine Gael nor the Labour Party present any alternative to the policies currently being pursued by Fianna Fail.