

## Mark Hoskins: Elections, no way to build an alternative

For  
your  
child's  
sake...



**Under a Fine Gael Government**  
 Under a Fine Gael Government, the children of the future will be left to fend for themselves. The Fine Gael Government will be responsible for the education of the children of the future. The Fine Gael Government will be responsible for the education of the children of the future. The Fine Gael Government will be responsible for the education of the children of the future.

**"When the going gets tough... we don't run away..."**

Instead of false promises... double talk and downright dishonesty... WE have told you the truth — and then got on with the job.

**28 WEEKS in office - this is what we've done.**

**THE PARTY'S OVER - WE CAN'T AFFORD ANOTHER!**

**Vote LABOUR WE'RE ON YOUR SIDE**

**KENNY**

**FINE GAEL**

We don't live in a socialist world. In fact never before has capitalism exercised such total hegemony. Despite huge disaffection with austerity and global capitalism, for billions of people the world over, an alternative is impossible to imagine. One of the key tasks of the left then, is not just to oppose attacks on the living conditions of working class people, but to provide an alternative vision of a society where we do not exist to serve the economy, but rather the economy exists to serve us, a society where the slogan "from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs" becomes a reality.

The question then arises; what is the most effective way to carry out this task? For most of the left, elections have some part to play. There was a time that the mainstream left believed that socialism could be brought about by the ballot box. During the long boom that followed the second world war that looked possible. In many countries, social democratic parties were able to introduce significant reforms, albeit as a result of the power of organised workers in unions. Under today's conditions, very few would still make that argument.

The main argument for engaging in the electoral process today is that it serves as a platform for socialist ideas. The opportunity to speak to people during election campaigns, to have speaking time in parliament and to have elected representatives with access to media airtime is attractive. However, the left has been actively engaging in this process for over a century and we are further away from socialism now than we were one hundred years ago.

There are very good reasons for this. At times socialist parties have made signifi-

cant electoral gains and had massive popular support. Even when they had mass membership, the tendency was always for their leaderships to become institutionalised and drift to the right. There is also a tendency for electoral success to sow illusions in the capitalist state. Not least is the growing reliance on leaders which leads to a demobilisation of organised workers.

The history of The Workers Party in the eighties and nineties is a prime example of all three of those problems. The party membership had spent years building support among the working class through activism in communities and in the unions. This translated into electoral support and during the eighties they became a force to



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be reckoned with.

However, in 1992, six of the seven Workers Party TDs along with some of the membership attempted to change the party constitution. Their aim was to move the party to the right in an attempt to win more electoral support. Having failed, the six TDs left the party, taking a significant proportion of the membership, effectively undoing the work of decades.

The Workers Party is not an isolated example of electoral success being counterproductive to the struggle for socialism. The Militant Tendency in the UK also built significant support in the eighties. Their influence on the Liverpool City council was such that the British media

ran a red scare campaign that lasted years and even penetrated the Labour Party that they were a part of. At their height they were believed to have somewhere in the region of 8,000 members. The Militant leader, Peter Taaffe, predicted that the following decade would be the "red nineties".

Within a few years, that confidence was eroded. Expulsions from the Labour Party, the fall of red Merseyside and a split in the organisation left them in complete disarray. The main figures of Militant on Merseyside became hate figures and the idea of socialism lost support. In both of these examples it was activism in workplaces and communities that built support for Socialism and electoralism that destroyed it.

The lesson we must take from this is that if we are to pose an alternative to the capitalist system, it cannot come through participating in elections. The alternative is to build centres of counter power, to organise in communities and workplaces and show how the world can be when we collectively take action. Strikes, community campaigns and student struggles can act as schools of self-organisation and provide glimpses of a world based on solidarity not greed, a world without leaders and bosses.

*The writer is an activist with the Workers Solidarity Movement*

# & THE LEFT

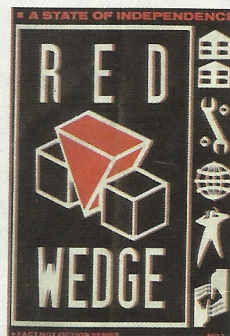
**Alan Myler:**  
Elections, an essential  
activity for socialists

**S**ocialist politics, to be meaningful and fruitful in the sense of achieving gains in class struggles with the elite, must connect with people in the daily reality of their lives. Experience at home and abroad has shown time and again the importance of elections to the people and to the struggle to build socialism, albeit as one element in a wider struggle.

From the emergence of modern socialism in the 1840s, elections have been recognised as a vital arena for political work. They represent a means to deliver concrete benefits for working class people (the eight hour day was the classic example), to raise class consciousness by offering an alternative to the status quo, and to expose the very limitations of democracy within the bourgeois political system. They are a means to an end: the capture of state power for the working class and the transformation of society.

The assumption of state power requires winning victories and popular support through struggle in the arenas of politics, culture, and economics. Socialists have always relied on different means to win gains for the working class. These broadly fall into three complementary categories; working between the gaps of existing political and economic structures to innovate alternative models of societal organisation; revolutionary confrontation with the existing structures in times of political or economic upheaval; and seeking reforms which benefit the working class in the immediate term. Each approach provides opportunities for the working class and its organisations in the class war against capitalism. Each has positive attributes which contribute to the ultimate goal of creating a rupture with the status quo.

However, it is clear that in the objective conditions across much of the globe, the appropriate strategy for the Left has been to embrace electoral politics with the goal of creating a tide of popular support for the transformation of society.



**Sorry to have missed you!**  
I am seeking your **No. 1** Vote  
**Paul Gogarty TD**  
"Not just at election time"

Dear Resident,  
I called today, but unfortunately there was no answer. I will be seeking your No. 1 vote on May 24th next based on my track record over the last five years. If you wish to get in touch about anything, please feel free to contact my office on 01-6219966 or mobile on 087-2752489. You can also e-mail me at paultd@iol.ie. Thanks for your time and consideration,  
*Paul*

The post-war reforms in Europe, including the welfare state and the nationalisation of major industries, radically improved the lives of working people. More recently, in Latin America, the successful capture of state power by Left political movements through elections has seen the power of the multinationals rolled back. Public services have developed at a rate unimaginable under previous centrist and right-wing governments. The result in each case has been a political virtuous circle where real and immediate gains have meshed with a Leftwards shift in the ideological compass of the societies in question.

In such circumstances, society moves closer to the point where moving beyond



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capitalism becomes more viable, and where the socialist alternative becomes more attractive. They demonstrate that electoral engagement offers a credible and convincing beginning for the journey towards socialism. Neo-liberalism has understood this all too well, reversing as many reforms as possible.

What is not in doubt is that the current electoral system in developed capitalist countries, of Representative democracy, is insufficient. This system was promoted by the arch-reactionary Edmund Burke. It is not truly democratic but rather gives powers to individuals elected to a parliament, usually for terms of four years, who then decide on matters affecting citizens without any reference to the citizens.

It is time for a truly democratic and ef-

fective system to be implemented which includes citizens' right to recall members of parliament. This would make members delegates not representatives. If workers can be dismissed if found unsuitable then surely such rules should apply to those elected to parliament.

All too often, it is emphasis, not principle, which divides socialists. In Ireland today, what is required is common purpose and cooperation to withstand the onslaught of transnational monopoly capitalism. It is a question of timing, of building mass support for the political, economic and societal alternative. In our conditions, mass support can only be won through arduous political work within the working class, within the existing structures of society, by combining theory and practice to synthesise a genuinely revo-

lutionary approach which moves beyond the dead ends of utopianism and militarist adventure, which is not based on tired clichés, and which is open to re-examining political methods and building progressive alliances to shift society Leftwards.

In the societies of the modern developed world, unless economic deterioration accelerates to a situation not seen in Europe for decades (which cannot be ruled out), participation in electoral politics must remain the central part of the agenda for advancing the socialist alternative in the immediate term.

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