

Irish Say No to Military and Neo-Liberalism

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BRUSSELS, Jun 13 (IPS) - The rejection of the European Union's latest treaty by Ireland's electorate has been interpreted as a vote against the bloc's increasing emphasis on bolstering its military capacities and its efforts to prioritise free market principles over social protection.

In results declared Jun. 13, about 1.6 million Irish people who cast their vote came down 54 percent against the Lisbon treaty, compared to 46 percent in favour. As the treaty has to be ratified by all 27 of the EU's member states to be legally valid, the Irish 'No' appears to have scuppered the possibility that it could come into effect in its present form.

The result represented a major setback for the political establishment in Ireland, the only EU country that had decided to ratify the treaty through a referendum rather than through a procedure in its national parliament. Representatives of all the political parties sitting in the Oireachtas, the Dublin parliament, had exhorted a 'Yes' vote, with the exception of Sinn Féin. A left-leaning nationalist party, Sinn Féin holds just four seats in the 166-strong Dáil, the parliament's lower house.

Although the campaign groups opposing the treaty ranged from hard-line Catholics who argued that the EU was seeking to make abortion freely available in Ireland, to anti-globalisation activists, an opinion poll conducted for The Irish Times newspaper shortly before the referendum found that the military aspects of Lisbon were one of the public's main concerns with the document.

Ireland is nominally a neutral country, yet clauses in the treaty appeared to undermine that status. They contained an obligation that each EU country provide assistance to any fellow member state that comes under attack. And they stipulated that each country would increase its expenditure on defence, without providing any similar onus on states to improve social services such as health or education.

Roger Cole from the Dublin-based Peace and Neutrality Alliance, which opposed the treaty, said: "This is a victory for the European peace movement. I hope the European project moves away from the process of militarisation."

Bertie Ahern, who resigned as Taoiseach (Ireland's prime minister) earlier this year, had admitted that over 90 percent of the treaty was identical to the proposed EU constitution that French and Dutch voters struck down in 2005. Last year the EU's governments decided to repackage most of the constitution's contents and rename it the Lisbon Treaty.

According to Cole, the constitution should have been completely scrapped at that time but EU leaders decided to salvage it "as if the treaty was emerging from the dead like Dracula

from a bad movie.”

Only 10 of more than 40 electoral constituencies had majorities in favour of the treaty. While some of the more affluent parts of Dublin supported the treaty, it was emphatically rejected in working class and rural areas, and in most of the towns and cities outside the capital.

In previous referenda, both Ireland’s trade union movement and the farming lobby have campaigned in favour of EU treaties. This time around, the Irish Farmers Association waited until the final stages of the campaign to urge a ‘Yes’ vote; it had dithered due to its perception that EU officials were not defending the interests of Irish agriculture in world trade talks. The Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU), which has almost 250,000 members, decided not to endorse the treaty.

Jack O’Connor, the union’s president, suggested that while EU social legislation has benefited Irish workers, there is a deep-rooted unease over how the interests of capital seem to be taken more seriously by the Brussels elite than social issues. “People are not comfortable with this ruthless neo-liberal Europe that seems to be emerging,” he said.

Although the treaty includes a bill of rights — including the right to strike — fears have been voiced that its provisions on social issues would have less legal weight than many of those relating to macro-economic policy. For example, the treaty says that competition must not be “distorted”. In some controversial recent verdicts, the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg has found that laws setting minimum wages flout competition rules.

Joe Higgins, leader of the Socialist Party and a former member of the Dáil, said many activists regarded the treaty’s rejection as “an opportunity to start against the neo-liberal juggernaut that’s being pushed down their throats.”

The EU’s presidents and prime ministers will meet in Brussels Jun. 19-20 to consider the implications of the Irish vote.

José Manuel Barroso, the European Commission president, noted that 18 countries have already ratified Lisbon. Despite the Irish vote, he said that the states which have not yet approved it should continue with their ratification process.

“The European Commission would have hoped for another result,” he added. “However, we respect the outcome of this referendum.”

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