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In Ireland Majority refuse to choose flavour of austerity in referendum —

Huge boycott is something to build on

Andrew Flood

June 1, 2012

With votes still being counted in the referendum in Ireland it has become clear that the largest block of potential voters refused to take part in the fiscal compact referendum, rejecting the arguments that they could either vote for 'stability' or against 'austerity'. Quite possibly more people chose to boycott the referendum than the combined Yes and No voters. On top of this some 17% of the population who live and pay tax in Ireland were excluded from voting at all in the referendum. This means as many as 2/3 of the adult population did not vote in the referendum.

Almost all the political parties and many political activists are reacting with shock and outrage directed at those who did not vote. In Ireland the WSM was alone among political organisations in arguing that the referendum was almost meaningless. Unlike almost everyone on the left we don't think that those who didn't vote are 'stupid' or 'sheeple'. Rather, they

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were, in many cases, smarter than almost all political activists in recognizing that the vote was so meaningless that the time it would take to vote was better spent getting the shopping done, watching some TV, playing with the kids or having a beer with friends.

The huge boycott of the referendum is a continuation of the increasing disillusionment with politicians and the representative political system that has been growing for the last two decades. While once the perspective that little or nothing could be gained from the political system was only common in the most impoverished sections of the working class, this result confirms that it has become common across the working class. The left's role is to build on this rejection in the argument for a revolutionary alternative, not to try and act as a recruiting sergeant to drag people back into the electoral fold through strident declarations that the electoral process really has meaning.

The spread of results across the country is already suggesting some interesting patterns if we understand the vote as an opinion poll. Urban areas with high concentrations of lower paid workers seem to have a far higher no vote, a majority no in many cases. Most rural areas and the urban areas where higher paid workers and the middle and ruling class have been found are more likely to have voted yes. On RTE John Kilraine reported that tallies showed that Ballyfermot had a No vote of nearly 90% while Sandymount had close to 77% yes a particularly extreme example of a class divide in the vote, Sandymount being one of the most prosperous areas in Dublin, Ballyfermot one of the more impoverished. This pattern seems common across Dublin and also in Cork.

Of course in part this is a reflection of where the left put the effort into getting out the vote, the turnout after all was also lower in these areas. The huge use of time and resources that was essential to the left 'it's about austerity' campaign did manage to convince those who wanted to choose between wolves

that the No wolf would perhaps be easier to outrun than the Yes wolf. But with all the establishment parties except Sinn Fein calling for a Yes vote the size of the No vote, even if it is from a small minority of adults, also indicates a deepening lack of trust in those parties.

The point for us, and for those who didn't vote, was that a No vote would not end austerity and a Yes vote certainly wouldn't deliver stability. We will never get a meaningful vote on such options from the ruling class. If we want to stop austerity we can only do this through our collective resistance and militancy – considerably more households refused to pay the Household tax then voted No. We'd imagine almost no non-paying households voted yes. The point here is that a very considerable number of households must have refused to pay and refused to vote.

The referendum campaign is now over. It looks like the result will be a narrow Yes vote. This could be a problem for those who insisted this was a referendum on austerity but as we show above that Yes vote is really only the Yes percentage of about 40% of the population. If the Yes vote is 60% then that would mean only 24% of the adult population voted for this treaty and most of these will have done so because they desperately hoped for magic 'stability' to descend and stop Ireland following the path of the disintegrating Greek economy. Their 'Yes' for jobs, 'Yes' for growth will be every bit as meaningless as it was in the Lisbon referendum. If there was a 'Yes' to austerity vote it would have been tiny. Although it may clash with what they appeared to be saying during the referendum it is now important for the left to make it clear that this result cannot be treated as a vote on austerity.

The referendum is over. It's time to return to building resistance to austerity and to use the base that has been built in the CAHWT to start to look at how that fight can be brought from the communities to the workplace. Austerity is not going to be defeated in the ballot box, in either a single or multiple votes. It's also not going to be defeated by a movement that exists in

isolation in Ireland. It's time for the left to stop looking at how the massive opposition to the Household tax can be used for local electoral gain. Instead we need to ask how it can be built into a widespread fight against austerity and for a new society that links up with movements across Europe and beyond.