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Is the Irish ‘austerity referendum’ where the real battleground is?

Andrew Flood

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Ireland is to have a referendum after all on the EU austerity treaty and a lot of the left is getting unreasonably excited about this. I say unreasonably because my opinion is that the referendum will not really, as the likes of the ULA claim, be a meaningful ballot on austerity. Austerity is not something simply being imposed on us by Europe through this referendum but something our domestic ruling class are already imposing and have been for a few years. Of course they have used the ECB/IMF as the ‘bad cop’ to scare us with and when passed will use the EU austerity treaty in the same way. But we need to recognize and organize around the fact that our local politicians and capitalist class are not really a ‘good cop’ eager to help us avoid the attentions of the ‘bad cop’ making threatening gestures at us across the room.

A yes vote will certainly be used by the government as a justification for austerity but a no vote will not be accepted by them as a rejection of austerity. Austerity will continue whatever way we

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vote — my key worry being that a campaign on a close to meaningless referendum now will serve to seriously distract many from the very successful real struggle against austerity in the form of the Household tax. And the larger and more visible a No campaign on the grounds of ‘No to austerity’ then the larger the mandate the government will be able to claim when the treaty is accepted (even if they have to put the question to us more than once). We saw this happen with the election of the Fine Gael / Labour Party government where we were told we had made our decision in voting for them.

Recent weeks have seen massive meetings against the Household tax all around southern Ireland, as many as 5–600 people turning up for some. Even small local meetings have seen a substantial layer of people being drawn in (or back into) active struggle for the first time in ages. With two of the three months to the registration deadline passed only 8% of households have registered despite the threat of a 2500 euro fine for failing to do so, a threat that will prove meaning if non-registration is above 50% (and now, if we keep organising, it is looking possible it will be above 80%).

During a discussion about the Household Tax about 10 days back a fellow campaigner remarked this would be a perfect moment for the government to call a referendum on the treaty. The distraction would serve to undermine all the organising that needs to happen over the next month to keep non registration high and build strong local organisation for the struggle to come. A real referendum campaign after all will require large amounts of money for posters and leaflets, and a huge number of person hours in terms of holding meetings, putting up poster and going door to door with leaflets.

Now perhaps that is too conspiratorial but I wouldn’t underestimate the intelligence & experience of manipulation of the Labour Party faction now in government that came from the Workers Party via Democratic Left. They are rather good at pulling political strokes. But of course it is more likely that is simply coincidental that the government suddenly reversed direction and went for

a referendum. Even so the probable outcome remains the same though.

The 1.6+ million households that have not registered so far is a more powerful force than any number of ballots cast on a meaningless referendum. A referendum that we all know we will simply get again if we vote down the first time (government spokespeople have already refused to rule out a second referendum in the event of a no vote). But for a left that is increasingly centered on electoralism the referendum looks like an opportunity not to be missed and I suspect, in particular with the worst offenders, that it is where all the energy will go for the next 2 months.

Despite the hopes of the electoralist left referendums are not really places where we can build power and they are certainly not spaces where the power of numbers can be expressed. In advance of the referendum being called I explored the reasons why this is the case in an article for Workers Solidarity called *Referenda: A Strategy for Success? Elsewhere on the WSM site in The Austerity Treaty: Is the call for a referendum a sensible strategy? Gregor Kerr argued "If the government are forced to concede a referendum, the 'debate' will consist of a series of threats of economic ruin. It is wholly conceivable in such circumstances – especially given the weakness of the left in terms of advancing a real alternative – that a majority of those who vote would actually vote for the treaty – a result which would have a demoralising effect on most of those who would have campaigned against it. Such a demoralising result would do serious damage to the task of building support for an alternative way of organising society."*

A no vote can't halt the EU drive to austerity as they can go ahead with that anyway with the other countries if we vote no – Britain has already opted out for instance. This is quite different from the situation with the Nice & Lisbon treaties where a 'no' from Ireland did halt, for a while, the process. The process cannot be halted at the European level by an Irish No vote and it is not useful to cast the illusion that it can be. As before the only thing

that can halt the EU austerity drive is for working people across the EU to organise to defeat it.

Some have argued that we need to 'register our dissent' but I'm not sure what value there is in this as an end in itself. In fact I think that attitude is one of the big problems with radical politics today, a feeling that once we have expressed opposition our duty is done and we can go home. We saw that attitude during the invasion of Iraq when over 100,000 demonstrated in Dublin against the refueling of US war planes at Shannon but when Bertie, the then Taoiseach made a joke of our opposition the vast majority just sat at home and watched the war on TV. Arguably the same process happened during the opening years of the crisis where opposition was massive in terms of the one day public sector strike and the ICTU marches but again once we had marched most people went home to watch government policy being implemented anyway.

Now the referendum is called anarchists obviously can't ignore it all together. I'll be voting No but my argument is not an argument about bothering to vote no on polling day. That won't require a significant effort. Its about the level of resources that should be into campaigning for a No vote between now and then. I think these should be minimal both because there are better things to be organised and because the more effort we put in the more the referendum will look like a real vote on austerity.

In bullet point form my initial thoughts on what anarchists should do and say are as follows

- a no vote in a referendum offers very little because it is a nationalist solution to a European (& global) problem, our greatest interest in a No campaign is in building links with movement in Europe. But given the fake nature of this referendum its not clear what real opportunities will arise.
- we are for a No vote.

- we are against any energy being diverted from the Household tax campaign to a No campaign.
- we don't intend to put resources in to produce & distribute any special printed publications on a mass basis
- we should publish some articles providing analysis of what is going on, directed in particular at the No side

There are my preliminary thoughts. We in the Workers Solidarity Movement are in the process of discussing what our collective position to the referendum will be. Different members have different perspectives on what is possible although I think everyone would agree with the pitfalls I've outlined. We should be detailing what position the WSM is taking early next week after the process of internal discussion and decision making of all our members is completed by an emergency delegate council on the topic. Feel free to contact us with your opinion on these questions or simply post them to our Facebook feed.