

Sinn Fein in Government

Sean McVeigh

On 30 November 2011 when tens of thousands of workers went on strike in the North over attacks on pensions and austerity cutbacks in the public sector, the Sinn Fein deputy first minister Martin McGuinness said he supported the strike. McGuinness said: "I understand fully the feelings of public sector workers angry at the imposition of a pension levy by the British government. I support the striking workers in the actions they have taken"⁷⁶.

In addition SF issued various statements saying its "elected representatives and activists were out on the picket lines" and Sinn Fein wanted, "a change in the cuts policy being imposed by the British government"⁷⁷. The message Sinn Fein was sending out was that the public sector cuts being imposed in the North have nothing to do with the policies it pursues in the Executive.

McGuinness was careful to frame the industrial action as being against a "pension levy by the British government", but the reality is that many thousands of strikers will have understood their action to be against both the government in Westminster and the Executive at Stormont. While McGuinness may attempt to distance himself from the cuts, the Executive - led by SF and the DUP - is implementing a programme of austerity which is deeply damaging to public services and working class communities.

One recent example of this type of policy came when SF and other parties in the Assembly brought in a new workfare scheme for the unemployed. It provides free labour for employers and punishment - loss of benefit - for the unemployed who refuse to comply. The new Stormont regulations - the Jobseeker's Allowance (Work Experience) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 - came before the Assembly's Social Development Committee on 26 January. The committee, which is chaired by SF veteran Alex Maskey and contains other SF Assembly members, endorsed the new regulations unanimously⁷⁸.

This measure copies the schemes in Britain that provoked widespread protests that compelled companies to withdraw from the scheme - and forced the Tory led coalition to make a series of U-turns. It is likely that changes to the scheme in Britain will be followed by changes to the rules in the North. But what is not in doubt is that before the controversy and the protests, SF in the Assembly worked alongside the DUP and other parties to bring in a scheme that would punish working class people if they refused to work for nothing.

That is why McGuinness's declaration of support for public sector strikers cannot be taken at face value. The 30 November public sector strike was extremely popular in Northern Ireland with more than 100,000 workers taking part. There was a total shutdown of all rail and bus services and two-thirds of all schools were closed. In the five health trusts all non-critical procedures were cancelled. Most people were aware of what was at stake - the public sector employs 226,000 workers in the North - which is about 32% of all jobs. According to ICTU the cuts will mean the loss of 26,000 public sector jobs by 2017.

SF was not the only mainstream party to see the value of issuing statements in support of the strike. Alasdair McDonnell leader of the SDLP, which has traditionally been seen as the more moderate nationalist party, announced that no SDLP Assembly members would cross picket lines during the strike. McDonnell said:

"Our MLAs will be standing shoulder to shoulder with those who are protesting against stingy cuts to our services. We offer our wholehearted support to those taking a stand for high-quality public services and will be showing that support to our colleagues in NIPSA in particular by respecting their picket-line."

SF leaders say they are not responsible for the cuts in Stormont departments because these cuts were forced by the 4 billion cut to the Northern Ireland block grant announced last year by the Tory Lib Dem

⁷⁶<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-15960618>

⁷⁷<http://www.westtyronesinnfein.com/news/21031lear>

⁷⁸See Social Development Committee minutes at: <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Committees/Social-Development/Minutes/26-January-2012/>

coalition. While it is true the block grant was cut by the coalition in London, it is also true that the entire Stormont project has been characterised by an adherence to neoliberal policies since it was set up in 1999. McGuinness and the other SF ministers are not mere bystanders, helplessly watching from the sides as the Westminster coalition wrecks the public sector in Northern Ireland. SF ministers are part of the cuts process - they make the decisions on which schools will close and which workers will lose their jobs. SF ministers are culpable - they are participating in the crime of making working class people pay for an economic crisis which is not of their making.

SF chose not to resist the cut to the block grant by London. This is at odds with its attitude over the last 40 years when other Westminster decisions were fiercely resisted by Sinn Fein. For example Margaret Thatcher's policy of criminalising republican prisoners was opposed with great determination and courage by the republican movement - to the point of death in the case of the 10 hunger strikers who died in Long Kesh prison in 1981.

Implementing the cuts

We have now had about eight years (on and off) of SF in government and its record, like that of the other Executive parties, has been one of privatisation, cutbacks and other neoliberal policies. These policies have been pursued independent of financial restrictions imposed by London.

As well as holding the top shared post of office of first minister and deputy first minister, Sinn Fein have held a range of ministerial positions including health, education, agriculture and regional development. When it came to drawing up a budget for the North for the period 2008 to 2011, Sinn Fein thought it a good idea for government departments - including health and education - to make 3% "efficiency savings" each year until 2011. The SF/DUP plan amounted to 1.7 billion in cuts to the public sector.

The trade union NIPSA said the SF/DUP budget was "predicated on cuts to public services and privatisation". The closure of numerous schools, accident and emergency departments, libraries and other public services shows NIPSA was right.

In January 2010 when DUP finance minister Sammy Wilson announced a NI budget cut of 367 million, SF ministers were as quick to find departmental cuts as their DUP colleagues. Announcing cuts of 10 million in her department, SF agriculture minister Michelle Gildernew, said the cuts were needed to balance the books: "These savings are necessary to allow the Executive to balance its books and enter the next financial year ready to address in-year pressures constructively." She added: "There will be some impact on the frontline and job numbers⁷⁹."

When Wilson stood up in the Assembly and announced the 367 million cuts there was no sign of any Sinn Fein opposition. Instead the SF economy spokesman Mitchel McLaughlin told the Assembly:

"It would be churlish not to acknowledge that the minister (Wilson) had a difficult job. He gave timely warning and spelled out to the Assembly the significant pressures that were building up, particularly because the Assembly has a fixed budget. When the global economy goes into decline, that has an effect here⁸⁰."

This economic consensus and teamwork between SF and the DUP was noted by commentator Liam Clarke who, writing in the Belfast Telegraph last year, said: "The parties have not yet developed policies that distinguish them in purely economic terms. Sinn Fein uses more left-wing language than the DUP, but they are at one on a range of issues, from corporation tax to health."

Closing schools

Sinn Fein has been in charge of education since the Executive was set up. The major areas of policy change brought in during that time have been in special education needs provision, a major school closure

⁷⁹<http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/news-dard/news-dard-january-2010/news-dard-260110-gildernew-protects-front.htm>

⁸⁰http://archive.niassembly.gov.uk/finance/2007mandate/reports/Report_41_09_10R.html

programme, the use of privatisation and PFI contracts to replace old buildings and the abolition of the 11-plus.

From the first days in government Sinn Fein made it clear that it had no problem with privatisation and Private Finance Initiatives. In 2000 when Martin McGuinness was minister for education he announced a new PFI contract to rebuild schools in West Belfast. He said:

”The award of these PFI contracts highlights the opportunities for partnership with the private sector in the pursuit of good value for money and the effective use of resources. It is now clear that PFI does offer real potential for value for money solutions to the pressing capital investment needs of our schools generally.”

Its commitment to neoliberal policies has increased as the years have passed. On 21 February 2012 it was revealed that five Catholic secondary schools in the North face imminent closure, to be followed by 23 other school closures in the near future.

The school closure programme has its roots in the ‘policy for sustainable schools’ which was launched by Sinn Fein minister for education, Caitrona Ruane, in January 2009. The policy stipulates that secondary schools with less than 500 pupils are not “financially viable” and should close⁸¹. At the time the SF minister said: “It is not an agenda to close small schools.” However, in accordance with this policy the new SF education minister continues to close both small and medium sized schools.

In September 2011 SF education minister John O’Dowd ordered education and library boards to conduct a “viability audit” looking at the financial sustainability of every school in Northern Ireland. O’Dowd defended the policy of relentlessly going after “unsustainable schools” when he said in the Assembly: “Some critics have used the term ‘hit list’ but I think everybody in the Assembly and everybody in the educational sector understands that we have to deal with an unsustainable schools estate⁸².”

One of the schools on O’Dowd’s hit list is St Aidan’s Catholic secondary school in Fermanagh. In February parents of children at the school set up St Aidan’s Action Group to campaign to keep the school open. The chairman of the group summed up the anger and frustration that many parents and teachers feel at the enforced policy of closing secondary schools with less than 500 pupils. He said:

”The educational and community damage will be felt in every part of Northern Ireland, especially rural and disadvantaged areas. We are therefore taking an initiative to extend our campaign not just to the rest of Fermanagh but across Northern Ireland. We are inviting all those schools and communities under threat to contact us and join us⁸³.”

The SF programme of school closures is causing incredible hurt - with children having to travel longer distances to school and teachers and other education workers forced onto the dole.

Attacking the vulnerable

SF proposals to reform special education needs provision in the North’s schools were published in the policy paper ‘Every School a Good School - The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion, by minister Caitrona Ruane in 2009⁸⁴. The proposals will drastically reduce provision for children with special educational needs (SEN) and lead to the loss of many teaching assistant jobs. Under the current system children with a ‘statement’ of special educational needs have a statutory right to help from a classroom assistant and this is paid for by central department of education funding. Under the new proposals from the SF minister all special education needs provision will be funded out of each individual school’s budget. In the opening paragraph of the document it states that the main reason for the changes is “the rising cost of the provision of SEN and the year on year increase in the number of children issued with statements.” The proposals would see the end of statements and the entitlements they bring.

⁸¹http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/13-schools_estate_pg/14-schools_-_estate-newpage.htm

⁸²<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-16760462>

⁸³ *Fighting parents hope to spread their campaign*, Irish News, 15 February 2012

⁸⁴http://www.deni.gov.uk/review_of_special_educational_needs_and_inclusion.htm

NIPSA, which organises classroom assistants, opposes the policy because it is "likely to see a significant decrease in the number of classroom assistants within schools, not because this will be in the best interests of children but because there will be inadequate funding to provide for the appropriate adult assistance within the class." The group 'Children with Disabilities Strategic Alliance' said the proposed changes would mean, "children who currently have enforceable legal rights to provision will lose these rights under these restrictive new proposals".

The SEN policy put forward by two SF ministers is reminiscent of the very worst education policies to come from Thatcher and successive Tory governments.

The 11-plus - the radical exception?

In 2002 Martin McGuinness as minister for education announced his intention to abolish the 11-plus exam for primary school pupils. The 11-plus exam institutionalised an unfair selection system in which a minority of pupils - mostly middle class children - were selected for a quality education while the majority of working class children had to make do with inferior schools. The 11-plus should have been abolished long ago.

Sinn Fein has not been slow to point to their role in ending the exam as evidence that they are playing a "progressive" role at Stormont. However, the picture of SF taking on the establishment and fighting to get the 11-plus abolished is a false one. The truth is there was opposition to the 11-plus from the top ranks of the NI civil service, employers and from business organisations such as the CBI and the Institute of Directors. Such was the hostility to the exam from the establishment that the DUP briefly had a position in favour of its abolition. The 1989 DUP election manifesto stated: "We believe that selection at 11 should be ended. The 11-plus procedure is educationally unsound and socially divisive and places unnecessary strain upon children at a very early age."

Big business was calling for educational reform because thousands of young people were joining the workforce without the basic skills of numeracy and literacy. The CBI consultation document on abolition of the 11-plus said: "The need for change is widely recognised. The current education system has not delivered the necessary outcomes to ensure a highly skilled, adaptable and creative workforce and it requires reform." The document went on to complain that too many young people leave school with numeracy and literacy problems and that key skills in young people "remain significantly below employers' expectations"⁸⁵. Similarly the Institute of Directors favoured the abolition of the exam and its replacement by a system of pupil profiles.

At a meeting on 24 June 2002 between McGuinness, senior civil servants and business representatives, the employers made clear their dissatisfaction with the educational setup and opposition to the 11-plus. The minutes of the meeting show that poultry producer Moy Park complained it had to "invest time and resources to educate" young workers while the representative from aircraft manufacturer Bombardier told McGuinness the company, "would like to see 11-plus replaced". The notes of the meeting say that Bombardier, "have found major skills shortage amongst new recruits and have had to educate and train staff"⁸⁶.

The decision to get rid of the 11-plus took place in 2002 - a time of falling unemployment; a growing skills shortage in some sections of industry with employers being forced to look abroad to recruit. It is clear that big business viewed the abolition of the 11-plus as part of an overhaul of education that would provide it with a local workforce that was numerate and literate.

Thus the SF policy of abolishing the 11-plus was not a radical deviation from its usual practice. This policy, like everything the Executive has done, was an attempt to serve the needs of big business.

Tax cuts for the rich

During the peace process there was much talk that the end of the Troubles would be followed by a 'peace dividend' as jobs flowed into the North, but it is now clear that the dividend will be paid to the rich and come in the form of lower corporation tax on company profits.

⁸⁵http://www.deni.gov.uk/22-ppa-rcbr00_summary.pdf

⁸⁶www.deni.gov.uk/meeting_with_business_community_representatives.pdf

Sinn Fein was the first major player to start talking about the Assembly getting the power to set corporation tax for Northern Ireland companies. There is now almost complete agreement amongst business organisations and political parties for the proposal. In October 2011 the Executive and the Westminster government set up a joint ministerial working group to consider giving the Assembly the power to lower the tax. This plan comes at a time when most working class people in the North are facing greater financial hardship, job insecurity, rising prices and attacks on public services. Since SF raised the idea it has become hugely popular with the rich. Prominent in the campaign to cut taxes for corporations was newspaper billionaire Tony O'Reilly who in 2007 organised a petition signed by 50 company directors demanding a cut in the tax.

All this is more bad news for the public sector as EU rules stipulate that reductions in regional rates of corporation tax must be accompanied by an equivalent reduction in funding from central government - which means more cuts to the NI block grant from Westminster. Sinn Fein and the DUP are completely aware of these rules but persist in deliberately bringing about a situation in which the public sector budget will be cut by hundreds of millions of pounds.

Tax expert Richard Murphy of Tax Research UK said the cut to corporation tax in the North would not guarantee a single new job but would result in a loss of 300 million in central government funding. He said: "That would create a double whammy for Northern Ireland because there's no evidence that reduced tax rates would result in a penny more tax being paid. The resulting impact on lost revenue for Northern Ireland could be catastrophic for its public services."

ICTU assistant general secretary Peter Bunting was absolutely right to argue that cutting corporation tax would transfer wealth "from the poorest to the richest, as public services are cut to fill the gap".

Privatising Water

Until May 2011 Sinn Fein minister Conor Murphy was in charge of the department of regional development which oversees public transport, roads, and water infrastructure.

In preparation for full privatisation NI Water became a government owned company in 2007 (just before the Executive returned from suspension) with the aim of becoming "self-financing" within three years through the introduction of domestic water charges.

When SF's Conor Murphy took over the department in May 2007, he allowed NI Water to continue to prepare for the introduction of water charges on domestic properties by installing charging meters in every new house built in Northern Ireland. The fact that water charges have been continually deferred is evidence that both Sinn Fein and the DUP are fully aware that such a move would lead to mass resistance that could threaten the tribal basis of the Stormont regime. Murphy also continued the policy of handing over water infrastructure to be run by private companies under PFI deals. Under a deal signed with the consortium Dalriada Water Ltd in 2006 worth 110 million, the private sector will soon deliver 50

When the deal was announced by direct rule ministers, the Stormont administration was in suspension and SF opposed the PFI contracts. But when SF got back in government in 2007 the party suddenly found merit in the PFI arrangements and Murphy presided over the transfer of large parts of the water network to the private sector.

The biggest company involved in Dalriada Water is California based multinational Aecom. This company specialises in taking over denationalised public utilities and has gas, oil and water interests around the globe. When opening a water treatment facility in Antrim constructed with the help of Aecom in 2009, Murphy praised the PFI project saying it would "deliver an efficient, cost effective and high quality water source".

Sinn Fein has played a key role in shaping the activities of NI Water because Murphy as DRD minister appointed a number of directors of the company. One of Murphy's appointments was Lawson McDonald, a director of Global Armour Ltd, which supplies body armour to the SAS and other British forces in Afghanistan. The SF minister also appointed Padraic White who as former Managing Director of the Republic's Industrial Development Authority was lauded as one of the architects of the Celtic Tiger. White is husband of Fianna Fail senator Mary White. These are the people - put in place by Murphy - who have shaped the direction of NI Water and are moving the company towards full privatisation with the always present danger of the introduction of metered domestic water charges.

Privatising public transport

Murphy also brought in changes that pave the way for the privatisation of public transport in the North. Bus and rail transport - Ulsterbus, Metro, and Northern Ireland Railways - are run by the government company Translink and are currently part of the public sector. Under legislation brought in by Murphy, the Transport Act, which became law in March 2011, the legal way was cleared to open up public transport to the private sector. Under the changes Translink will become just another transport operator that will bid for contracts in competition with privately owned companies.

The change in the law allows DRD to issue transport licences to private operators and for contracts "to be awarded to operators other than Translink in recognition that Translink may not be the only provider." The aim of the legislation is to "open the market to controlled competition with new contracting and permit issuing powers". The law also stipulates that any new rapid transit system set up in Belfast should be put out to "competitive tendering".

The law also gives private companies the right to use facilities - stations, and bus stops - that were once the preserve of the public sector⁸⁷.

Privatising local government

Another example of home-grown Stormont Thatcherism came on 26 March 2010 when the Assembly passed another piece of new legislation - the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act. This legislation was guided through the Assembly by the DUP but it got the wholehearted support of Sinn Fein.

The explanatory notes attached to the Act make clear that it will enable local councils to privatise services. The notes state: "The Act aims to clarify the powers of district councils to enter into long-term service contracts with the private sector and so remove any concerns contractors and financiers might have about such contracts." It is one of the most significant actions undertaken by the Assembly and will have a massive and negative impact on the North's public sector. The Act passed through the Assembly in a joint SF/DUP effort. In supporting the legislation SF environment spokesman Daith McKay described it as "an important piece of legislation that gives councils a number of new powers". Leading SF MLA, John O'Dowd, welcomed the bill as "an important step on the road to restructuring local government".

Tribal chiefs for the 1%

While the Tory Lib Dem coalition at Westminster has pursued a strategy of massive cutbacks throughout the UK, in Northern Ireland it has found willing partners in the parties that make up the Stormont Executive.

When SF ministers say they are not responsible for the cuts they are merely doing what parties of austerity do everywhere - pass the buck, deny ultimate responsibility and say they are compelled by circumstances to make cuts. Margaret Thatcher once summed up the position that has now become the stance of Sinn Fein ministers: "there is no alternative".

SF has defined itself at different times as part of the broad left or as part of a radical, progressive, republican tradition. However, parties need to be understood and judged not just by what they say about themselves - but also and more importantly by the policies they pursue and implement in office. On the basis of its record in government Sinn Fein can only be understood as a party of capitalism and in the current period as a party of austerity and neoliberalism.

Capitalist parties routinely 'talk left but act right' when they get into office. In Britain the Liberal Democrats do it. In the US the Democrats are currently doing it in the run-up to November's presidential election. Social Democrats have been doing it for over 100 years. Sinn Fein politicians have raised "talking left and acting right' to an art form.

The Sinn Fein leadership and their DUP partners in government have made it clear they are fighters for the 1%. The Executive's record is unambiguous on this - it does not hesitate to make working people pay for the crisis.

⁸⁷See the Executive's own account of the Act at www.niassembly.gov.uk/researchandlibrary/2010/9510.pdf

Sinn Fein voters, supporters and rank and file members are in a different category entirely. They are, in the main, part of the 99%, are victims of the system and will be part of the struggle to overthrow it. Most SF voters would be appalled to discover the extent to which the party leadership at Stormont is attacking the interests of working people.

Sinn Fein has built a durable relationship with the DUP which has a history of bigotry and sectarianism. Today SF and DUP politicians play out the role of tribal chieftains with each party out to get the best deal for 'their' respective communities. But the only people who benefit from this system are members of the 1%. It is this group that benefits from SF/DUP policies of privatisation, PFI, workfare, public sector cuts and lower corporation tax - not the people who live on the Shankill or the Falls.

These policies can also lead to increased hopelessness and despair. It is possible that a combination of the economic crisis, the Executive's neoliberal policies and the tribal system at Stormont, could combine to bring about a revival of sectarian tensions and violence.

The challenge for socialists is to work alongside SF members and supporters who are part of the 99% - as brothers and sisters in the struggle - and convince them that the experience of SF in office is final proof of the bankruptcy of republicanism.

It is also important to argue that the only way out of the madness of austerity and cutbacks is to build a movement of resistance that can unite working people - Catholic and Protestant, north and south - in one struggle to overthrow both capitalist states in Ireland.