

## ***Textes et contextes***

ISSN : 1961-991X

: Université Bourgogne Europe

18-2 | 2023

The “crisis of political parties” in the British & Irish Isles

# From Revolution to Conformity: The Rise and Crisis of the Irish Labour Party, 1912-2020

*De la révolution au conformisme, l'essor et la crise du parti travailliste irlandais, 1912-2020*

15 December 2023.

**Olivier Coquelin**

🔗 <http://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=4412>

Licence CC BY 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Olivier Coquelin, « From Revolution to Conformity: The Rise and Crisis of the Irish Labour Party, 1912-2020 », *Textes et contextes* [], 18-2 | 2023, 15 December 2023 and connection on 14 March 2025. Copyright : [Licence CC BY 4.0 \(https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). URL : <http://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=4412>

PREO

# From Revolution to Conformity: The Rise and Crisis of the Irish Labour Party, 1912-2020

*De la révolution au conformisme, l'essor et la crise du parti travailliste irlandais, 1912-2020*

## **Textes et contextes**

15 December 2023.

18-2 | 2023

The “crisis of political parties” in the British & Irish Isles

Olivier Coquelin

🔗 <http://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=4412>

Licence CC BY 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

- 
1. Irish Labour: origins and role in the 1916-23 Revolution
  2. Labour’s influence after the Revolution (1922-1965)
  3. Vicissitudes and zeitgeist (1966-2020)
    - 3.1. From leftward turn to electoral decline and upsurge (1966-92)
    - 3.2. From stagnation to surge and steady decline (1990s-2010s)
- Conclusion

---

1 Since its creation in 1922, the southern Irish State has been politically distinct from other Western European countries, mainly through a party system composed of two nationalist-inspired organisations, Cumann na nGaedheal/Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, which can be ideologically placed either on the right or on the centre-right of the political spectrum (Weeks 2010:137-167). This system, which transcends the traditional left-right divide, was formed against a background of essentially constitutional antagonisms between supporters and opponents of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921.<sup>1</sup> However, the evolution of this divide over time did not really affect the electoral dominance of the country’s two main parties, which only began to be questioned somewhat in the 2011 general election, when Labour as the leading

force on the left came second with 19.4% of the first preference vote. But, ironically, Labour's historic performance has not been repeated thereafter, and the party has even sunk electorally, achieving its lowest level of votes ever in the 2020 general election, far behind Sinn Féin which has therefore dethroned it as the main left-wing organisation in the Republic of Ireland.<sup>2</sup> The crisis that Labour has been experiencing since 2020 is so deep that even the question of its demise is being raised (McMorrow 2022).

- 2 This article will therefore explore why the Irish Labour Party was in a position to exert some influence on Irish politics only through sporadic participation in coalition governments, led mainly by Fine Gael, from the late 1940s. In doing so, the various periods reflecting the party's ideological shifts will be reviewed – from support for a revolutionary agenda to a more traditional position in line with the country's dominant paradigms, and *vice versa*. Ultimately, the question will be whether these ideological shifts came too late to allow Labour to challenge the political order established since 1922, each of them plunging the party into crisis and electoral setback. But first, it seems essential to go back to the origins of the Irish Labour Party and its role in the revolutionary period from 1916 to 1923.

## 1. Irish Labour: origins and role in the 1916-23 Revolution

- 3 Like its British counterpart, the Irish Labour Party, founded in 1912, was the brainchild of the trade unions of the country's main confederation, the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC), itself created in 1894 by Irish unions that had previously been affiliated with the British Trade Union Congress – and which has been known as the Irish Congress of Trade Unions since 1959 (R. O'Brien 2014: 18).
- 4 The question of political representation of the working class arose fairly quickly in the ranks of the ITUC, where there were four opposing currents on the issue: the first believed that the trade unions should not be involved in political affairs under any circumstances; a second majority group, satisfied with the action taken by the nationalist MPs of the Irish Parliamentary Party, considered the involvement of workers in politics as an obstacle to the proper march towards

Home Rule, i.e., towards the restoration of the autonomous parliament of Dublin, abolished in 1801; a third group, from Belfast, was in favour of affiliating the ITUC with the political wing of Britain's trade unions, the British Labour Representation Committee, which changed its name to the Labour Party in 1906; and a fourth, largely minority trend, influenced in particular by the separatists of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB),<sup>3</sup> insisted that the ITUC should establish its own political machinery in order to sever all links with the British labour movement. While, from 1903 to 1911, the ITUC officially refused to sanction the creation of a workers' party, independent of other political organisations, it nevertheless allowed affiliated unions to field candidates in local and general elections (Boyle 1988: 221-233, 266-270, 278-293; Mitchell 1974: 17-24).

- 5 Meanwhile, James Larkin's notable arrival in Ireland in 1907 had resulted in the creation of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU) two years later. This union (today known as the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union – SIPTU) joined the ITUC in 1910 and from then on was involved in the renovation and radicalisation of the entire Irish labour movement (ITGWU 1918: 5-8). This was illustrated primarily by its undeniable conversion to the principle of the One Big Union, which aimed to organise all workers, no longer in the same trade, but in the same industry – from the labourers to the skilled workers –, with each union then having to band together within a large single union (*The Irish Worker* 1912: 2).
- 6 In addition, the ITGWU also advocated political action for the working class, through the Labour Party of Ireland, the creation of which was endorsed by the ITUC at its 1912 annual meeting, motivated in this respect by the prospect of Irish self-government or Home Rule, the restoration of which was passed at Westminster the same year and was due to be implemented in 1914 (ITUC 1912: 45). This desire to launch an Irish workers' party, truly independent of other political organisations within the future Parliament of Dublin, was confirmed in June 1914 when the ITUC renamed itself the Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party (ITUCLP) (ITUC 1914: 20).
- 7 However, the failure of the 1913 Dublin Lockout<sup>4</sup> and of the 1916 Easter Rising,<sup>5</sup> which involved leaders of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), at the head of the most radical fringe of the nationalist

Irish Volunteers,<sup>6</sup> allied with the Irish Citizen Army,<sup>7</sup> a workers' militia led by James Connolly – then leader of the ITGWU and an eminent socialist theorist who was executed after the rebellion –, threw the Irish labour movement into disarray and weakened it considerably. Yet, this did not discourage the union leaders from seeking to rekindle the flame of trade unionism in Ireland. And in this process of reorganising the working class, they also expressed the wish, at the 1916 annual meeting, to revive the political machine of the labour movement, embodied by the Labour Party, believing that “the circumstances of the time now compel us to take action or lose the chance of assuming our rightful place in the political life of this country” (ITUCLP 1916: 32).

- 8 But, in order not to alienate the Protestant workers of Ulster, who favoured keeping the island within the United Kingdom, the trade union leaders avoided taking a clear stand on the question of national self-government or independence (Mitchell 1971: 318-319; O'Connor Lysaght 1983: 51). They also feared that the national cause would distract the working class as a whole from their economic and social concerns, in other words, that it would lead them to support *en masse* a nationalist movement – in this case Sinn Féin – dominated by individuals whose interests did not always coincide with their own (*Irish Opinion* 1918: 1). Hence, throughout 1917 and 1918, they committed themselves to the elaboration of a real political alternative, likely to bring together the whole of the Irish proletariat around the one and only Labour Party. As a symbol of this increased politicisation of the trade union movement, the delegates at the ITUC's annual meeting in August 1918 renamed their organization the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (ILPTUC). It was also at this meeting that the decision was made to put forward candidates for the December 1918 general election. With this in mind, the labour organisation even drew up a socialist constitution, the ultimate aims of which included:

To win for the workers of Ireland, collectively, the ownership and control of the whole produce of their labour; To secure the democratic management and control of all industries and services by the whole body of workers, manual and mental, therein, in the interest of the Nation and subject to the supreme authority of the National Government (ILPTUC 1918: 122).

- 9 Yet, quite unexpectedly, on November 1, the ILPTUC eventually decided to withdraw from the December 1918 general election to Sinn Féin “[...] in the hope that the democratic demand for self-determination, to which the Irish Labour Party and its candidates give its unqualified adherence, will thereby obtain the greatest chance of expression at the polls” (*The Voice of Labour* 1918: 1). In short, they were leaving the constitutional affairs of the country to Sinn Féin, so that Labour could devote itself fully to promoting its agenda. But in a period of rising nationalism, could they afford to relegate the political side of the Irish question to the background and then hope to occupy the “rightful place in the political life of this country” (ILPTUC 1916: 32)? On the other hand, if the trade unions affiliated to the ILPTUC had been fully committed to the national struggle, would they have gained as much membership in the revolutionary period, reaching 300,000 members in 1921 – 100,000 of them in the Transport Union?<sup>8</sup> This is indeed questionable.
- 10 Of course, the Irish unions did not live entirely on the margins of the Irish Revolution either.<sup>9</sup> They sporadically supported the national cause through actions designed to hinder the British war effort, such as those carried out by Irish dockers and railway workers, with the approval of their union leaderships, from May to December 1920 (Townshend 1979: 265-282; Costello 191: 2-13). They also successfully called for a general strike in April 1920 to protest against the treatment of Sinn Féin prisoners at Mountjoy Jail in Dublin (W. O’Brien 1969: 190-192; O’Connor 1992: 107-108). Later, the Labour leadership would do everything possible, but to no avail, to prevent the Civil War from breaking out between supporters and opponents of the December 1921 peace treaty, within the independence forces of Sinn Féin and the Irish Republican Army; and then to ensure that the Civil War ended promptly after its outbreak in late June 1922 (W. O’Brien 1969: 219-221, 224-225; Morrissey SJ 2007: 202-203, 205-206; Mitchell 1974: 162-165; Greaves 1982: 312). By not fully involving itself in the national liberation struggle in favour of strictly economic action, the labour movement seriously compromised its chances, in the period to come, of conquering both political and economic power, in order to establish the socialist workers’ republic it had been calling for. Such a strategy amounted, in a way, to maintaining Sinn Féin’s political supremacy, acquired as of 1917 and strengthened after the 1918 general

election,<sup>10</sup> in particular through its new victory in the 1921 general election, in which Labour once again fielded no candidates (Farrell 1970: 477-502).

## 2. Labour's influence after the Revolution (1922-1965)

- 11 Labour's reformist and legalistic attitude was to remain unchanged thereafter. It was reflected in the gradual abandonment of the One Big Union doctrine of James Larkin and James Connolly, in favour of parliamentary and constitutional action. The climax of this new strategy was reached when the Labour Party amicably separated from the ITUC, at a special convention in 1930. Once emancipated from its historic trade union partner, while allowing the unions to join its ranks, Labour was able to devote itself to issues other than purely socio-economic ones (Puirséil 2007: 31-33). But since most workers – whether unionised or not – hardly made the connection between their emancipation as a class and the political emancipation of the Irish nation, many of them did not hesitate to give their first vote to one or other of the political parties that had emerged from Sinn Féin and therefore fought for their nationalist aspirations, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil,<sup>11</sup> much to the detriment of the Labour Party, though it was supposed to represent their particular interests in Dáil Éireann, i.e. the national parliament of Ireland (Coquelin 2018: 483, 487).
- 12 Thus, as the main left-wing organisation in the southern Irish State (until the 2016 general election when it was superseded by Sinn Féin), Labour was only able to have some influence on the country's public policies through sporadic participation in coalition governments, led mainly by Fine Gael, from the late 1940s.<sup>12</sup> Before that, however, the refusal of Sinn Féin's anti-Treaty members to sit in the Irish Parliament, from 1922 to 1927, had enabled it, through its position as the largest opposition force in parliament, to focus general attention on economic and social issues, which were more relevant to its concerns. Taking advantage of the many strikes that took place in Ireland from 1917 to 1922, the Labour Party surprisingly finished third in the June 1922 general election with 21.3% of the vote, just behind the anti-Treaty Sinn Féin led by Eamon de Valera, which obtained 21.8%. But the advent on the political scene of a large number of anti-Treaty

Sinn Féiners, united in 1926 in a new party, Fianna Fáil, ended this interlude and gave way to a new kind of ideological divide over the national question, in which the Labour Party found it very difficult to assert itself – despite the publication in 1931 of its programme entitled *The Nation*, which was not aimed at the working class alone, but at the nation as a whole (Allen 1997: 32-33). The Labour Party struggled all the more to assert itself since, until 1936, it seemed difficult to distinguish it clearly from Fianna Fáil in terms of their respective socio-economic goals. Hence Eamon de Valera's party was able to rely on the critical support of Labour and a section of the trade unions before and after it took power in 1932 – which resulted, *inter alia*, in the adoption of a number of social reforms, such as the Old Age Pensions Act and the reduction of the working week to 48 hours (Mair 1977: 69).

- 13 The left-wing party, however, was soon under no illusions as to the real motives of an increasingly less radical Fianna Fáil government in the socio-economic sphere. It is also true that the tenets embraced and put into practice by Fianna Fáil in the 1930s and 1940s were usually associated with certain right-wing political families. These included the perpetuation of order, hierarchy and tradition through the state and intermediary bodies such as the family and the Church; a preference for rural society over the materialism and immorality of the urban world; the celebration of a glorious and mythical past; the defence of private property; the exaltation of the nation; class collaboration; and so on (Ferriter 2007: 102-103, 113, 279, 363-364; Fanning 2015: 199-202; Marx 1990: 62-69, 113-135).<sup>13</sup> As a result, in 1936, Labour drafted a new constitution, which was overall more radical than the previous one, and this, mainly with a view to standing out from Fianna Fáil. In essence, this document committed the whole proletariat to fight for the establishment of a “Workers’ Republic” that would be established “on the principles of social justice, sustained by democratic institutions and guaranteeing civil and religious liberty and equal opportunities to achieve happiness to all citizens” (Quoted in Puirseil 2016). The new constitution also advocated the nationalisation of basic industries, economic planning, better social services, an overhaul of the state banking system, the dismantling of large farms, and the promotion of cooperative farming (Puirseil 2007: 39-57).



- 14 This radical shift, which went against the grain of Catholic social thought, met with the wrath not only of the Catholic Church but also of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, a Labour-affiliated union most of whose leaders were devout Catholics. As a result, in 1939, the party executive decided to revert to much more moderate positions, including changing the phrase "Workers' Republic" to "republican form of government" (Puirseil 2007: 61; O'Connor 1992: 131-132). This capitulation to clerical pressure highlighted a spirit that was less doctrinaire than pragmatic among most Labour leaders. This pragmatism encouraged them to spare the Catholic Church so as not to risk alienating the many workers and employees (whether unionised or not) who were strongly influenced by its moral and social teaching. Added to this were two waves of anti-communist hysteria during the 1930s, which urged Labour to tone down its rhetoric for fear of becoming one of their targets – particularly at the time of the Spanish Civil War, when a significant section of the southern Irish population, including members of Labour, had sided with Franco, essentially for religious reasons (Puirseil 2007: 48-49, 57-58; Ferriter 2012: 100).
- 15 This clerical pressure would be experienced again by Labour, in an even more dramatic way, during its first participation in a coalition government, from 1948 to 1951, in what became known as the "Browne affair". Dr. Noel Browne was the Minister of Health in the Costello government.<sup>14</sup> In 1950, Browne drew up a plan for family social security, known as the Mother-and-Child Health Scheme. This plan, of social-democratic inspiration, aroused the wrath of the Catholic hierarchy, who could not tolerate state intervention in areas, such as health and education, which had been under ecclesiastical control until then. In the end, the vehement and systematic opposition of the Church got the better of Browne, who was compelled to resign in April 1951, thereby abandoning the project and bringing down the Costello government (Browne 1986: 141-179; McKee 1986: 169-194).
- 16 In any case, Labour's attempts to differentiate itself ideologically and strategically were ultimately unsuccessful, as it never disrupted the Irish party system that had been in place since 1927. No doubt Fianna Fáil had already established itself sufficiently well in the sectors likely to support the successive programmes of the Labour Party, especially in the working class areas of the major cities, such as Dublin and

Cork. This also meant that, contrary to what one might expect, Labour generally (at least until the 1960s) enjoyed greater support in rural areas, especially among the agricultural workers in the central and eastern counties whom the ITUC, through the ITGWU, had failed to organise for almost 20 years following the failures of the 1923 strikes (Garvin 1977: 74; Suiter 2012: 166).<sup>15</sup>

17 In addition, the internal dissension between moderates and radicals, which ran counter to the interests of the labour movement, led to two schisms with disastrous consequences for the Irish left. The first major split coincided with the return of James Larkin from the United States in April 1923 after nine years' absence. As soon as he returned to the country's most powerful union, the ITGWU, Larkin with the help of his supporters set out to take over its leadership, which he considered to be his rightful place as the founding father of the organisation. This, of course, did not sit well with his main opponents who, under William O'Brien, had dominated the union's executive from 1917 to 1923. An internal struggle then began, with more or less the same characteristics as the one which, at the time, was undermining the international labour movement: with, on one side, a revolutionary fraction, favourable to joining the Communist International or Comintern, and on the other, the supporters of the reformist path, hostile to this project. The result was that O'Brien and his supporters eventually won their legal case and expelled Larkin from the ITGWU and the Labour Party. In response to this anathema, the Workers' Union of Ireland was formed in June 1923, followed in September by its political offshoot, the Irish Workers' League (O'Connor 1992: 118-119; 1999: 360). The latter officially became the Irish section of the Third International, replacing the Communist Party of Ireland, founded in October 1921 and dissolved in January 1924 on the orders of the Comintern executive. However, like the first Irish Communist Party, the Irish Workers' League and its successors in the communist movement, including heterodox Trotskyist tendencies, never went beyond the stage of a propaganda grouping, promoting their cause within social, economic and political movements in the South and North of Ireland, including the Labour Party (Bowler 1993: 45; O'Connor 1999: 372).

18 In this respect, it should be pointed out that, in addition to the various champions of Catholic precepts, many leaders of the official la-

bour movement – most of them from the ITGWU – were also hostile to Communism, probably (at least initially) more out of anti-Larkinism than out of any intrinsic conviction. It is therefore not surprising that James Larkin was once again at the source of a new split within the organised proletariat in the first half of the 1940s. It all began in 1941 when Labour leaders took some liberties with their ITGWU counterparts, as they sanctioned the Larkins – father and son – to join their party. But above all, William O'Brien and his comrades could not tolerate the nomination of James Larkin senior by Labour, in the 1943 general election. After many unsuccessful efforts to reverse this situation, the ITGWU decided to sever its links with the Labour Party in January 1944. At the same time, five of the eight Labour MPs, also members of the ITGWU, seceded to form their own political organisation, the National Labour Party. Yet, the previous year, the left-wing party had obtained its best electoral result since 1922, with 16.1% of the vote. The presence of a Labour rival on the political scene, therefore, became an obstacle to its progress. So much so that the “official” Labour Party was not to exceed 15% of the vote until 1965, despite the absorption of its Labour rival in June 1950 – i.e., following the retirement of William O'Brien in 1946 and the death of James Larkin senior in 1947 (Allen 1996: 78-82; Garvin 1977: 173).

### **3. Vicissitudes and zeitgeist (1966-2020)**

#### **3.1. From leftward turn to electoral decline and upsurge (1966-92)**

19 Thereafter, the Labour Party evolved on the basis not only of its alliances – notably with Fine Gael – but also of its electoral performance and the zeitgeist, the spirit of the times. Thus, at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s, it took a sharp turn to the left by reviving its project of a socialist workers' republic. The word “socialist” was now used unabashedly in Labour's speeches and programme, as in a speech delivered by leader Brendan Corish in 1967, in which he predicted: “The seventies will be socialist” (Rafter 2012: 127; Puirseil 2007: 238-239, 264). Nevertheless, the hopes raised by this most radical

turn did not translate into the ballot box in 1969 or 1973. There were two main reasons for this. Firstly, despite the prevailing spirit of openness and changing attitudes towards authority, a significant part of the population remained conservative, including Labour Party members and voters, who were not enthusiastic about the party formally embracing socialism. Fianna Fáil then sought to exploit the doubts of this section of the electorate by focusing its campaign for the 1969 election on the supposed dangers posed by Labour's left-wing extremism or extreme form of socialism. In this red scare campaign, Fianna Fáil received support from some church people, as this account from a Roscommon woman reveals: "A nun in our local convent told fifth class primary to tell their parents not to vote Labour as they were all communists in the Labour Party. Now this spread like wild fire to every home, and even though I don't know what effect it had, I know enough it had its effect. I heard one mother saying, 'The two parties are much of a muchness, but I won't vote Labour because (Conor Cruise) O'Brien and (David) Thornley are communists and should be shot'" (*Sunday Independent* 1969: 3). The result of this was that in 1969, with 17% of the first preference votes, Labour came third again, far behind Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael; and in 1973, it fell by another 3%. Looking at the 1969 general election, while Labour did better in Dublin than in the previous election in 1965, it also lost votes in the rest of the country. This suggests that the Fianna Fáil campaign had an undeniable effect, in that Labour gained proportionately fewer votes in Dublin than it lost elsewhere (Puirseil 2007: 269-271, 306).

- 20 From that time on, Labour would decline steadily electorally, falling to 6.5% in 1987. It is also true that, throughout the 1970s, it was deeply divided on issues such as Ireland's entry into the EEC and the Northern Irish conflict (O'Halpin 2012: 142-146, 148-153; Collins 2012: 156-159). Not to mention the following decade, in which it found itself with a serious competitor on its left, The Workers' Party (formerly Sinn Féin - The Workers' Party from 1977 to 1982), which obtained quite decent results, notably 5% in 1989 (Ó Broin 2009: 152-160; Puirseil 2012: 78). It was actually not until 1992 that Labour made a spectacular comeback reaching 19.3% of the vote, which some commentators attribute to Leader Dick Spring, who had urged reform on societal issues such as contraception and divorce, which were still extremely divisive at the time (Murray 2017; Finlay 2022).

## 3.2. From stagnation to surge and steady decline (1990s-2010s)

- 21 The party lost ground again thereafter, stagnating at around 10% throughout the 1990s and 2000s. It was also at this time that Tony Blair's New Labour's social-liberal "third way" was to find favour with the Irish Labour Party, which was not unconnected with the economic prosperity of the country, the mechanisms of which the party had supported (Suiter 2012: 165-176).
- 22 Then, after a surge in the 2011 general election in which it came second, ahead of Fianna Fáil, which paid heavily for its mismanagement of the 2008 economic crisis (Daly 2012: 93), the Irish Labour Party now seems to be experiencing the same fate as some European parties of the same movement – notably the French Socialist Party –, following its bitter failure in the 2016 general election, obtaining only 6.6% of the vote. The same general election that saw Sinn Féin become the leading left-wing political force in the Republic of Ireland, but without finishing ahead of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, and which even won the 2020 general election (at least in terms of percentage of first preference votes) – although this did not result in the formation of a Sinn Féin government. While Labour was continuing to fall, with 4.4% of the vote (McGuill 2016).
- 23 This victory for Sinn Féin, and thus for a left-wing party for the first time in the country's history,<sup>16</sup> can be explained in several ways. Firstly, it should be remembered that the economic prosperity of the 1990s and 2000s also brought with it a seemingly unstoppable process of secularisation in southern Irish society, to which the Catholic Church is still struggling to adapt, and which has seen its influence greatly diminish as a result (Ferriter 2004: 732-739; Donnelly 2000; McGarry 2021). On the other hand, "while not reneging on its ultimate goal, Irish unity" (Maillot 2022: 108), Sinn Féin was able to somewhat move away from its traditional nationalist discourse to focus on socio-economic issues that had arisen following the 2008 economic crisis (such as the housing shortage, the rise in rents, and the deterioration of the health system). This appealed to the most disadvantaged and especially to young people, at the expense of the Labour Party, which was no doubt penalised for its participation in the Fine

Gael government of Enda Kenny in 2011-16 (Ní Aodha 2020). Their promises to protect voters from austerity measures actually turned out to be nothing more than lip service, when faced with pressure from the European troika<sup>17</sup> to address the public debt crisis caused by the bailout of the national banks, necessitated by previous excesses in private debt (*The Irish Times* 2016).

## Conclusion

- 24 Labour, as the main left-wing party in the southern Irish State until 2016, has never really been a pillar of the country's party system, which consequently has never been based on a traditional Western European left-right divide. Except perhaps since the 2020 general election, after which Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, yesterday's enemies, came together in a coalition government for the first time in history, on the basis of their socio-economic convergences. Labour has, therefore, only been able to influence the course of public policy, to some extent, when it participated in coalition governments. For which, by the way, it has hardly been rewarded, since each of its participations in government was always followed by an electoral setback, the last of which occurred in 2016 (McCullagh 2012: 124).
- 25 There are several reasons for this. The ideological disparity of the party's membership and leadership is undoubtedly one. Up until the 1990s, Labour was divided between currents ranging from social Catholic conservatism to the Trotskyist extreme left, through orthodox communists and social democrats (Rafter 2012: 142). However, it must be admitted that it was this former conservative trend that, most of the time, took the upper hand over all the others or ended up doing so, directly or indirectly. So much so that, in 1985, American historian Emmet Larkin described the Irish Labour Party as "the most opportunistically conservative Labour Party anywhere in the known world" (1985: 88). Except in the second half of the 1930s, and again in the second half of the 1960s and into the early 1970s, even the most progressive members of the party tended to be self-censoring in order to avoid the wrath of the Catholic Church and thereby alienating a large part of the electorate (Bacik 2012: 178). However, such an attitude raises three questions: didn't the leftward shifts outlined above come too late to be truly effective? Moreover, as a general rule,

does genuflecting before the architects of the established order lead to the real shaping of social realities according to so-called heterodox principles? Or should one not, on the contrary, strive to counteract the dominant forces so that these same realities do not become entrenched forever in a systematic opposition to all evolution? For sociologist and historian Kieran Allen, at least, there is no doubt about it. Analysing the period from 1927 to 1932, he argues that:

[L]acking confidence in their own ability to fight, workers were more than willing to give an ear to a radical force that promised both to stand up to British imperialism and also to provide jobs and improved conditions. When they looked at the Labour Party, the more they became convinced that Fianna Fáil held the original copyright [...]. Labour was displaced by Fianna Fáil not because it was too radical but because it was not radical enough (1996: 35).

- 26 In any case, Labour's electoral decline in recent years seems irreversible, having fallen below the 5% mark in 2020 for the first time in its history. The crisis that has since ensued therefore raises the question of its demise, as was the case for the Italian Socialist Party dissolved in 1994, and as might be the case for the French Socialist Party following the 2022 presidential election, where the party's candidate, Anne Hidalgo, only obtained 1.74%, i.e., a score well below the symbolic 5% figure for the first time in the history of the Fifth Republic.

---

## Primary sources

### Irish State Papers

*Census of Population, Ireland, 1926, 1936*

### British State Papers

*Census of Ireland, 1911*

### Labour and Trade Union Reports

Irish Trade Union Congress, *Report of the Eighteenth Annual Meeting, May 1912*, Published by authority of Congress and the Parliamentary Committee.

Irish Trade Union Congress, *Report of the Twenty-First Annual Meeting, June 1914*, Published by Authority of the National Executive.

Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party, *Report of the Twenty-Second Annual Meeting, August 1916*, Published by Authority of the National Executive.

Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party, *Report of the Twenty-Third Annual Meeting, August 1917*, Published by Authority of the National Executive.

Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, *Annual Report for 1918*, Issued by authority of Executive Committee.

Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of the Twenty-Seventh Annual Meeting, August 1921*, Published by the National Executive.

## Newspapers and periodicals

Irish Opinion, 16 February 1918.

McGarry, Patsy, "A possible disaster: Catholic Church reckons with declining interest post-pandemic," *Irish Times*, 7 May 2021. Available via

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/religion-and-beliefs/a-possible-disaster-catholic-church-reckons-with-declining-interest-post-pandemic-1.4557615>. Consulted 12 February 2023.

McGuill, Dan, "Labour just had the worst election in its 104-year history", *TheJournal.ie*, 3 March 2016. Available via <https://www.thejournal.ie/labour-ireland-worst-election-ge16-2016-2629803-Mar2016/>. Consulted 12 February 2023.

McMorrow, Conor, "The Labour party's fight for survival", *RTÉ*, 4 March 2022. Available via <https://www.rte.ie/news/primetime/2022/0304/1284323-labour-party-alan-kelly-fight-for-survival/>. Consulted 14 March 2023.

Ní Aodha, Gráinne, "How did they do it? Sinn Féin's historic 24% win was built on learnt lessons and a fed-up electorate", *TheJournal.ie*, 12 February 2020.

Available via <https://www.thejournal.ie/sinn-fein-comeback-5001379-Feb2020/>. Consulted 12 February 2023.

*Sunday Independent*, 29 June 1969.

*The Irish Times*, 10 February 2020.

*The Irish Worker*, 8 June 1912.

*The Voice of Labour*, 9 November 1918.

"What now for Labour Party after disastrous general election performance?", *The Irish Times*, 1 April 2016. Available via <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/editorial/what-now-for-labour-party-after-disastrous-general-election-performance-1.2593828>.

Consulted 12 February 2023.

## Memoirs

Browne, Noël (1986). *Against the Tide*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.

William O'Brien (1969). *Forth the Banners Go*, Dublin: The Three Candles Ltd.

## Secondary sources

Allen, Kieran (1997). *Fianna Fail and Irish Labour: From 1926 to the Present*, London: Pluto Press.

Ashford, Nigel / Davids, Stephen (1991). *A Dictionary of Conservative and Libertarian Thought*, London: Routledge.

Bacik, Ivana (2012). "Labour and the Liberal Agenda", in: Daly, Paul / O'Brien, Rónán / Rouse, Paul Eds., *Making the Difference? The Irish Labour Movement, 1912-2012*, Cork: The Collins Press, 177-188.

Bowler, Stephen (1993). "Sean Murray (1898-1961) and the Pursuit of Stalinism in One Country", in: *Saothar*, 18, 41-53.



- Boyle, John W. (1988). *The Irish Labor Movement in the Nineteenth Century*, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Bradley, Dan (1988). *Farm Labourers: Irish Struggle, 1900-1976*, Belfast: Athol Books.
- Collins, Stephen (2012). "Labour and Europe: From No to Yes", in: Daly, Paul / O'Brien, Rónán / Rouse, Paul Eds., *Making the Difference? The Irish Labour Movement, 1912-2012*, Cork: The Collins Press, 154-164.
- Coquelin, Olivier (2018). *L'Irlande en Revolution, entre nationalismes et conservatismes: une histoire politique et sociale (18e-20e siècles)*, Paris: Editions Syllepse.
- Costello, Francis (1991). "Labour, Irish Republicanism, and the Social Order During the Anglo-Irish War", in: *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 17, 2, 1-22.
- Daly, Paul (2012). "Labour and the Pursuit of Power", in: Daly, Paul / O'Brien, Rónán / Rouse, Paul, Eds., *Making the Difference? The Irish Labour Movement, 1912-2012*, Cork: The Collins Press, 82-94.
- Donnelly, James S. (2000). "A Church in Crisis", in: *History Ireland*, 8, 3. Available via <https://www.historyireland.com/a-church-in-crisis/>. Consulted 12 September 20 (<https://www.historyireland.com/a-church-in-crisis/>)22.
- Fanning, Ronan (2015). *Eamon de Valera: A will to Power*, London: Faber and Faber.
- Farrell, Brian (1970). "Labour and the Irish Political System: A suggested Approach," *Economic and Social Review*, 1, 477-502.
- Ferriter, Diarmaid (2004). *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000*, London: Profile Books.
- Ferriter, Diarmaid (2007). *Judging Dev: a reassessment of the life and legacy of Eamon de Valera*, Dublin: Royal Irish Academy.
- Ferriter, Diarmaid (2012). "'No Good Catholic can be a true Socialist': The Labour Party and The Catholic Church, 1922-52", in: Daly, Paul / O'Brien, Rónán / Rouse, Paul, Eds., *Making the Difference? The Irish Labour Movement, 1912-2012*, Cork: The Collins Press, 95-106.
- Finlay, Fergus, "Celebrating the hunger for change that altered Ireland 30 years ago", in: *Irish Examiner*, 29 November 2022. Available via <https://www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/columnists/arid-41016860.html>. Consulted 10 February 2023.
- Garvin, Tom (1977). "Nationalist Elites, Irish Voters and Irish Political Development", in: *Economic and Social Review*, 8, 3, 161-186.
- Greaves, Desmond (1982). *The Irish Transport and General Workers' Union: The Formative Years, 1909-1923*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.
- Heywood, Andrew (1994). *Political Ideas and Concepts: An Introduction*, London: The MacMillan Press.
- Maillot, Agnès (2022). *Rebels in Government: Is Sinn Féin ready for power?*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Marx, Rolland (1990). *Eamon de Valera*, Paris: Beauchesne.

- McKee, Eamonn (1986). "Church-State Relations and the Development of Irish Health Policy: The Mother-and-Child Scheme, 1944-53", in: *Irish Historical Studies*, 25, 98, 159-194.
- Larkin, Emmet (1985). "Socialism and Catholicism in Ireland", in: *Studies*, 74, 293, 66-92.
- Mair, Peter (1977). "Labour and the Irish Party System Revisited: Party Competition in the 1920s", *Economic and Social Review*, 9, 1, 59-70.
- McCullagh, David (2012). "A particular view of what was possible: Labour in Government", in: Daly, Paul / O'Brien, Rónán / Rouse, Paul, Eds., *Making the Difference? The Irish Labour Movement, 1912-2012*, Cork: The Collins Press, 107-124.
- Mitchell, Arthur (1974). *Labour in Irish Politics, 1890-1930: The Irish Labour Movement in an Age of Revolution*, Dublin: Irish University Press.
- Arthur Mitchell (1971). "William O'Brien (1881-1968) and the Irish Labour Movement", in: *Studies*, 60, 39-40, 311-331.
- Morrissey SJ, Thomas J. (2007). *William O'Brien, 1881-1968: Socialist, Republican, Dáil Deputy, Editor and Trade Union Leader*, Dublin: Four Courts Press.
- Murray, Niall, "Election Crisis: 1992 winter election gave way to a Spring Tide", in: *Irish Examiner*, 25 November 2017. Available via <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-20463479.html>. Consulted 10 February 2023.
- O'Brien, Rónán (2012). "A Divided House: The Irish Trades Union Congress and the Origins of the Irish Labour Party", in: Daly, Paul / O'Brien, Rónán / Rouse, Paul, Eds., *Making the Difference? The Irish Labour Movement, 1912-2012*, Cork: The Collins Press, 17-31.
- Ó Broin, Eoin (2009). *Sinn Féin and the Politics of Left Republicanism*, London: Pluto Press.
- O'Connor, Emmet (1992). *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824-1960*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.
- O'Connor, Emmet (1999). "Jim Larkin and the Communist Internationals", in: *Irish Historical Studies*, 31/123, 357-372.
- O'Connor Lysaght, D. R. (1983). "The Rake's Progress of a Syndicalist: The Political Career of William O'Brien, Irish Labour Leader", in: *Saothar*, 9, 48-62.
- O'Halpin, Eunan (2012). "Labour and the Making of Irish Foreign Policy, 1973-77", in: Daly, Paul / O'Brien, Rónán / Rouse, Paul, Eds., *Making the Difference? The Irish Labour Movement, 1912-2012*, Cork: The Collins Press, 139-153.
- Puirseíl, Niamh (2007). *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73*, Dublin: University College Dublin Press.
- Puirseíl, Niamh (2012). "If it's socialism you want, join another party: Labour and the Left", in: Daly, Paul / O'Brien, Rónán / Rouse, Paul, Eds., *Making the Difference? The Irish Labour Movement, 1912-2012*, Cork: The Collins Press, 67-81.
- Puirseíl, Niamh, "Labour in Name Only", *Jacobin*, 5 March 2016. Available via <https://jacobinmag.com/2016/05/irish-labour-party-social-democracy-welfare-state-church>. Consulted 12 February 2023.
- Rafter, Kevin (2012). "Labour and the Media: The Promise of Socialism, Negative Campaigning and *The Irish Times*", in: Daly, Paul / O'Brien, Rónán / Rouse,

Paul, Eds., *Making the Difference? The Irish Labour Movement, 1912-2012*, Cork: The Collins Press, 125-138.

Suiter, Jane (2012). "Ireland's Journey to the Third Way: the Hi-Social Model?", in: Daly, Paul / O'Brien, Rónán / Rouse, Paul, Eds., *Making the Difference? The Irish Labour Movement, 1912-2012*, Cork: The Collins Press, 165-176.

Townshend, Charles (1979). "The Irish Railway Strike of 1920: Industrial Action and Civil Resistance in the Struggle for

Independence", in: *Irish Historical Studies*, 22, 83, 265-282.

Vincent, Andrew (1995). *Modern Political Ideologies*, Blackwell: Cambridge (USA).

Weeks, Liam (2010). "Parties and the Party System", in Coakley, John / Gallagher, Michael, Eds., *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, London: Routledge, 137-167.

---

1 Signed in December 1921 by representatives of both sides, this peace agreement put an end to the War of Independence that had started in January 1919. The Treaty provided *inter alia* for the partition of the island into two distinct entities, but aroused strong opposition from the most radical Irish republicans, thus generating a civil war that lasted ten months and saw the victory of the pro-Treaty forces in power.

2 The results of the 2020 general election in terms of percentage of first preference votes are as follows: Sinn Féin 24.5%, Fianna Fáil 22.2%, Fine Gael 20.9%, Green Party 7.1%, Labour Party 4.4%, Social Democrats 2.9%, Solidarity-PBP 2.6%, Independents/others 15.4%. (*The Irish Times* 2020: 1).

3 The Irish Republican Brotherhood was a Masonic-style secret society founded in 1858 by veterans of the abortive 1848 Rebellion. Its aim was to establish an independent republic in Ireland through insurrection. It failed for the first time in 1867. Despite the decline that followed – to the benefit of the more moderate and legalistic Home Rule movement – the organisation remained active and even experienced a certain revival in the early 1910s.

4 On 21 August 1913, William Martin Murphy, leader of Dublin's employers, dismissed a hundred employees of the tramway company he owned on the grounds that they were members of the ITGWU, which he had anathematized some time before. Five days later, more than a third of the company's employees voted in favour of a strike that soon paralysed the whole city. For more than six months, Dublin was the scene of violent clashes between the forces of law and order and strikers whose only real demand was respect for

trade union freedom, which they claimed had been flouted by the Dublin employers. Ultimately, the outcome of the strike depended on the British labour movement. But when the British unions refused to organise a blockade of Dublin port, the striking workers had no choice but to gradually return to work between mid-December 1913 and February 1914.

5 Home Rule in Ireland, as passed at Westminster in 1912, was due to come into force in 1914. But with the outbreak of the First World War, its implementation was postponed to a later date. Revolutionary nationalists then took advantage of British difficulties on the continent to launch an insurrection in April 1916. The latter was confined to Dublin and put down within a week. However, the execution of the leading rebel figures provoked an outcry from the predominantly nationalist Irish population, who had initially denounced this venture. From then on, public opinion gradually radicalised and came to support the revolutionary forces in their fight for the country's independence.

6 The Irish Volunteers was a nationalist militia created in 1913, in response to the creation of the Ulster Volunteer Force, by the Unionists. The latter organisation was designed to prevent the application of Home Rule in Ireland, as adopted by the Parliament in London in 1912.

7 The Irish Citizen Army was created during the 1913 Dublin Lockout as a protective force for strikers. It was later gradually transformed into an offensive and subversive battalion, under the leadership of socialist and trade-unionist James Connolly.

8 Between 1917 and 1921, membership of the ITUC's affiliated unions and other organisations increased from 100,000 (about 16.5% of all industrial workers in the country) to 300,000 (about 49% of all industrial workers in the country). (ITUCLP 1917: 70; ILPTUC 1921: 75, 222; *Census of Ireland 1911*: xxix-xxx).

9 Historians generally agree that the Irish Revolution can be traced back to the abortive Easter Rising of 1916, mentioned above. Although this insurrection failed to destroy the imperial edifice, it nevertheless paved the way for the War of Independence of 1919-1921, orchestrated once again by the Irish Volunteers – known as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) from 1919 onwards – and its political wing, Sinn Féin, which won the general election in Ireland in December 1918 and pursued a strategy of “civil disobedience” based on the establishment of local institutions – such as the Irish national parliament, better known as Dáil Éireann – designed to thwart any British interference in Irish affairs. The revolutionary period culminated in the signing of the

Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921, which led to a civil war from 1922 to 1923, splitting the IRA and Sinn Féin and resulting in victory for the supporters of the Treaty.

10 Although it took no direct part in the 1916 Rising, the British authorities were convinced that Sinn Féin was the driving force behind it. Hence the republican party benefited from the swing in public opinion following the crackdown on the insurgents. This manifested itself in by-elections won throughout 1917. From a small group of committed nationalists, Sinn Féin then became a genuine mass movement. This was confirmed in the December 1918 general election, which resulted in a landslide victory for Sinn Féin.

11 The fraction of Sinn Féin that supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 held power from 1922 to 1932, under the name Cumann na nGaedheal as of 1923. In 1933, the organisation changed its name to Fine Gael, a name it has retained ever since. As for Fianna Fáil, it owes its existence to a second split within Sinn Féin, which occurred in 1926 over the question of whether or not to participate in the institutions of the Irish Free State. The more orthodox republicans rejected this alternative, while those who approved left Sinn Féin and founded Fianna Fáil.

12 The coalition governments in which the Labour Party participated were: the Costello government (Fine Gael) from 1948 to 1951, then from 1954 to 1957; the Cosgrave government (Fine Gael) from 1973 to 1977; the Fitzgerald government (Fine Gael) from 1981 to 1982, then from 1982 to 1987; the Haughey government (Fianna Fáil) from 1993 to 1994; the Bruton government (Fine Gael) from 1994 to 1997; and the Kenny government (Fine Gael) from 2011 to 2016.

13 On the different conservative hues, see Vincent (1995: 55-83), Heywood (1994: 286-293), Ashford and Davids (1991: 45-51).

14 It was in fact a coalition government dominated by John Costello's Fine Gael. The other organisations included the Labour Party, the National Labour Party and the Clann na Poblachta. The latter was a sort of melting pot of former Fianna Fáil members and supporters and independent social democrats such as Dr Noël Browne.

15 In the Irish Free State in 1936, there were 29.5% of industrial and agricultural workers in a labour force of 1,235,424, compared to 25.9% in 1926 in a labour force of 1,223,014. (*Census of Population, Ireland 1926*: 23, 26-7; *Census of Population, Ireland 1936*: 23, 30, 51).

16 It should be noted here that, while remaining firmly nationalist, Sinn Féin gave its political objectives, from the 1960s onwards, a socio-economic dimension which proved sufficiently progressive to classify it as a left-wing party. To the extent that it is now a member of The Left in the European Parliament – GUE/NGL. (Maillot 2022: 17-18, 106-150; Ó Broin 2009: 151-154, 194-208).

17 The European troika is a term used, especially in the media, to refer to the decision group formed by the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The usage arose during the European debt crisis in the context of the “bailouts” of Cyprus, Greece, Ireland and Portugal necessitated by their prospective insolvency caused by the world financial crisis of 2007-2008 ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Financial\\_crisis\\_of\\_2007%E2%80%932008](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Financial_crisis_of_2007%E2%80%932008)).

---

## English

From 1922 to the early 2010s, the Irish Labour Party represented the main political force on the left, in a country where antagonisms were based on a divide other than the traditional one between right and left. This means that, despite its ideological shifts over time, Labour never held the reins of power and was only able to influence Irish politics to some extent through its sporadic participation in coalition governments from the late 1940s onwards. This article therefore seeks to understand why Labour’s modest yet promising electoral gains were systematically followed by setbacks and crises, with the last one even threatening its existence.

## Français

De 1922 au début des années 2010, le Parti travailliste irlandais représenta la principale force politique de gauche, dans un pays où les antagonismes reposaient sur un clivage autre que celui, traditionnel, entre une formation de droite et une autre de gauche. Cela signifie que, malgré ses infléchissements idéologiques au fil du temps, les travaillistes ne tinrent jamais les rênes du pouvoir et ne furent en mesure d’influencer quelque peu la vie politique irlandaise que via leur participation sporadique à des gouvernements de coalition à partir de la fin des années 1940. Cet article se propose donc de comprendre pourquoi les progrès électoraux du parti travailliste, modestes mais néanmoins prometteurs, furent systématiquement suivis de revers et de crises, la dernière allant même jusqu’à mettre en danger son existence.

**Mots-clés**

Irlande, Parti travailliste, gauche, conservatisme, crise

**Keywords**

Ireland, Labour Party, left, conservatism, crisis

---

**Olivier Coquelin**

MCF en civilisation des îles britanniques, Groupe de recherche en études irlandaises (GREI) de l'ERIBIA (Équipe de recherche interdisciplinaire sur l'Irlande, la Grande-Bretagne et l'Amérique du Nord, EA 2610), Université de Caen Normandie, UFR Langues Vivantes Etrangères, Esplanade de la paix, 14032 CAEN (France)