

EU Demands 'Yes' Vote in Irish Referendum

by Dean Andromidas

Sept. 18—At a press conference at the European Parliament in Strasbourg on Sept. 16, Ireland's Socialist Party member Joe Higgins accused European Commission president José Manuel Barroso of employing "terror and fear," to force a "Yes" vote, in the Oct. 2 Irish referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. Higgins said that the EC has, for weeks, sent its employees, including the Commission's secretary general, to visit schools all over Ireland, as a "cynical means of sending a message to parents that they should vote 'Yes' to the Lisbon Treaty." He accused the Irish government and the pro-Lisbon Treaty organizations of taking their cues from the EU, by relying on a campaign of "fear to pressure the Irish people to support Lisbon." They are using the anxiety among the population over the economic crisis to claim that a "No" vote would cause catastrophe.

The Lisbon Treaty is a plan for supranational rule that would divest Europe's nations of whatever shreds of sovereignty they still have. The treaty was signed by EU heads of state in December 2007, but requires unanimous ratification by the member countries. In June 2008, Ireland's "No" vote in a referendum derailed the supranationalists' plans. Heavy pressure came down on the Irish government to schedule a new referendum.

Higgins said the Irish "Left is in favor of the widest democratic debate on the Lisbon Treaty, and we are fully prepared to debate with any of the political groups around Europe, but it is a gross abuse of taxpayers' funds and of democratic procedures for the Commission to intervene in a one-sided fashion in the way the Commission has done in Ireland.... Europe has had enough of Mr Barroso's neo-liberal agenda."

EIR pointed out that the German Constitutional Court had recently ruled that the Lisbon Treaty is only valid for Germany insofar as it is interpreted in a manner compatible with the German Constitution; and that political forces in Germany and other countries want ref-

erenda as well. Higgins replied that these issues made the "No" campaign on the Irish referendum all the more important for the rest of Europe.

The Socialist Party, along with 13 other organizations, is part of the "Say 'No' to Lisbon/Campaign Against the EU Constitution" alliance, and has invited the Irish Prime Minister and his colleagues to a full public debate, in late September; but the government has yet to accept the challenge.

Backed by the Banks

In his press conference, Higgins said that, given the backing of big business and the mass media, the "Yes" campaigners have spent ten times more than the "No" campaigners. The "Yes" supporters have the full support of Ireland's hopelessly bankrupt banks, which just received a EU54 billion bailout from the government. On Sept. 16, the government announced its "bad bank" scheme, called the National Asset Management Agency, which will buy up toxic assets of the main Irish banks. These debts are mostly owed by speculators who bought big during the Celtic Tiger boom years (1995-2007), but who now cannot, or will not repay them. This is the biggest financial rescue package in Ireland's history, and was made under direct orders from the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank; it means the government will pay EU54 billion in bonds to take over EU77 billion of toxic debts.

In an attempt to use the bailout in the government's campaign for a "Yes" vote, Irish Finance Minister Brian Lenihan said, "Throughout the last year, our membership of the European Union, and the euro zone in particular, has played a vital role in our response to the current financial crisis. The ECB stood behind this country during its time of greatest need, and let nobody forget that when it comes to the Lisbon referendum on October 2nd."

While the EU54 billion bailout represents over one third of the country's gross domestic product, the government has cut the budget by 20%, and admitted that living standards and unemployment have been set back by 20 years.

In June 2008, the Irish voted down the Lisbon Treaty by 53.4% to 46.6%. Today, because of the government's media campaign, the polls are too close to call. Whatever happens, the economic crisis is going to get far worse, and that promises a political backlash, just as the mass strike in the United States is transforming the political situation there.