On Being a Socialist in Parliament: Richard Boyd Barrett and Christine Buchholz

Revolutionary socialists reject the notion of a parliamentary road to socialism but nevertheless believe that is useful to stand in parliamentary elections. Here *IMR* interviews two socialists who succeeded in getting elected, which explore how they do their job and use their position to further the wider struggle: they are with Richard Boyd Barrett, of the People Before Profit Alliance in Ireland and Christine Buchholz, supporter of the Marx 21 current within Die Linke (The Left Party) in Germany.

Richard Boyd Barrett

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IMR: How did you become a TD?

Richard Boyd Barrett: I was involved in campaigning for many years with the SWP and later with People Before Profit. I was involved in the anti war movement, workers rights, anti privatisation campaigns, and environmental campaigns, particularly in my own locality Dun Laoghaire where a whole series of campaigns sort of over lapped over a period of time. While everyone who was involved in those campaigns might not have been a socialist most people saw a need when it came to election time to have some representation for our campaigning activity and most of them felt there was no established political party that represented their objectives and aspirations and it was really out of that that the People Before Profit Alliance developed, first in Dun Laoghaire and then in some other parts of Dublin as a way to bring together different left wing, trade union, environmental and community campaigners into a movement that linked those campaigns together. Then we decided to run in elections. In Dun Laoghaire I was selected as the candidate. I didn't get elected the first time around but we got a very good result and it was clear that there was an audience.

IMR: Was that for TD?

RBB: I ran for TD and I also ran for the council and got very close both times, but didn't get elected. The first time I ran for the Daíl (for the SWP) was in 2002 and then for People Before Profit in 2007 I stood for Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown Council in 2007. .But finally I was elected to the council in 2009 - in fact I topped the poll with a significant margin so that was the first electoral break through for PBP and we also got a number of councillors elected elsewhere for PBP in 2009. Then in 2011 I was elected in the general elections for Dun Laoghaire. At that stage we were part of a bigger alliance called the United Left Alliance which got five TD's elected in total. That was a big breakthrough for this new radical left politics that was emerging on the political landscape.

IMR: In part you've already answered this, but what were the main political activities that led to your election, as in which campaigns do you think were most important for building your credibility?

RBB: I think that as the chair person of the anti war movement I had gained a lot of experience in building a big national campaign. We had had big protests at that stage and also I gained a lot of experience in helping pulling together broad coalitions because that was a very broad coalition involving trade unionists, local campaign groups and other sort of progressive NGO's. So I think the idea of developing something like PBP flowed from that but I believe the key next step was for those sort of campaigning activities to gain roots in particular localities and to begin to link in with social, political and environmental issues, that affected people on a day to day level and in Dun Laoghaire there were a number of campaigns that were critical in that regard. There was a big campaign against the bin tax - that was a national campaign and we had a strong group in Dun Laoghaire. We were also fighting a whole number of battles on housing in the locality because there was a big housing crisis. There was a very significant and very successful campaign to stop the privatisation of the Dun Laoghaire sea front which we spearheaded,.Then there were other things like solidarity with the Shell to Sea campaign in Mayo. A lot of these campaigns started to overlap and the activists found themselves again and again working together so there was really a logical and organic development from that sort of activity to when elections came along.

IMR: I heard you once say that it was the bus campaign that was key in Dun Laoghaire.

RBB: Yes that's right. There was a move to cut a bus route through a particular working class area in DL and we led a campaign on that. It wasn't fully successful although we did get some concessions from Bus Eireann to retain some level of service in the area. That was important in reaching into new areas. When we look at our votes in the ballot boxes we found they were significantly higher in areas where we had an active campaign.. So it was very much a campaigning organisation that developed into something that could challenge on a political front.

IMR: What would you say about the general political situation in early 2011 that led to this break through for the left?

RBB: I think people were absolutely enraged at the failure of the political establishment and the crimes of the political establishment - in facilitating the bonanza of greed by developers and bankers - that led to the crash and to the cruel austerity regime that was imposed. So that was the biggest context and obviously destroyed the support for Fianna Fail who had dominated Irish politics for the last 70 years. It also saw the collapse of the Green Party - who virtually ceased to exist. Much of the anger benefited the Labour Party but there were quite a few people who didn't see Labour as an alternative because they remembered it selling out in the past in order to be in government. And also there was a layer of people involved in campaigning who had seen that Labour had not been part in building campaigns on the ground, so I think that was really the context. A desire to see an alternative to austerity and one that was actually building resistance on the ground and not just

talking about it.

IMR: What are your main priorities in your work as a TD?

RBB: the main priority is to use the parliament as a platform to organise opposition outside the parliament; to use it as a place to coordinate and link together different struggles that are happening outside the parliament, in the workplaces, communities and various fights against austerity. I think that's the most important thing. The big danger of parliament is to get sucked in to the bubble and I always quote Lenin's famous phrase 'Parliament is a dungheap. You can stand on it to shout louder but whatever you do don't fall into it'. I think that's absolutely right. So if you can use it as a platform to get in touch with different people, and to be a voice for people who are fighting back on the outside and to facilitate that struggle then that is useful. But parliament itself isn't amenable to change and it's very clear to me after two and a half years in there that the only time the government are affected by anything we say inside the parliament is when we get huge numbers of people on the streets outside the parliament, because the government or the elites of this country aren't interested in a good argument. It's about what you can mobilise to force change. I think we have done that quite successfully in a number of areas, most notably the recent campaign to stop the privatisation of public forestry in this country. Where we spearheaded that campaign on the ground but used the parliament as a focus to get it all together. There have also been a number of successful protests against cuts to disability, disadvantaged schools, local fights over stopping an oil company putting an oil rig in Dublin bay where again I think we used the parliament well to build and support movements of resistance outside. So it can be done but the key is not to get sucked in to the bubble.

IMR: How much do you see yourself using the position to make propaganda against the government and the system and for socialism?

RBB: I think the big argument the government use for austerity is that there is no alternative. You might not like what's happening but there is no choice is their narrative, so I think it is important to be able to get up and articulate alternatives. It gives a bit of confidence to people outside when they are resisting unjust austerity and cuts if they can hear an alternative being put forward in the parliament. But I still think we have a big job to do, to really get across the message that there are alternatives. There are lots of different groups that are making arguments against austerity, trade unions, social justice and left wing groups, but I still think they haven't been popularised to the degree that they need to be to really give people confidence. That's why the People's Assembly that we are organising for September 18 will be a quite important opportunity to really try and create a coherent and comprehensive alternative, bringing together the different groups that have been fighting austerity and put forward those alternatives and really popularise those arguments amongst larger layers of people. Obviously parliament can be useful in that regard.

IMR: What about international issues? I know you often raise these.

RBB: Yeah, I think international examples and inspiration is tremendously important. I think it's important to speak of them in parliament but maybe even more so to use them as positive examples for

people here who are trying to fight back. When you are trying to convey the idea that resistance, people's power and workers' power can change things, it's fantastic to be able to talk about the examples of the revolution in Egypt, the resistance in Spain, and Greece, the more recent revolts in Turkey and so on. So I think the international dimension is very important because part of the strategy of Europe's elites is to try and isolate and demoralise people in different countries and the different movements of resistance. But I think when you set our resistance in the context of a wider and growing European and world wide resistance against austerity it gives people confidence and helps them to believe in the possibility of change.

IMR: And foreign policy?

RBB: Palestine is obviously an issue that I've talked a lot about. It's very important just because of the horror that's going on in Palestine Also we need to oppose any moves to try and use the crisis in Syria to justify greater militarism by the big powers in the Middle East. We have spoken again and again against moves to try and militarise the EU and align it closer to the NATO military alliance. It's obvious why that's important, because there's vast amounts of money that could be used to create employment, education, healthcare that are being pumped into war and militarism and that's a terrible waste. I also think we have a moral duty to stand up for international solidarity and oppose oppression against groups elsewhere in the world.

IMR: In practice how do you actually divide your time between the Daíl and work outside?

RBB: That's a really difficult balance, and we have been learning as we go along, because there is a lot of pressure. There is local constituency work, which as the austerity deepens is intensifying. We have huge amounts of people in mortgage difficulty, housing difficulty, unable to pay their bills, homelessness, so we have an office and a clinic in Dun Laoghaire which is extremely busy. We have some volunteers helping me and some resources from parliament to staff that office. That's a big priority but also the Daíl would sit Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday of any given week so those days would be concentrated on parliamentary activity and with linking up with groups outside the parliament that are trying to campaign and put pressure on the government. Then I also try and make time to travel around the country to help develop PBP; so usually Monday nights are free and I travel every Monday night to try and develop PBP branches. It's a balancing act and obviously I get a lot of support from the people who work with me in parliament and from the wider organisation and it really shows the importance of having an organisation on the ground because if you were just an individual TD you could have far less of an impact than having the SWP, PBP and other campaigns which you are working with outside the parliament.

IMR: You only take the average industrial wage while donating the rest of your salary to political campaigns. Why do you think this is important?

RBB: One of the things that hugely angers people at the moment is the gross inequality in our society, particularly in the teeth a dire recession where a small elite are protected from the crisis and even benefit from it, while ordinary people are being hammered. I think it's important if you're on the left and represent ordinary people that you are in the same situation as they

are. I don't see how you could claim to represent people who are struggling if you're insulated from the impact of what's happening to them. I think that's part, while it's not the only reason, of why there's a huge alienation from politics. Increasingly politicians and trade union leaders have a lifestyle and a material existence which really bear no relationship to the people they claim to represent. They live lives far closer to the elite than to ordinary working people. I also think there is an issue of accountability - you can be more accountable to people if you're in the same position as them. If I want a pay rise - I have to fight for everyone else to get a pay rise so I think it's a basic principle of left wing and progressive politics.

IMR: How does the way you do your job differ from the way other independent TD's operate?

RBB: I think there is a substantial difference and the main difference is a focus on activities outside the parliament. There are quite a number of independent and left TD's in the Daíl that on many issues I would find myself working with and in agreement with. But they generally do not put the same emphasis on activity outside, on building protests or on people power. They tend to more articulate a different policy and be of the view that if you get enough people to vote for those policies you could change things through parliament. I don't believe that. I think it is people's power and workers power that changes things. I think consciously or unconsciously you are selling people an illusion if you say to them 'vote for me and I'll change it for you'. So I always emphasise in everything I'm doing the power of people to bring about change. In the campaigns where we have been successful it hasn't been because I have made good speeches about it in parliament - I do my best to give good speeches - but those speeches get strength and weight by what's happening on the outside. It is when we have mobilised people in large numbers that the campaigns have been effective and that's when you can see the government fearful about what we are saying. I think that's the key thing - that change comes from below and left wingers in parliament are there to encourage that self activity of ordinary people, not to substitute for it.

IMR: What criticisms do you have of the Daíl as an institution?

RBB: It's simply not accountable. Politicians will make promises before an election and then break them directly after an election and ordinary people have to wait five years to hold them to account for that and that's just not good enough. Promises are made these days it seems just to take people in and to get political parties into power but with no intention of following through on those promises. The basic problem is that the Daíl is not accountable to people on a day to day basis and we need a democracy which is much more direct and participatory, really I think ultimately a democracy where we don't have professional politicians so much as you people who are organically representing the working class and ordinary people - where people could be accountable on a weekly, even daily basis for what they do and can be replaced if they fail to implement the policies that they claim to stand for.

IMR: Out there, especially in working class areas, there is a great cynicism and disillusionment with politicians and people believe there is a high level of corruption. Do you think that's true? What's your ex-

perience of this?

RBB: There was very overt corruption during the Celtic Tiger. Neoliberalism in this country let developers and bankers rip and produced corruption as an almost inevitable bi-product. Of course we saw very explicit examples of that with ministers taking large donations and bribes. Because of the outrage and anger I don't know now the extent of such direct bribery so I don't know the answer to that but what I do think is that there is a more general corruption of the political process, because the political establishment still allow themselves to be hostage to big business interest. So everything is about deference to the markets, deference to the multinationals, deference to the big corporations. The idea that you could tax these people, that you could tax the wealthy is almost incomprehensible to the political establishment. I think that's corrupting. The extent to where there are direct bribes I don't know, although I do think that what happen probably more is that politicians that generally champion and protect the interest of the corporations and big business can fairly confidently expect to end up on the boards of directors of some of these companies or be rewarded with senior positions in the European Union bureaucracy or on quangos. So I think there's that sort of corruption which is still widespread and endemic within the system.

IMR: What is your vision of real democracy?

RBB: I think we need really popular, direct, participatory democracy where people have an ongoing say in the decisions that are made that affect their lives. They shouldn't just have to wait five years to vote in a different government, they should have a say on a week to week and month to month basis about laws that affect them. They should have the opportunity to recall their representatives if they don't do what they said. I think we need economic democracy. We have to some democratic control, in fact we need democratic control over the wealth and the resources in our country and that means democracy in industry as well as just geographically by constituency. I think people like the pensioners and the unemployed, all these different sectors need to have their own representation. So I think we are really talking about a revolution here in the way democracy is done. I think we need a revolution to bring that about. We need to see the sort of popular uprising as we are seeing in Egypt, Greece, and Spain and indeed for those things to go further, to bring about a root and branch change in the way democracy is done because it is absolutely clear that the current system of democracy is dysfunctional, and needs to be replaced with something that truly represents the aspirations and interests of ordinary people.

Christine Buchholz

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IMR: How did you become MP?

Christine Buchholz: I was elected in the general election of September 2009.

DIE LINKE (The Left Party) had a massive upturn at this time. Already in 2005, the list of the post-communist party Linkspartei.PDS won 54 seats in parliament including 12 MPs of Electoral Alternative Labour and Social Justice (WASG), a left break away from social democracy. Until 2009, there was no big wave of class struggle, but the mood for change was still there. Then - three weeks before the election - the worst war-crime of the German army after WWII happened: the bombing of 140 civilians close to Kundus, in Afghanistan. DIE LINKE increased its vote from 8,7 to 11,9 percent because it was the only party in the Bundestag that was opposed to sending troops to Afghanistan right from the start. I became one of 76 Left MPs in the new Bundestag.

IMR: What were the main political activities and experiences that led to your election?

CB:I was an activist in different movements: the anti-war movement, the anti-capitalist mobilizations like Genoa, Heiligendamm, the European Social Forums and movements against racism and fascism. And I was part of the regroupment of the German left in the WASG and finally DIE LINKE where I fought - and still fight - for an orientation on class struggle and activity around movements at grassroots level.The reputation I got from these activities led to my election on the list of DIE LINKE in the state of Hesse.

IMR: You are an MP for DIE LINKE. Could you tell us something about this party, its history, nature policies etc.?

CB: DIE LINKE was founded 2007 out of the - mainly west German - Electoral Alternative Labour and Social Justice (WASG) and the post-communist Linkspartei.PDS based in East Germany. The WASG was initiated in 2004 by a group of left wing trade unionists that had been expelled from the SPD for their criticism of the neoliberal politics of the red-green government under Gerhard Schröder and the cuts package 'Agenda 2010'. It represented a shift to the left in the German labour movement and unified a layer of left wing trade unionists and activists from social movements and smaller left wing organisations.

The PDS was the successor of the Stalinist SED, the ruling party of the GDR. It had gone through a process of integrating activists of radical left traditions in western Germany and - at the same time - approached government in several states in eastern Germany. The birth of the new left was backed by massive movements against Agenda 2010, the attacks against the unemployed with the labour market reform Hartz IV and also by the resistance against wars, starting from 1999 against the bombing of Yugoslavia to the movements against the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

We have both traditions in DIE LINKE: a tradition of politics from above centred on parliamentarism and a bureaucratic approach, but also an activist, class-orientated tradition. Even if the 'socialism from above' approach is stronger in the east, sometimes west German groups that are deeply involved in communal politics are very much dominated by parliamentary logic as well. In the city state of Berlin, DIE LINKE was part of government till 2011 - a complete disaster. But now, the same party was successful in the mobilization around a referendum that could pave the way for the re-communalization of the energy supply. The performance of the party has depended on the level of branch based activities.

To sum it up. DIE LINKE had been a

massive step forward in German left wing politics, it has been an important factor in mobilizations against the Nazis in Dresden and in the anti-troika-Blockupy Protests in Frankfurt, but it lacks a coherent strategy on how to intervene in class struggle and become a motor inside the unions to raise the level of resistance in the work places. There is massive discontent in the German working class, but a low level of resistance. There are examples where workers do resist but there is no generalized fight back.

IMR: What do you see as your main priorities as an MP?

CB:My main priority is to support class struggle and movements in Germany and strengthen the left wing of DIE LINKE. But this is not easy. The logic of parliamentarism is swallowing much of the energy of all MPs, including the left-wingers in the party. Of course you have to do your job properly. I think it is important to prioritize. To give an example: when I was on the investigation committee for the Kundus Bombing I organized a journey together with a comrade to Afghanistan to meet with the victims of the bombing. When we had an internal debate if we should vote against a UN peacekeeping Mission in Sudan or if we should abstain, I travelled to Sudan to strengthen the argument of those who were opposing any military intervention. But I never participated in official parliamentary delegations or similar journeys that are disconnected to the debates and activities of the movements and the left.

IMR: How do you combine parliamentary and extra parliamentary activity?

CB:This is a question of political coherence, combining both types of activities. I voted - like the other DIE LINKE MPs- in parliament against the fiscal treaty and the bailout for the European banks. But the main effort was to mobilize actively against the politics of the troika, Merkel and the ECB for a nation wide protest in Frankfurt. When the police banned the protest from the city in 2012 I made a speech in the Bundestag denouncing it. When the police attacked a part of the 'Blockupy' demo in 2013, I and other MPs of DIE LINKE used the parliament to confront the government over the incident. With other parliamentarians I used my position to participate in sit-ins to block the Nazis in Dresden. For some MPs it meant their parliamentary immunity was lifted. The point is to serve the extra-parliamentary activities through your position as an MP - not the other way round.

IMR: How does the way you do your job differ from the way other DIE LINKE MPs operate?

CB: It is the political aim that shapes your strategy, and your strategy influences your daily decisions. Of course, the day-to-day work of a comrade who wants to change politics mainly through parliamentary channels will differ from the approach of someone with a revolutionary strategy. But it is not as easy as it sounds. I do not run around with a megaphone all the time while the other MPs just sit in the parliamentary committees. I think, first of all as a revolutionary you have take positions on a whole range of questions and avoid being seduced into a type of 'expert mongering'. Secondly, while always searching for unity in action you have to be prepared to take minority positions inside the party if necessary. For example, I participated very much in discussions around the right for Jews and Muslims to practice religious circumcision when there was a harsh debate

in German public life to abolish it. Then there have to be conscious decisions on priorities. As a revolutionary, I give priority to all kind of mobilizations - not only concerning anti-war politics which I do cover as DIE LINKE's spokes person on peace matters - but also, for example, around the anti-capitalist protests. Most importantly, as a revolutionary I can't just work on my own. I am connected to many in the party and the movement and I am part of a network of other revolutionaries inside DIE LINKE that keeps you grounded and serves as a frame of collective discussion. If you don't discuss the political situation and the decisions to be taken collectively you'll end up thinking of yourself as being hard left while in reality that doesn't mean too much at all.

IMR: What criticism do you have of the Bundestag as an institution?

CB: The Bundestag is part of the state machine that is wholly dominated by the capitalist class. Many people think, as an MP you have some kind of power. This is absolutely not the case. So for example, in theory the Bundestag monitors the activities of the secret services. But the latest scandal around the collusion of the German BND and the American NSA just revealed the opposite. Neither I nor any other MP, including MPs of the government parties, can really do anything about it. Indeed, as an MP of the Left Party it is you that is being monitored by the secret service not the other way round.

This example just illustrates the basic problem: while in theory they talk about checks and balances, about the separation of powers, it is the executive that dominates the legislature. And the executive, i.e. the army, the police, the state bureaucracy, the governmental machine etc., is dominated by class interests that are foreign to those of the majority. This leads to a situation where parties are trying to catch votes every four years promising all kind of things and then just do whatever they think is in the 'national interest', i.e. the interest of capital. So while a majority of the population is consistently against participating in the Afghan war, this has never been reflected inside parliament. The government parties just keep on voting year after year to continue with this bloody mess with the support of the so called opposition of the SPD and the Greens. Indeed, it was the latter that started it all while being in government twelve years ago.

But that doesn't mean you should abstain from elections or parliament. Since the majority of people believe in parliamentary elections you have to relate to them. As an MP you have much more visibility and a much louder voice than otherwise. It would be foolish to abstain and let these opportunities pass. This is all the more important when you are part of a new left party that effectively tries to change the balances of forces on the ground.

IMR: What is your vision of real democracy?

CB: Real democracy would mean that the working class would be in control of society. That sort of democracy would be based around the place where we work since it is in the workplace that society's wealth is produced and peoples' needs are met. This requires a break with the logic of capitalism: as long as production serves profit making and not the needs of the producers it is impossible to have real democracy. Secondly, real democracy would be about controlling your own life. It would require the active participation of individuals since freedom can't be handed down.

So this starts at the workplace but is not restricted to it. Why can't just the tenants of a tower bloc come together and think about collective improvements of where they live? This would presume a common interest in the house that you are in, and of course enough time just to do it. Today, we are estranged from each other, we have to do what a boss or a land lord says, we are forced to earn a living somehow and are under constant stress. Today you are being constantly ruled. In a free society you would rule yourself together with others. In a real democracy there will be collective decision making in every tower bloc, every city district, every school and every hospital and of course on a national and international level.