

Scottish Socialist Party fosters nationalist divisions

Chris Marsden
24 October 1998

At the beginning of September, the Scottish Socialist Alliance agreed to transform itself into the Scottish Socialist Party. The initiative for this decision comes from Scottish Militant Labour, which leads the Scottish Socialist Alliance--an umbrella organisation of middle class radicals, ex-Labourites and Stalinists

The Scottish Socialist Party has been proclaimed despite the opposition of Scottish Militant Labour's English comrades in the Socialist Party, and the Committee for a Workers International, which represents their co-thinkers around the world. It will not be affiliated to the Committee for a Workers International, but will encompass a variety of different political trends on the left, united only by their espousal of Scottish separatism and a vague commitment to reformist policies. Scottish Militant Labour has promised to work as a separate faction within the new party.

In a series of internal documents, Scottish Militant Labour disparaged their international organisation and justified a split in opportunist and chauvinist terms. Affiliation to the Committee for a Workers International was counterproductive because it 'does not possess the authority in Scotland that SML possesses; nor does the Socialist Party. For a layer of activists who work closely with SML there remains a residue of suspicion of London-based political leaders' (*Members Bulletin*, April 1998, point 132), and 'insisting on affiliation to the CWI as a precondition for the formation of a new party is in effect to erect a brick wall between SML and all other forces in order to satisfy formal protocol' (Point 138).

The 'other forces' cited by Scottish Militant Labour are not those small groups that presently gravitate around the Scottish Socialist Alliance. The organisation has other, bigger fish in mind. The Scottish Socialist Party is conceived as a means of capitalising electorally on the growing discontent with the Labour government. This is particularly acute in Scotland, where Labour maintained control of the vast bulk of Scottish seats throughout 18 years of Conservative rule and, instead of opposing the attacks of central government, implemented them.

Scottish Militant Labour emerged out of the ranks of the old Militant tendency that operated on an all-Britain basis. It first came to prominence through the popular support it won for a campaign against the Poll Tax in the late 1980s. Since then it stood candidates in various elections who have polled over 10 percent of the vote. Their most notable success was the election of its leader Tommy Sheridan as a Glasgow city councillor, while imprisoned for his actions in opposing the Poll Tax.

But the main beneficiary of the swing against Labour has been the Scottish National Party. In 17 council elections in Scotland, the Labour vote has fallen from 45 percent to 24 percent while the Scottish National Party vote has increased from 25 percent to 32 percent. Throughout the 1980s this bourgeois formation sought to portray itself as the defender of the type of reformist policies abandoned by the Labour Party. They channelled workers' anger behind a separatist agenda by claiming that all that was preventing social reforms was rule from London by parties who were indifferent to the fate of Scotland. A recent survey for the *Glasgow Herald* newspaper estimated that 73 percent of 18 to 24 year-olds now

support Scottish independence.

Scottish Militant Labour is seeking to rise to prominence on this wave of political disorientation. Rather than arguing for a united struggle by workers throughout Britain against big business and its Labour government, on the basis of a socialist programme, they declare, 'the predominant character of this movement of public opinion in favour of Scottish independence is progressive.' It is, they add, made up of 'those who are generally more socialist-leaning, including a big majority of young people and low paid workers.' Those opposed to independence, they claim, include 'the most right-wing, conservative sections of the population, in particular the Scottish ruling class of landowners, financiers and big business interests' (*Scottish Socialist Voice*, June 1997).

Their main charge against the Scottish National Party is that it cannot carry out a genuine struggle for independence because it is in thrall to the major corporations.

According to Scottish Militant Labour's main theoretician Alan McCoombes, the working class must champion its own brand of nationalism. He has developed a mythical history of a Scottish people fighting for its own nation from 'time immemorial' against a treacherous Scottish ruling class (*Scottish Socialist Voice*, June 1997).

'The Scottish Socialist Party,' they write, 'will stand as the only party in Scotland prepared to challenge the chaotic rule of multi-national capitalism.' An independent Scotland, they say, will enable the implementation of social reforms, by using the new state to control the globally organised corporations and lead to the eventual creation of a Socialist Scotland. 'The demand for independence reflects a desire by ordinary people for greater democracy and control over decision making in the face of global capitalism ... by breaking free of the British state, it would be easier for Scotland to evolve towards a more equal society.'

Scottish Militant Labour insisted the new party be launched in time to stand candidates in elections to the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh in 1999. They baldly declare that the election of even one or two Scottish Socialist Party MPs would, 'In one fell swoop ... stimulate the start of an unstoppable revival of socialism in Scotland' (*SML Members Bulletin*, March 1998).

Such a fantastic claim epitomises the gulf separating Scottish Militant Labour's politics from the principled considerations that dictate the construction of a socialist party in the working class. Marxists conceive the building of such a party as the product of a consistent and protracted struggle to raise the consciousness of working people to establish their political and organisational independence from the bourgeoisie and its representatives. Scottish Militant Labour speak a different language, that of the crudest short-term expediency. For them, all that is necessary is to pragmatically adapt to the prevailing level of political backwardness in order to win a position of power and influence within the apparatus of the state.

One of the new party's first recruits is Hugh Kerr, a member of the European Parliament who recently broke from the Labour Party. It is he

who has provided the best description of the political role for which the Scottish Socialist Party is intended--as a left prop for the Labour government.

Drawing attention to the decline in Labour's membership, he said, 'We have to create a niche on the left for people in Labour who are fed up with New Labour.... The election to the Scottish Parliament will crown [Scottish National Party leader] Alex Salmond. We have to crown 'Crown Prince' [Tommy] Sheridan in the Scottish Parliament--to drive that parliament to the left.

'We might hold the balance of power,' Kerr went on. This would be used to shore up the Labour Party in return for a few concessions. Labour's Scottish Secretary Donald Dewar 'should be nice to us. New Labour will not have an overall majority and may need the SSP to win a majority.'

Internationalism and socialism

For Marxists, socialism is the product of the independent political action of the working class. This necessitates workers understanding that their social and political interests cannot be reconciled with those of the bourgeoisie. Ever since the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848, internationalism has been the cornerstone of the struggle for socialism. Nationalism is the ideology of the bourgeoisie, because its rule developed through and led to the consolidation of the nation state. Socialism, by its very nature, can only be a world system realised through the unification of workers across all borders. Its aim is to end the division of the global economy into antagonistic nations by liberating production from the fetters of private ownership, placing it at the service of the world's people. This requires the development of a consistent internationalist outlook amongst workers.

Scottish Militant Labour are indifferent to the central task of overcoming the political influence of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois forces over the working class. Their new party is founded on the claim that encouraging nationalism will provide a new basis for socialism. But the perspective of Scottish separatism--a struggle 'against Britain' and 'for Scotland'--cannot demarcate the specific interests of the working class from the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois layers who champion independence. It ties the working class politically to the bourgeoisie, while pitting Scottish workers against those in other countries.

The extraordinary integration of the world economy that has taken place in the past two or three decades--a process widely known as globalisation--is the most graphic confirmation of the necessity for workers to base their own struggles on an internationalist perspective. In contrast, Scottish Militant Labour portray socialism as the product of a gradual process of reforms implemented through the new Scottish Parliament. 'The parliament is likely to have some important powers--including for example the power to restore free education, to cancel the housing debt and to introduce a range of progressive measures which would signify a direct challenge to the New Labour government in Westminster.'

Aside from being confined to Scotland, this is fundamentally no different from the reformist perspective developed at the turn of the century by the British Fabians and once championed by the Labour Party and similar parties throughout the world. Scottish Militant Labour never examines the reasons for the failure of these organisations and their transformation into open agents of global capitalism. Nor do they seek to account for the collapse of the Soviet Union, the most graphic example of the tragic consequences of a repudiation of socialist internationalism, embodied in the Stalinist perspective of 'socialism in one country'. Instead, they simply identify the degeneration of the old organisations with a few treacherous leaders, too cowardly to challenge the global corporations.

Neither does Scottish Militant Labour address the bitter experience made by workers with separatist movements around the world, such as in

the former Yugoslavia. The class character of the demand for separatism cannot be established simply by identifying the number of workers who support it. The question that must be posed is, whose interests are served by Scottish nationalism?

Contrary to Scottish Militant Labour's claims, there is significant support for independence amongst businessmen, such as media tycoon Rupert Murdoch and transport multimillionaires Brian Souter and Anne Gloag. Today, the world economy predominates over all national economies. Massive transnational corporations transfer production to wherever they can achieve a higher rate of return on their capital. To attract inward investment and remain competitive in the world market, every country, and even competing regions within countries, is engaged in a frantic scramble to demolish welfare provisions and slash the living standards of working people. The movement for Scottish independence is rooted in these developments.

The Scottish National Party explicitly declares that the purpose of Scottish independence is to create a cheap labour platform that can compete with the rest of the UK and Ireland for investment from companies seeking access to the European market. The Blair Labour government, though opposed to outright separation, pushed through devolution for Scotland, Wales, London and the English regions in order to divide the working class and encourage regional competition for investment as a means of slashing public spending. Broad sections of the Scottish Labour Party and trade union apparatus favour outright separatism because they are anxious to benefit from their own relations with the global corporations.

The purpose of the Scottish parliament, hailed as a new democratic forum by Scottish Militant Labour, is to provide a regional apparatus more directly responsive to corporate needs. It will also be better equipped to politically control social discontent in the working class. According to the *Scotsman* newspaper, the new parliament will be based on a 'new consensual style of politics', framed around a common national interest. Scottish Militant Labour's attempt to dress up nationalism in socialist attire provides a valuable service to the ruling class in perpetrating this political fraud. At no time do they explain that the working class must develop its own forms of organisation, independent from and opposed to the state apparatus of the ruling class.

A product of opportunist politics

The formation of the Scottish Socialist Party was prepared by the opportunist politics of the Socialist Party and the Committee for a Workers International. Their opposition to its establishment is without principled content. The Socialist Party has made no public statement whatsoever. In an internal *Members Bulletin*, 'In defence of the revolutionary party', however, the party's executive stressed that it had 'consistently adopted a sensitive attitude to the national question in Scotland'. The party abandoned its long-held opposition to devolution and argued for it, 'against many on the left (including some within our own ranks)'. They also supported the establishment of Scottish Militant Labour as a separate organisation, and 'we both agree that developments now pose the need for us to raise the demand for an independent, socialist Scotland'.

Socialist Party leader Peter Taaffe is reduced to arguing against the effective liquidation of Scottish Militant Labour solely from the standpoint of organisational integrity and finance. 'At all times the consciousness of a separate revolutionary organisation or party must be engendered in the minds of our members by the leadership,' he writes. 'Where we work in broad formations it is essential we meet separately and regularly, preferably on a weekly basis, to discuss the way forward, to collect dues' (*Members Bulletin*, April 1998).

The Militant group first achieved political prominence in the 1980s when operating as a faction in the Labour Party, but it was established in

the early 1950s. Militant's founder, Ted Grant, was part of a tendency in the Fourth International that rejected Trotsky's central conceptions in the period following the Second World War.

Adapting to the post-war stabilisation of capitalism, Grant and his co-thinkers rejected a perspective based on the working class as the agent of social change. They considered that the taking of power by the Stalinists in Eastern Europe, and then in China, showed that 'workers' states' could be established without a conscious revolutionary movement of the working class. The Stalinist and reformist bureaucracies would play this role. The welfare reforms and nationalisations by the Labour government in Britain were hailed as proof that such parties could also become the vehicle for realising socialism. Insofar as Marxists had any role to play, it was to pressure the Stalinist and reformist bureaucracies to the left.

Militant worked within the Labour Party for over 40 years, calling on it to implement a left-reformist programme including widespread nationalisations of key industries. As Labour lurched to the right under the leadership of Neil Kinnock, the group was subjected to a witch-hunt and expulsions. Labour's shift to the right, epitomised by the ascent of Tony Blair and the party's subsequent renunciation of its constitutional commitment to social ownership of industry, convinced a majority of Militant supporters to abandon work in the party. This provoked a split with Ted Grant and the assumption of leadership by Peter Taaffe.

In 1995 Taaffe wrote a statement declaring his support for the creation of a new 'mass socialist party in Britain'. This did not signify a shift in the group's orientation to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. According to Taaffe, the formation of a new socialist party would arise through a realignment of left elements within the Labour Party, the various fragments of the old Stalinist Communist Party and the smaller left groups like Militant. He cited as proof the creation of the now almost defunct Socialist Labour Party by British miners union leader Arthur Scargill and Rifundazione Comunista in Italy, which emerged out of a split in the Italian Communist Party. Such parties would, he said, be based on a reformist programme, with Marxists operating as a tendency within them much as Militant had operated within the old Labour Party.

The Taaffe group set up Socialist Alliances throughout Britain as a vehicle for this regroupment strategy. Though the project failed and was subsequently abandoned in England, it finds its most finished expression in the formation of the Scottish Socialist Party. Scottish Militant Labour now declare, 'the ideological battle grounds which divide the left have become blurred,' to the point where everyone can unite in a common organisation.

There are already indications that the Socialist Party's Welsh membership intends to follow the same road as the Scottish organisation. Even in England, the Liverpool area has called for greater autonomy from the centre. Internationally, the section in Pakistan supports Scottish Militant Labour's line, while their group in Australia is seeking to fuse with the larger radical group, the Democratic Socialist Party. The formation of the Scottish Socialist Party is, therefore, only the most advanced expression of a break-up of the Committee for a Workers International along national lines.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact