

Ex-Stalinist Jimmy Reid supports Scottish Socialist Party

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On November 4, in his regular column in the *Glasgow Herald* newspaper, Jimmy Reid, one-time leader of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and the 1971 Upper Clyde Shipbuilders dispute, wrote that he would vote for the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) in preference to the Labour Party in next May's elections to the new Scottish Parliament. The SSP was recently formed by the Scottish Militant Labour group as a reformist alliance of middle class radicals, Stalinists and Scottish nationalists.

Several days after Reid's column, Hugh Kerr of the SSP replied in the *Herald*'s letters page, saying he welcomed Reid's decision and encouraging him to join the SSP's electoral list.

Any organisation genuinely adhering to socialist principles would be thrown into crisis by Reid's endorsement. To welcome it is a clear indication that the SSP is emerging as an instrument of Scottish-based capital to divide the working class, for such has been Reid's own political role.

Reid joined the CP in 1948 at the age of 16, where he was educated not in socialism, but in nationalism. In his biography, *Reflections of a Clyde Built Man*, he describes how he first 'heard of our Scottish history and nation-hood in the Communist Party.'

Beginning in the 1930s, as part of the turn by the Stalinist parties world-wide to popular front alliances with sections of the capitalists, the CP in Scotland abandoned its previous policy and began to champion home rule for Scotland. This policy was included in the parliamentary 'British Road to Socialism', published under Stalin's supervision in 1951.

In 1952 Reid was elected as the national chair of the Young Communists. The Stalinists' suppression of workers' uprisings in East Germany, Poland and Hungary appear to have caused him little disturbance. The same can be said of Khrushchev's secret speech, which acknowledged some of the crimes of Stalin.

By 1959 Reid was on the national executive and political committee of the CPGB, along with Harry Pollitt and R. Palme Dutt. After a period in London, Reid returned to Glasgow in 1964 and was elected secretary of the Communist Party in Scotland.

The years 1968-75 were marked by a world-wide revolutionary upsurge of the working class, from the May-June 1968 movement in France and the Tet Offensive against America's invasion of Vietnam to the 1974 strike wave in Britain which brought down the Heath government. World capitalism survived this crisis largely due to the role of the Stalinist 'Communist' parties, which subordinated the working class to a pro-capitalist perspective.

Sensing that a new upsurge was developing in Britain, the CP

brought forward its Scottish policy to prevent the development of a unified movement of British workers against the failure of successive Labour and Tory governments to deliver sustained social improvements. Reid was one of the CP's leading policy architects on Scotland.

In 1969 he told the CPGB's 30th Congress: 'We reiterate our demand that the national aspirations of the Scottish and Welsh people for self-government must be met. This is not a socialist but a democratic demand. Our party in Britain has not done enough to popularise and make known its position on the national question in these isles. This must be rectified immediately, and particularly we should fight to win the Labour movement to take a correct stand on this issue.'

What this meant for the working class was exposed in the struggle that emerged in 1971 over the Tory government's decision to close Upper Clyde Shipbuilders, where Reid was leader of the shop stewards. Over 8,500 jobs were immediately threatened, along with 20,000 in supporting industries. The UCS closure threat coincided with strike votes at Ford, British Leyland and British Steel, and a 47 percent pay claim by the miners' union. In addition, preparations were being made for mass demonstrations against the Tory's Industrial Relations Act and rising unemployment.

News of the UCS closure intensified the widespread anger against the government. UCS workers and a large swathe of workers across Central Scotland prepared to challenge the government.

After the closure announcement, mass meetings were held in many areas and factories. The West of Scotland was twice brought to a standstill by general strikes and 80,000-strong demonstrations in Glasgow. Shipyard workers voted to occupy the threatened yards.

Rather than unify Clydeside workers with the many other movements emerging across Britain, the CP leadership in the four UCS yards called for a 'work-in'. Presented as a radical new tactic for the working class, and cloaked in militant-sounding rhetoric, this innovation meant quite simply that the shipyard workers would work for nothing while the yards were under their control. Meanwhile the stewards and union officials lobbied the government and private capitalists to find a new owner for the yards.

Reid presented this in explicitly Scottish terms, saying a Scottish buyer would be preferable. He promoted a plan to develop the Clyde area as an industrial development site in alliance with

Glasgow City Council. In line with this, the Stalinists invited William Wolfe of the Scottish National Party (SNP), who was a wealthy factory owner, onto the platform of a UCS workers' rally.

So successful was the UCS policy in dividing the working class that the UCS framework became official policy. The Scottish TUC held a 'Peoples Assembly' in 1972 attended by business, the church and the trade unions.

Every subsequent turn of the political and economic situation has seen the same forces advance the same solutions. In the 70s and 80s, which witnessed the destruction of Scotland's traditional industrial base, every closure was fought on the same strategy as UCS.

Campaigns to find new buyers, preferably Scottish, were employed to divide Scottish from English workers, while the social devastation resulting from the failure of these attempts was invariably blamed on 'Westminster rule'. The national confusion injected into the working class resulted, as early as 1973, in the election of an SNP member for the Govan constituency.

While more than a quarter of the UCS workers were eventually sacked, and those remaining faced dramatic increases in productivity, Jimmy Reid was a made man. After several attempts to get elected to Parliament for the Communist Party, he left the CP in 1976 and shortly after rejoined the Labour Party.

Reid began to work more closely with the capitalists whose interests he had served so well in the UCS dispute. He began a career as a political columnist with the *Glasgow Herald*, one of Scotland's two business newspapers, a relationship that continues to the present day.

In his last two decades as political pundit and TV commentator, Reid has been elevated to something of a Scottish national icon. He has also been valued as a political weathervane, sensing shifts in the working class and the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. He has drifted further to the right whilst developing his Scottish nationalism.

In the early 1980s he denounced groups such as the Militant Tendency in the Labour Party, and supported the Labour leadership's witch-hunting attacks against them. In 1981 he described the Social Democratic Party, a right-wing split-off from Labour, as 'responding to a fundamental need'. Three years later he warned the Labour leadership to avoid supporting the miners strike. By 1989 he was writing a column in the Murdoch-owned tabloid the *Sun*.

In 1994, at the launch of an abortive political magazine publishing project, Reid informed the *Financial Times*, 'By any definition ever penned, Scotland is a nation. It has a settled territory, a jurisprudence, and economy.' On the destruction of living standards, Reid opined, 'It's got a genocidal dimension. It wasn't the bullets of the settlers that killed the Red Indians; it was when they destroyed their economy. When I see young people leaving Scotland, I see an almost genocidal process.'

He wrote, 'I am an internationalist and a nationalist. I believe in good loving relations between those who have a good sense of their own national identity.... If you can't love Scotland you can't love the world.' He described the Tory government as 'an alien political culture' being imposed on Scots.

While presenting the social crisis afflicting workers across

Britain as a national grievance, Reid has emerged as a rabid anticommunist who never misses an opportunity to attack Lenin and the Bolshevik party. Two weeks before Reid announced he would vote for the SSP, he penned an article which echoed the views he had broadcast some years previously in a national TV programme entitled 'Moscow Gold'. According to Reid, the Russian Revolution had little to do with Marxism. Lenin and the Bolsheviks had more in common with nineteenth century terrorists than Marx, and his concept of a party was 'thoroughly elitist'. Like many other Stalinists turned anticommunist, he declared that Stalinism flowed from Lenin's idea of a party.

When, therefore, on November 4 Reid announced that 'if the choice were between New Labour and the SSP, I would vote for the latter,' he brought a long political experience to bear. He went on to outline a programme for a political party with which the reformist and nationalist SSP could have little disagreement.

Pointing to the growing hostility to the Blair government, Reid warned, 'many [Scots] will be disenfranchised unless from the Scottish Labour movement emerges a group that will give such people the possibility of voting Real Labour/Social Democrat/Democratic Socialist.... A new political grouping that gave expression to those sentiments and beliefs could poll well in the election and win seats.'

This was not yet the Scottish Socialist Party, because Reid remained concerned that 'in the background lurks a Trotskyist cell seeking to pull the strings'. Reid would no doubt recall the witch-hunt he supported against the SSP's forerunner, the Militant Tendency.

Hugh Kerr, a Member of the European Parliament who recently split with the Labour Party, wrote to the *Herald* to assuage these fears. Kerr explained that he had opposed the Militant when they were in the Labour Party, although he opposed their expulsion, but he had joined the SSP 'because it is a much broader group than Scottish Militant Labour. In the organisation and the leadership are former members of the Labour Party, the Communist Party, the Socialist Movement, and Scottish National Party, and Green Party and no party at all.'

Whatever the outcome of the nascent political romance between Reid and the SSP, these exchanges recall the old adage: 'By your friends you shall be known.'

See Also:

Scottish Socialist Party fosters nationalist divisions
[24 October 1998]



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