Scottish Socialist Party sows national divisions

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The May 6 elections to the Scottish parliament are being used as a launching pad for the newly formed Scottish Socialist Party (SSP). It is calling for Scottish independence as the basis for the implementation of a program of social reform. Some recent opinion polls suggest that the SSP might win as many as 10 out of 129 seats in the parliament and it is highly likely that their most prominent figure, Glasgow City Councillor Tommy Sheridan, will be elected. The SSP have formed an electoral pact with the Socialist Workers Party to stand candidates in every Scottish electoral seat.

The creation of a Scottish parliament and a Welsh Assembly follows years of agitation by the Labour Party, the Scottish and Welsh nationalists, and the trade unions while Britain was under Conservative rule, claiming that social conditions would improve with independence. As a result there is in Scotland a widely held view amongst sections of workers that some degree of Home Rule, even independence, is necessary for "things to get better."

The SSP is seeking to capitalise on this sentiment and, more recently, the electoral misfortunes of the Scottish National Party (SNP). Until a few months ago, the SNP was running neck and neck with Labour in the opinion polls, and defeating them in parliamentary and local government elections. Its votes were highest in working class areas where Labour, as the local ruling party, was mired in scandal, sacking workers or both.

Faced with the possibility of coming to power on a wave of enthusiasm for the programme of Scottish-based social reform it nominally championed, the SNP's business supporters insisted they turn rapidly to the right. Promises of reform were replaced by pledges to cut corporation tax and compete with the "Celtic tiger" economy of southern Ireland. Where previously the SNP would have thumped rhetorical tubs on the ills of "English" rule, they now presented themselves as the party of "Enterprise, Compassion, and Democracy."

Despite this, alarm in ruling circles developed over the dangers inherent in the break-up of Britain, the possibility of taxes rising and the Blair government suffering a bloody nose at the polls when it was representing their interests so well. Over the last months, repeated attacks on the SNP and independence--*Scotland on Sunday*, for example, chose last week to announce that independence would cost around £9.6 billion over existing state spending--have borne fruit. It is expected to poll less than half Labour's vote.

It is in this context that the political role being played by the Scottish Socialist Party must be understood. It is seeking to occupy the terrain of "left nationalism" so recently vacated by the SNP and legitimise nationalism amongst workers as a means of securing an audience for itself.

The SSP was formed under the initiative of Scottish Militant Labour (SML)--alongside a group of ex-Stalinists, radicals and nationalists--specifically for this purpose. The SML recognised that disenchantment with the right-wing policies of the Labour Party amongst workers had initially benefited the SNP and decided to mount a challenge on its nationalist territory.

To form the SSP, the SML effectively severed links with its English collaborators--the Socialist Party led by Peter Taffee, formerly known as the Militant Tendency and the main party of the Committee for a Workers International. The SML's liquidation into the SSP was only the clearest example of the world-wide tendency of the groups operating under the banner of the Committee for a Workers International to fragment along national and regional lines. [1]

The SSP's election manifesto, "A Socialist Vision for a New Scotland", adopts a wholly national framework for the group's politics. "Our starting point is a rejection of the doom and gloom merchants who tell us that Scotland is too poor to stand on its own two feet," it declares. "The fact is, Scotland is an immensely wealthy country with land, water, oil, gas and electricity in abundance. And on top of that, Scotland's Capital [sic] is the third financial centre in Europe, with the city's banks and insurance companies controlling £150 billion of funds--more than ten times the entire budget for the Scottish Parliament."

They go on to regale against absentee landlords, American, English (and Scottish) multinationals. The SSP propose that the new parliament can become an instrument to channel this globally acquired wealth into the pockets of the Scottish population. They never bother to address the fact that the revenues held in Scotland have been accrued through the imperialist exploitation of the world's peoples, as this would belie their claim that Scotland is an oppressed nation. Secondly, they insist that for this to be fully implemented Scotland must be independent.

The limited reforms they go on to advocate contradict the grandiose schemes for Scotland's socialist future. They call, for example, for the reduction of public sector rents by just 25

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percent and student grants to return to their 1979 levels, a fairer system of local taxation and the like. More fundamentally, however, they never address the question of social inequality outside Scotland's borders, nor make the case for a united political and social offensive by Scottish workers with those in England and Wales, let alone those in Europe and the rest of the world.

The impact of this left-sounding nationalism is to build illusions in the Scottish parliament, further disorientate the working class and foment divisions between workers in different areas of the UK.

A revealing glimpse into the role the SSP envisages for itself is provided by their speculating over their future role as power-brokers within the new parliament at Holyrood. "Because of the new electoral system--and especially given the likelihood of a hung parliament--the Scottish Socialist Party could potentially hold the balance of power in Holyrood," they declare. "Within that parliament we will promote each of the policies that we have listed in this manifesto, and call on MPs from the other parties to support our initiatives."

They reassure their supporters, "Any bartering that we undertake will not be for ministerial positions, but for radical socialist measures to redress some of the injustices and inequalities in our society." But bartering will take place, nevertheless, and their own position and influence will undoubtedly be a serious consideration for Mr. Sheridan and his friends.

In a section entitled "The Parliament and its powers", the SSP demands that the Scottish parliament should have control over tax raising, welfare legislation, oil revenue and should have the power to set its own interest rates. It should also hold a referendum on independence in its first four-year term. "A group of Scottish Socialist MPs in Holyrood would be prepared to lead a mass crusade of defiance and extra-parliamentary action for the return of the billions stolen from Scotland by central government during the past twenty years," they state.

The unquantified claim that "billions" have been "stolen from Scotland" by Westminster over the past 20 years is false. All evidence suggests that state spending on Scotland is proportionally higher than the rest of the UK, despite tax revenue being lower. Immediately this argument was raised during the present election campaign, it became a focus for right-wing proponents of English nationalism to call for an end to Scottish subsidies.

The real issue in Scotland, as in the rest of the UK, is the plundering of the pockets of working people and their exploitation by big business. But the SSP rejects such a class approach in favour of anti-English rhetoric.

The extent of their nationalist turn is further highlighted by the SSP's reaction to the fate of their former comrades in the Socialist Party in England. Last November, the Labour government's newly-created UK Registrar of Political Parties banned a series of groups from participation in elections on the basis that their names were similar to other political groups. The Scottish Socialist Party, the Socialist Party in England and Wales, the Scottish Green Party, the Welsh Socialist Alliance, other regionally-based Socialist Alliances, and the Communist Party of Great Britain were all banned on this pretext.

Despite the fact that the proscriptions clearly focused on parties that were left opponents of Labour, specifically targeting former members of the Militant group, the SSP chose to fight the ban on nationalist grounds. SSP leader Tommy Sheridan called for a meeting with Labour's Scottish Secretary Donald Dewar and bizarrely threatened to take their case to the Commission for Racial Equality, in the process making an explicit assertion that the Scottish constitute a separate race. Sheridan, a Glasgow city councillor, told the *Scotsman* that it was "downright racist to deny Scottish-based parties the opportunity to stand."

The SSP's lawyer got signed affidavits from the SNP, the Scottish Liberal Democrats, Scottish Labour and the Scottish Tories calling for the ban to be lifted. After 10 days, and sympathetic coverage from both the *Glasgow Herald* and the *Scotsman,* the bans on the SSP and the Scottish Green Party were lifted. The SSP responded with an article in the *Scottish Socialist Voice*, which said that the registrar had shown "breathtaking disregard for the distinct political culture in Scotland and Wales" by refusing registration to the "Scottish Socialist Party, the Scottish Green Party and the Welsh Socialist Alliance." Only in the third column of the article do they mention that the ban on the Socialist Party in England remains. They have maintained a near silence on this ever since. Nothing positive can emerge from such inauspicious beginnings.

Notes

1.Scottish Socialist Party fosters nationalist divisions
[24 October 1998]

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