

Scottish Socialist Party upholds interests of Scottish business

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The Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) is a coalition of Stalinist and left groups that has its origins in the fragmentation of the former Militant Tendency, a radical group that operated within the British Labour Party and is now known in England as the Socialist Party.

Scottish Militant Labour, which now provides the central leadership of the SSP, was set up by Militant in an opportunist attempt to exploit confused nationalist sentiment amongst workers—but which then split from its international body, the Committee for a Workers International.

Over the 1980s and 1990s, social and political discontent was reflected to some extent in a growing vote for the separatist Scottish National Party (SNP) and a more general belief that Scotland's woes emanated from Westminster—whether the Conservatives or Labour were in power.

The SSP was formed in 1998 to stand for election in the devolved Scottish Parliament established by British Prime Minister Tony Blair. From the outset, the SSP functioned as a left apologist for devolution. It claimed that the Scottish Parliament could be a mechanism for implementing a reformist programme and that the struggle for such reforms would be bound up with a revolutionary mobilisation of the Scottish working class.

Scottish workers were painted as far more left-wing than their English counterparts. The SSP asserted this national struggle would help radicalise the English working class while weakening the power of the British state.

The party, which is still led by people who claim to be Trotskyist, has now made a more explicit repudiation of socialism and made clear that its central aim is to forge an alliance with the SNP and its business backers on the basis of an openly capitalist programme. To this end, in 2003 the SSP initiated an Independence Convention, seeking to emulate the previous Constitutional Convention which, during the 1990s, campaigned for devolution.

On November 30 of last year, the SSP, SNP and the pro-independence Scottish Greens held a public rally to launch their pro-independence alliance.

Alan McCombes, the SSP's chief ideologue, provides the rationale for the SSP's rightward shift in his recent pamphlet *Two Worlds Collide*, in which he insists that the essential basis of working class struggle must be the formation of a Scottish nation state.

He rejects out of hand any broad implications of the development of globalisation, under which all areas of the productive process are being integrated across national borders, claiming, "The changes that have taken place over the past 30 years are quantitative changes, changes of degree, rather than qualitative changes."

He writes: "Technology may have made it easier for money to be shifted around the world at the click of a mouse. But there is no computer programme ever devised that can instantaneously transfer a railway network, or an oilfield, or an electricity grid through cyberspace and across international borders. A bus company is nothing without roads and drivers. Even Scotland's renowned banking system is based upon the skills and expertise of tens of thousands of trained staff."

The opposite of McCombes' position is the case. Even workers in the most apparently immovable services have been integrated into the global economy. For example, public transport in Britain's major cities is run directly by private operators, components of giant and highly globalised transport corporations.

Even where infrastructure remains partly under the control of local authorities, wage levels are dictated by the state of the class struggle and prevailing wage rates over the economy as a whole, including private industry. These, in turn, are largely set by world conditions.

It is no accident that the SSP's closest allies in the trade union bureaucracy are in the rail workers union, the RMT, and the public service workers union, Unison. The SSP articulates the political standpoint and social concerns of a layer of former radicals, academics and trade union bureaucrats whose interests are bound up with their position within the state apparatus. They view devolution and independence as the means by which to carve out a comfortable niche for themselves in the upper reaches of an emerging Scottish state.

McCombes goes on to declare: "Our aim is not to replace capitalist globalisation with socialist globalisation...The last thing socialists want to create is a gigantic new mega-state run by a remote bureaucracy in Washington, Paris, Tokyo or London."

This is a clear repudiation of socialist internationalism, cynically utilising the legitimate mistrust of state power when wielded by the capitalist class in undemocratic institutions such as the European Union.

In the struggle against capital, the working class must establish its own state apparatus, one that of necessity transcends the existing state borders, works towards the elimination of all national divisions and develops the progressive potential of globalised production. That is why Marxists in Britain champion the perspective of a United Socialist States of Europe against the irrational division of states that have long been economically interconnected, as part of the struggle for a world socialist federation.

The perspective of international socialism is bound up with the eventual elimination of the state and its replacement by much higher and democratic forms based on the free association of equal citizens, not the building of new, smaller states that would, if anything, be less economically viable and, as experience has demonstrated, no less undemocratic.

McCombes' championing of independence also necessitates presenting Scotland as an oppressed nation, ruled over by a "kind of colonial governor general" until a devolved government was established in 1999.

But the Scottish bourgeoisie had undergone a bourgeois democratic revolution before agreeing to a voluntary unification with England with the Act of Union of 1707. It subsequently formed a component part of the British bourgeoisie and shared fully in the spoils of Empire and the exploitation of the working class—as manifest in its being the home to global companies such as HBOS, Royal Bank of Scotland, Standard Life, Scottish Power and Stagecoach.

There is, of course, oppression and bitter poverty in Scotland, but the

class exploitation of Scottish workers is historically bound up with the exploitation of the working class in Britain. Today, more than at any other time in history, British workers and those in all countries face a common struggle against rival groups of transnational corporations and financial institutions.

Scottish nationalism is not a left-wing or anti-imperialist movement, as the SSP maintains. It first emerged as a significant political force only in the late 1960s as a response amongst sections of academia, business and the middle class to their own social concerns. It was given a powerful impetus by the discovery of large reserves of oil in the North Sea in the early 1970s and developed under the banner of a demand that Scotland reap the rewards of its oil resources.

Led by Stalinist and Labour trade union officials, Scottish nationalism was promoted as a means to divert the increasingly militant working class down the political dead-end of blaming “London rule” for the collapse of the old heavy industries.

The Scottish Socialist Party even recycles the old Scottish Nationalist Party slogan: “It’s Scotland’s Oil”.

The desire to secure the exclusive right to resources such as North Sea oil bears direct comparison to overtly right-wing regional movements such as the Vlaams Blok (now Vlaams Belang) in Belgium and the Lega Nord in Italy. The decline of Belgium’s industrial base in the French-speaking area, Wallonie, has fuelled the demand for Flemish separatism, in the same way that, in Italy, the Lega Nord of Umberto Bossi calls for the wealthier, highly industrialised areas of northern Italy, or the so-called province of Padania, to secede from the Italian state and end its subsidies to the poorer south.

Whether they take a left- or right-wing form, all the various separatist movements within the old imperialist states represent a response by layers of the regional bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie to the crisis and breakdown of the old nation state economies resulting from globalisation. This involves an attempt to become direct agents acting on behalf of globally mobile capital in ensuring the exploitation of the natural resources and labour forces of “their” region, or to protect unviable national industry from global competition. In either case, separatism acts as a vehicle for national and cultural chauvinism and, by dividing the working class, makes the dismantling of previous social gains easier.

McCombes naturally prefers to identify Scottish nationalism with the type of “left” nationalism that is on the rise in Latin America, praising the Zapatista peasant movement of Mexico and the government of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela because they have “taken as their starting point the need to defeat global capitalism at home.”

The SSP takes the same attitude to Bolivian President-Elect Evo Morales and, in so doing, has provided a platform for the anarchist Kevin Williamson, who has used his weekly column in the SSP’s *Scottish Socialist Voice* to mount an explicit anti-communist attack on the Russian revolution of 1917.

In a recent column, Williamson eulogises the “axis of good” supposedly established by Morales with Chavez and Cuba’s Fidel Castro as the “epicentre of people’s resistance” to the “juggernaut of global oppression.” He denounces those who counterpose socialism to capitalism for drawing a “simplistic ideological line in the sand.”

Williamson states, “It is neither the job of Chavez nor Morales nor any political party to challenge the power of capital on behalf of the people. That task is the job of the people themselves.”

The purpose of this radical phrase-mongering becomes clear when he claims, “While old-style ‘revolutionaries’ fight for ‘workers control,’ libertarian socialists fight for ‘workers management’. There is a world of difference between the two and it is not about terminology. It is about approach. Namely: should socialists facilitate the people taking power into their own hands—or should socialists ‘do it on behalf of the people’... The ongoing Bolivarian revolution is much deeper and much more profound

than the events of Bolshevik-controlled Russia—which was in reality a counter-revolution and one which took place in the name of workers control against genuine workers management.”

What unites Williamson and McCombes is an attempt to dress up nationalism in socialist clothes, despite the fact that neither Chavez nor Morales has made any actual challenge to the rule of capital. Indeed, for Williamson, the Bolshevik revolution was “counter-revolutionary” precisely because it expropriated the capitalist class, while the Bolivarian revolution is “much deeper and more profound” even though it leaves the means of production in the hands of big business!

Williamson writes, “In Venezuela it is not a Chavez party ‘programme’ or ‘manifesto’ that guides the will of the people. The Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela is unfolding in defence of the radical Bolivarian Constitution which enshrines the rights of the people. This Venezuelan Constitution was drawn up by the people themselves and not by Chavez or by any leftist party.”

With its demands for an independent Scotland, the SSP subordinates the working class to a similar perspective to that advanced in Venezuela’s Bolivarian constitution—one that masks a defence of capitalism and the state with talk of “independence, liberty, sovereignty, immunity, territorial integrity and national self-determination” as the “unrenounceable rights of the Nation” and a commitment to “life, liberty, justice, equality, solidarity, democracy, social responsibility and, in general, the pre-eminence of human rights, ethics and political pluralism.”

McCombes elaborates on the links between his party and the SNP and makes clear the class forces with which the SSP are identifying.

“Pro-independence forces, including the Scottish Socialist Party, the SNP, the Scottish Greens and independents have already begun working together to help bring about the break-up of the British state,” he writes.

The SNP is a capitalist party, which has largely abandoned the reformist promises it previously used to win support in the working class. Its efforts are now devoted to presenting itself as the viable party of business to replace Labour and the Liberal Democrats as the leading party in the Scottish Parliament.

This has not stopped the SSP from seeking to work with the SNP and the similarly pro-independence Scottish Greens for the Independence Convention. They operate an effective division of labour. The SNP sets about winning business hearts and minds, while the Greens and the SSP concern themselves with promoting democratic and reformist illusions in an independent Scotland amongst working people.

In the *Scottish Socialist Voice* (No. 245), Williamson elaborates on the Independence Convention’s significance, translating his enthusiasm for Morales and Chavez into the language of Scottish politics. He sets the convention two tasks: First, to weld the three disparate pro-independence parties together and “turn passive support for Scottish independence into a tangible, visible, organised and unstoppable movement.”

Second, to get a majority in the Scottish parliament for an independence referendum by forming an electoral pact with the SNP and the Greens.

“Everything is subordinate to these two practical considerations,” he insists.

McCombes still asserts that the eventual goal of the SSP “is to transform Scotland into a democratic, socialist republic that will defy the multinationals and become a focal point for European and global resistance to capitalism and the free market.”

This is only a new variant of the “two-stage” theory advocated for decades by the Stalinist bureaucracy to legitimise its own efforts to subordinate the working class to the bourgeoisie. It asserted that a struggle for socialism in the economically backward countries with a late capitalist development could proceed only after a democratic revolution had brought the national bourgeoisie to power. The working class, the Stalinists insisted, had to accept as inevitable and support the establishment of such a bourgeois state, which supposedly would create

the conditions at some unspecified time in the future for the working class to fight to take power into its own hands and implement a socialist program.

The result of this perspective—rejecting the lessons of the Russian Revolution and advanced in opposition to Leon Trotsky’s program of Permanent Revolution—was a series of tragic and bloody defeats for the working class in the Twentieth Century, from China in the 1920s to Spain in the 1930s, to Indonesia, Sudan and a number of other “Third World” countries in the post-war period, as well as the abortion of the anti-imperialist struggles of the workers and peasants in the Asian subcontinent.

In the case of the SSP, the revival of the “two stage” theory provides an ideological justification for an alliance with the SNP and other bourgeois pro-independence forces.

McCombes says of those who oppose Scottish separatism: “There is a misguided interpretation of socialist internationalism which insists that bigger is always better. They defend the United Kingdom against those ‘narrow nationalists’ in Scotland and Wales who are fighting to opt out of the imperial Anglo-British state.”

No genuine socialist defends the UK and the British state, but the interests of the working class are not served by the creation of a series of new and competing nation states—England, Scotland and Wales. To replace the UK on a progressive basis means a unified movement of the working class to overthrow British imperialism.

In opposition to this, the SSP supports the creation of a cross-class “people’s” movement for an independent Scottish capitalist state, which can be formed only on the basis of rejecting a struggle for socialism and the independent interests of the working class and suppressing the class struggle.

A party seeking such an alliance with the rightward moving SNP cannot sustain a socialist veneer for long. One of the more remarkable aspects of McCombes’ pamphlet is the openness with which he makes common cause with sections of Scottish big business.

Much of the final chapter of his pamphlet is spent in defence of Scottish-owned businesses, bemoaning that there are only 12 “medium-sized” companies in Scotland. He complains that Scotland’s whisky distillers, petrochemical industries, the media and other profitable enterprises are largely owned by “foreigners”.



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