

The political lessons of the split in the Scottish Socialist Party-Part 2

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3 October 2006

This is the conclusion of a two-part analysis. The first part was posted Monday, October 2.

The Scottish Socialist Party's support for separatism hastened its integration into the official structures of bourgeois politics.

For Marxists, the building of a socialist party can be realised only through a struggle to raise the consciousness of working people. This means consistently demarcating the independent interests of the working class from those of the ruling elite and its political representatives.

Should Marxists win seats in parliament, they utilise them as a platform for conducting such a struggle—exposing and denouncing the various mechanisms through which the ruling class seeks to dupe and oppress working people. This requires, above all, warning workers and youth against any illusion in a parliamentary road to socialism and making clear to party members in Parliament that they are working in enemy territory.

The SSP was founded on an entirely different perspective.

According to its progenitors, the collapse of the Soviet Union had rendered the ideological differences between Labourism, Stalinism and Trotskyism irrelevant. A new workers' party would be realised through a realignment of left elements from within the Labour Party, the various fragments of the old Stalinist Communist Party and the smaller left groups like Militant.

However, the political divisions that exist in the workers movement are not accidental or episodic. Trotsky's founding of the Fourth International was based on the explicit recognition that both Stalinism and social democracy were dead from the standpoint of the socialist strivings of the working class.

Social democracy as an international tendency passed over to the explicit defence of the bourgeois order when affiliated parties lined up behind their own national bourgeoisie to support the imperialist slaughter of the First World War. It was this betrayal that caused the genuine revolutionists, led by Lenin and Trotsky, to break with the Second International. Through this uncompromising stance, Lenin's Bolsheviks prepared the ideological and political basis for the seizure of power in October 1917 and the founding of the Third Communist International in 1919.

The defeats and setbacks of revolutionary struggles internationally—in which social democracy played a key role—encouraged the growth of a bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, headed by Stalin. Its policy of socialism in a single country led to the transformation of the Communist parties internationally into instruments of counterrevolution, with catastrophic consequences in China, Germany and Spain, and for the Soviet masses themselves.

The ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union confirmed Trotsky's prognosis. He had insisted in the 1930s that there were only two possible outcomes: either the Soviet working class would overthrow the Stalinist bureaucracy, restore workers' democracy and return Soviet foreign policy to the internationalist and revolutionary line which had guided the USSR in its early days under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky—a political

revolution very much dependent on a revival of socialist internationalism within the international working class and successful socialist revolutions in one or another of the advanced capitalist countries—or the Stalinist degeneration of the workers state would lead to its collapse and the restoration of capitalism.

Having fatally undermined the workers state and betrayed and disoriented the international working class, in 1991 the bureaucracy liquidated the USSR and joined with the bourgeoisie in restoring capitalist social relations and throwing millions into abject misery.

As for social democracy, across Europe the old labour parties have shed their former reformist programmes and taken the lead in imposing the diktats of big business and the financial oligarchy, while leading a renewed turn to colonial plunder.

The SSP argued that all of this should be forgotten in order to start all over again—based on the same failed national reformist programme. Moreover, it claimed that workers should look to forces that had spent their entire lives in degenerated organisations that had repeatedly betrayed the interests of the working class.

In reality, the only thing that attracted the various Stalinist, reformist and nationalist forces to the SSP was the fact that no one would be held to account. Indifferent to the crucial task of overcoming the political influence of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois forces over workers and youth, the SSP uncritically adopted political positions and conceptions alien to socialism which serve to deaden the independent, revolutionary capacities of the working class.

Its guiding principle was tactical expediency—adapting to prevailing moods and illusions so as to win positions of power and influence within the apparatus of the state. The model it cited was the Rifondazione Comunista (RC) in Italy, which emerged out of a split in the Italian Communist Party and allowed various pseudo-Trotskyist groups to affiliate. The RC is now part of the government of Romano Prodi, which is presently seeking to impose spending cuts of €30 billion.

The SSP was feted by the powers that be in Scotland. Tommy Sheridan now likes to proclaim himself an opponent of the capitalist press. But with the exception of Murdoch's titles, the Scottish press has been overwhelmingly favourable to both him and the SSP.

As throughout the UK, Labour in Scotland is seen by broad sections of workers as a right-wing, pro-business party. Already deeply unpopular, Blair's support for the Iraq war left the Labour Party despised and discredited.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) benefited from this situation by combining their nationalist message with support for minimal reforms and an antiwar stance. Even so, this left many workers and youth in Scotland alienated from the political apparatus that had so recently been established.

The SSP could advance itself as more left wing than the SNP and more seriously committed to independence. Its populist nationalism—tied as it was to the constant boosting of the democratic credentials of the Scottish

parliament—channelled political protest in directions that did not threaten the interests of capital.

Rejecting the necessity for workers to base their struggles on an international perspective, the SSP claimed that socialism was the outcome of the gradual accumulation of social reforms implemented through the Scottish parliament. In this way it tied the working class politically to the bourgeoisie and the state apparatus.

The SSP's opposition to socialist internationalism served to convince a number of disenchanted Labourites, Scottish nationalists and trade unionists that it could be used to restore their own political credibility and even save their careers. The party's greatest success came in 2003 at the height of the antiwar movement. This saw the Scottish section of the Rail and Maritime Trade Union affiliate to the party, and the election of a further five SSP candidates into Holyrood (the Scottish parliament) alongside Sheridan.

Sheridan was built up as a major political figure and even given a regular column in the *Daily Record* to expound his views.

The party's boosting of Holyrood was not only determined by its reformist ideology. Members of the Scottish parliament (MSPs) are paid £40,000 per annum and can expect an additional £45,000-plus in expenses and office allowances.

The SSP's efforts to project itself as a major political force, including standing candidates in every Scottish seat and maintaining a large headquarters, made it increasingly dependent on these monies. A portion of the MSPs' wages helped finance the SSP's full-time staff, whilst some members were employed as parliamentary workers and its newspaper received funds to publish details of MSPs' surgeries.

In what remained a small party, and one lacking the requisite political ballast, the funds provided by Holyrood were vital to the continued functioning of the SSP and its ability to advance itself as a major player in Scottish political life.

Even before the latest crisis, the SSP was massively in debt. The loss of income from Sheridan and Byrne, combined with court costs and fines, threatens it with financial disaster. Sheridan, who has yet to receive his payment from the *News of the World*, if it is ever paid, is still financially tied to his former organisation. The fight over the party's finances has already led to court actions being threatened.

The SSP's indifference to the history of the workers' movement was not only to facilitate opportunist alliances, but so that it could justify its own nationalist programme without opposition.

According to both McCombes and Sheridan, the degeneration of the Soviet Union took place because Russia was economically backward. In contrast, they argue, Scotland is an advanced economy and has the benefit of oil off its coastline.

Only in a climate of deliberately cultivated political ignorance could such a proposition be advanced. Even in 1917, the territories that made up the Soviet Union covered a twelfth of the world's land surface and encompassed a population of scores of millions, including a proletariat that dwarfed the present working class population of Scotland. It had access to oil and other vital resources and a massive internal market that helped it to survive for decades in isolation, despite the criminal betrayals of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

The USSR's ultimate fate was sealed because it is not possible to develop an autarkic national economy divorced from the world market. Assuming hypothetically a socialist revolution confined within Scotland's borders, isolation would lead to its more or less rapid collapse.

Arguments to the contrary are cynically advanced as radical window dressing by those who have rejected any genuine possibility of social revolution. Indeed, the last major political initiative launched by the SSP leadership before it descended into factional warfare was the Independence Convention. This was its most overt appeal for an alliance with the Scottish National Party and other nationalist forces, based on an

insistence that independence on a capitalist basis took precedence over socialism.

Alongside the promotion of nationalism and reformism has been the cultivation of personality politics. Those who now attack Sheridan's egomania fed it for years—building him up to such a degree that ballot papers read “SSP—Tommy Sheridan.”

This approach is hardly the exclusive property of the SSP prior to the split or of Solidarity today. Change the names and one might be writing about the Respect-Unity coalition led by the Socialist Workers Party, which has based its entire perspective on cashing in on the illusions of workers and young people, particularly amongst Muslims, in ex-Labour MP George Galloway for his antiwar stance.

Glorifications of “the leader” by Sheridan's supporters—past and present—are a defining characteristic of petty-bourgeois political tendencies.

Leadership plays a crucial role in the workers' movement and the struggle for socialism—and figures such as Lenin and Trotsky are held in high esteem because the perspective for which they fought gave conscious expression to the historic interests of the working class. The opposite of such a principled approach is the cult of the personality that found such grotesque expression in Stalin's Russia.

Amongst the middle-class radical groups, invoking the “charisma” and “mass appeal” of a particular leader is invariably used as a rationale for adapting to non-socialist tendencies, such as the populist nationalist regimes of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez or Bolivia's Evo Morales. For these tendencies, socialism is not the product of the independent action of politically conscious workers—they do not believe this is possible—but of the “great man” acting as a substitute for the masses. This is particularly appealing for the SSP and Solidarity when figures such as Chavez are able to enact certain popular national reforms by utilising oil revenues—the very policies they advocate.

In addition, the SWP and Socialist Party clearly hope they will be able to gain their own seats in Parliament by cashing in on Sheridan's somewhat diminished popular appeal.

When it was formed in September 1998, the SSP was hailed as the wave of the future by the middle-class left. Under the tutelage of McCombes and Sheridan, we were told that the left was setting aside the sectarian squabbles of the past and finally emerging as a serious political force that would soon become a mass party.

The warnings made by the Socialist Equality Party that nothing good would come of such an opportunist alliance were dismissed. Responding to an intervention by the SEP from the floor at the SSP's founding conference, one wag declared, “Don't spoil the party!”

It took just less than eight years for the SSP to implode in the most grotesque manner imaginable. Not only have no principled considerations been raised, let alone clarified, by any one involved, but the various factions have chosen to fight out their differences in the capitalist media, the courts and by bringing the police into a dispute over the party's assets.

Standing amidst the ruins, both McCombes and Sheridan insist that the essential perspective on which the SSP was founded must now be reinvigorated.

The McCombes SSP has, if anything, stepped up its nationalist rhetoric. Its first public campaign is in support of a demonstration for “genuine home rule,” while it says of the split, “Now that Tommy Sheridan has left the SSP with his London-based supporters, we invite all those in Scotland who support Socialism, Independence and Internationalism to join the SSP and refound the party that shook the political establishment.”

Sheridan is keener still to move on with no political questions asked, proclaiming that “it is now only possible to take the socialist movement forward by immediately launching a new political party ... bigger, better and bolder than that which had gone before.”

Whatever political formations emerge from the SSP on such a basis can

have nothing to do with socialism or the working class. They must inevitably move ever further to the right.

The bitter experience of the SSP is an object lesson for workers everywhere in the essential role of the middle-class radical groups. Their false association with Trotskyism is used to disorient workers and youth and invariably ends up providing succour to the bourgeoisie and its defenders.

The panaceas they advance as an alternative to a principled struggle for socialism always end in disaster and leave behind a legacy of confusion and even demoralisation.

This does not have to be the case. A negative experience can become the occasion for a fresh political turn if it is understood.

The brief history of the SSP confirms that there are no short cuts to the construction of a new workers' party. It must be based on principled political foundations that have stood the test of time—those embodied in the Fourth International represented today by the International Committee and the Socialist Equality Party.

Concluded



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