

# Socialist Equality Party of Britain on the ballot for May 3 elections

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5 April 2007

Regional lists for the Socialist Equality Party have been accepted onto the ballot in the West of Scotland for the May 3 elections to the Scottish Parliament and in the South Wales Central region for the Welsh Assembly.

In the West of Scotland region, the SEP's list is headed by National Secretary Chris Marsden. The list also includes *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board member Julie Hyland, Robert Skelton, Harvinder Singh Thind and Niall Cooper. The list for the South Wales Central region is headed by WSWs correspondent Chris Talbot and includes David O'Sullivan, Stuart Nolan and Poopalasingam Thillaivarothayan. A brief biography of the candidates can be found on the SEP's election website.

The SEP is intervening in these elections in order to develop a new and genuinely socialist movement against the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair, which functions as the political tool of the super-rich. The SEP seeks to unite workers internationally against the eruption of US aggression, which, with Labour's support, threatens to extend the illegal wars against Iraq and Afghanistan into Iran. The fight against war is bound up with the struggle to put an end to the capitalist profit system by reorganising economic life to meet the social interests of the world's people.

The candidates of the SEP are campaigning on four central issues:

- \* No to militarism and war
- \* Defend democratic rights
- \* For social equality
- \* For international workers unity

The SEP took the decision to stand for Holyrood and the Assembly because these ballots are conducted on the basis of proportional representation and provide a broader platform due to the regional list system than the first-past-the-post constituency-based system for Westminster. This also means that they offer a more concentrated expression of the rising hostility towards the government and the social and political problems facing working people.

Labour is expected to suffer significant losses throughout the country, but nowhere more so than in Scotland. The possible loss of what was once a Labour stronghold prompted Blair and Chancellor Gordon Brown to effectively launch the party's election campaign in Glasgow on Tuesday by throwing their support behind Scotland's First Minister Jack McConnell.

The main beneficiary of the hostility to Labour is expected to be the Scottish National Party (SNP), which could take control of Holyrood from the present Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition. So concerned was the pro-Labour *Guardian* that it editorialised on April 3, "Of all the forces in the vortex currently tugging at Labour—among them Iraq and the cash-for-honours inquiry—the Scottish elections pose the most

immediate threat to the Chancellor's hopes of sweeping into office at the head of a reinvigorated government."

The *Guardian* also pointed to what it described as the "paradox" of growing support for the SNP under conditions in which actual backing for Scottish independence has declined to just 27 percent according to a poll of polls. It attributes this to the fact that the SNP has successfully portrayed itself as an anti-establishment party, adding, "Labour is the establishment, and voters are in the mood to punish it for that."

There is some truth in this appraisal. The SNP has made great efforts to portray itself as a left-of-centre party, somewhat akin to the Labour Party in the early 1980s, which champions very limited social reforms. In addition, the SNP opposed the Iraq war and has made political capital out of the cash-for-honours scandal gripping the government.

However, behind this left façade, the Scottish nationalists appeal to the same big business layers as the government. Their key economic demand is for a significant reduction in corporation tax to enable Scotland to compete against the "Celtic Tiger," Ireland. It is this aspect of their nationalist rhetoric that has earned them the backing of leading business figures—some of whom support outright independence while others want to preserve the present devolved institutions. To maintain this coalition, the SNP has shelved promises to hold an immediate referendum on independence should it win control of Holyrood in favour of supposedly "proving its ability to govern."

This orientation to big business would normally be enough to dissuade workers and young people of their illusions in the SNP's promises of reforms. Indeed, the assertions of Scottish nationhood are routinely cited as a means of ending the country's "dependency culture"—i.e., its higher levels of public spending than the rest of the UK.

The primary reason for the SNP's ability to masquerade as an alternative to Labour rests with the Scottish Socialist Party and its recent split-off "Solidarity—Scotland's Socialist Movement," headed by former SSP leader Tommy Sheridan. In 2003, the SSP secured significant support in the Scottish elections, winning more than 100,000 votes and returning six MSPs to Holyrood. But they did so by claiming that Scottish independence was the only viable means of implementing socialist policies and bringing about genuinely democratic government.

In the subsequent years, the SSP was rocked by factional in-fighting that ended in a split, while its advocacy of nationalism became ever more fervent. Whatever criticisms both parties may make of the SNP's more overtly capitalist policies, their claim that independence is the supposedly vital "first step" in the socialist transformation of

Scotland translates into support for an SNP victory. And many of those who looked to the SSP as an alternative will conclude that the SNP has a much greater chance of ousting Labour than two fractious, but essentially identical, left-talking nationalist formations.

Hostility towards Labour is just as pronounced in Wales, but it has not been channelled into the dead end of national separatism. Indeed, Labour was only just able to secure a majority in the devolution referendum to create a Welsh Assembly in 1998.

Labour presently heads a minority administration with almost twice as many votes as its nearest rival, the nationalist Plaid Cymru. Plaid has only one seat more than the Conservatives, who are followed by the Liberal Democrats, none of whom are in favour of outright separation. Though officially committed to the establishment of an independent Welsh state within the European Union, Plaid has made little concrete proposals towards this end, other than calling for the Assembly to be given the same powers as the Scottish parliament. Plaid's director of elections has declared that the party is ready to "talk to anyone" to form an administration in the likely event of a hung Assembly.

As in Scotland, Labour has used the limited power of the devolved institutions to make certain social concessions in order to distance itself from the Blair government. Unlike their English counterparts, Welsh and Scottish students do not pay tuition fees to attend university in their home countries, and the Welsh Assembly scrapped charges for medical prescriptions on April 1 (although this is dressing for the fact that since the devolved institution was created, the number of hospital beds available has been cut by 2,000.)

Despite such efforts, the 2003 elections saw voter turnout collapse to 38 percent, and it is expected to be even lower on May 3.

The radical groups in Wales do not support independence. The Socialist Party of England and Wales—which in Scotland is affiliated to Sheridan's Solidarity—explains that "the most important principle for socialists should be maintaining the unity of the working class. A struggle for independence in Wales not only risks dividing the Welsh working class from the English, but also dividing the Welsh working class itself." Clearly, as far as the Socialist Party is concerned, this principle does not operate in Scotland.

It should also be noted that a failure to advocate outright separation does not exclude a flirtation with Welsh nationalism that, in part, keeps all options open. George Galloway's Respect-Unity Coalition, for example, has proudly announced its recruitment of former Plaid Cymru councillor Neil Sinclair. Respect's website offers no position whatsoever on the issue of independence.

In contrast, the Socialist Equality Party states in its manifesto, "There are no common interests between working people and their oppressors, whatever flag they wave. The Socialist Equality Party fights against all efforts to divide the working class. We seek to unite workers throughout Britain with their brothers and sisters on the Continent through the establishment of the United Socialist States of Europe."

The SEP insists that the fundamental issues confronting the working class across the world—of militarism and social inequality—must be at the centre of the fight for a genuinely socialist reorientation of the workers movement.

Social conditions in the two regions where we are standing are testimony to the vast gulf that has opened up between the mass of the population and the ruling elite.

Covering a population of almost 350,000 people, the West of Scotland stretches from the western edges of Glasgow to Port

Glasgow and Greenock in the northwest and Ardrossan and Saltcoats in the southwest.

The region was formerly a centre for heavy industry, but Port Glasgow now has just one shipbuilding yard remaining. Greenock is home to IBM and a T-Mobile call centre, and Hewlett-Packard has a factory in Erskine, but otherwise the electronics industry in the area is also in decline. In February, Simclar laid off 420 employees at its factories in Kilwinning and Irvine. Protesting workers had stormed the Kilwinning site in protest at their treatment, accusing the company of asset stripping and a lack of consultation.

Paisley is the largest town in the West of Scotland region. Once renowned for its textile industry, the mills have long since closed. According to the Scottish Executive, the Ferguslie Park housing scheme in Paisley is the country's most deprived area.

Across Scotland, poverty has increased, with 980,000 people officially defined as living in relative poverty (after housing costs) in 2005/2006—up 20,000 over the previous year. Child poverty has also risen, with the numbers living in families with less than half the median income up by 10,000 to 110,000 over the same period. Statistics compiled by NHS Scotland show that a child born in the deprived Calton district of central Glasgow has a life expectancy of just 54 years of age.

The situation is similar in South Wales Central, which covers the capital, Cardiff, and the Rhondda Valley—once a central mining and steel district. Labour boasts of creating 130,000 extra jobs in Wales since 1997, but Work and Pensions Secretary John Hutton admitted that most of these were low-paid and there has been no appreciable improvement in GDP per head.

Last month, Burberry closed its polo-shirt production facility in Treorchy with the loss of 300 jobs, transferring production to China. Burberry has 2,000 employees in Britain; its other main plant is in Castleford, West Yorkshire. Since 1991, the number of jobs in the Welsh textile manufacturing industry has fallen from 13,000 to fewer than 4,000.

In the Welsh valleys, employment rates remain below 70 percent. A Welsh family has an average disposable income of just £21,182 (US\$41,838) a year. This is equivalent to £11,900 a head, compared with £15,900 in London, and only the relative wealth in Cardiff and the northeast pushes Wales ahead of northern Ireland and the northeast of England.

The SEP calls on workers and youth to read our manifesto, vote for our list and participate in our campaign.



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