

The Scottish Socialist Party: Cheerleaders for nationalism

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The Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) is standing 10 candidates in the May 6 Westminster elections. Its manifesto, “For an independent socialist Scotland,” is the work of a party hostile to the essential interests of the working class.

A mere 655 words long, its purpose is to blame all social ills in Scotland on the union with England and Wales, and boost the campaign by the Scottish National Party (SNP), the ruling party in the devolved Scottish government, for Scottish independence.

The manifesto states that “All three Westminster parties are in a race to see who can make the deepest cuts while the SNP wring their hands and blame London.”

This is a transparent apologia for the SNP. Following the global meltdown of the world financial system, the SNP supported the prodigious bailout of the entire British banking system, including the Edinburgh based and now nationalised Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS)—responsible in 2008 for the biggest corporate loss in British history.

The SSP manages to pay considerable attention to the petty scandals surrounding MPs’ expenses in Westminster. According to the manifesto “the answer is simple... We have long argued that MP’s should live on the wage of those they represent. Our MSPs did just that at Holyrood thus keeping them in touch with the real lives of voters.”

By holding up their role as members of the Scottish parliament as an alternative to the expenses fiddling at Westminster, the SSP aim to present Holyrood itself as a haven of probity. Between 1999 and 2007 the SSP held a number of seats in the Scottish parliament, during which time it worked assiduously to generate support for the newly-devolved institution. The SSP thus bear full responsibility for the SNP’s ability to benefit from growing hostility to the Labour Party, and its election to power in 2007.

The SSP does not, however, say one word about the greatest crisis of world capitalism since 1929 and the essential fact that the spending cuts planned by all the major parties are the product of a concerted attempt to make

workers pay for the bank bail-out and to claw back the loss of profits by the major corporate concerns. To do so would disprove the SSP’s central message that independence would create the basis for resolving the social problems facing Scottish workers.

In Scotland, according to the Centre for Public Policy for Regions, a Scottish parliament which “has not been used to real terms cuts in budgets, but rather to relatively large year-on-year increases, now faces one of the most severe fiscal contractions in modern history. Furthermore, this downturn in funding prospects will be long-lasting.”

The only way that this can be opposed is through a united struggle of the working class in Britain and beyond, against the financial oligarchy. The SSP propose the opposite. Their manifesto claims that “Scotland needs nothing less than a resistance movement of mass peaceful protest on the scale of that which defeated the poll tax.”

The reference to the poll tax is misleading. The poll tax protests of 1989-90 were by no means a purely Scottish phenomenon and culminated in a large demonstration in Trafalgar Square, London which, along with a mass non-payment campaign, rendered the tax uncollectible. Developing outside of the Labour Party and trade unions, they reflected the transformation of both into tools of big business.

For the SSP, the primary aim of any protest movement is to build support for Scottish independence, the outcome of which can only be new state-enforced divisions between working people in Scotland and England and a fratricidal struggle over dwindling resources.

The manifesto claims, for example, “100,000 jobs are threatened by the cuts promised by the Westminster parties and vital services for our most vulnerable citizens will go.”

In fact, millions of jobs across Britain are threatened by the capitalist parties, in both Westminster and the Scottish parliament at Holyrood. Like the UK administration in London, the SNP in Edinburgh has already begun to impose spending cuts at Scottish and local level.

It is currently engaged in a strike breaking operation with

rail operator Scotrail, aimed at imposing driver-operated trains on all new lines.

The most significant statement in the brief manifesto is the paragraph outlining the SSP's attitude to independence. This states, "The Scottish Socialist Party is a pro-independence party—no ifs, no buts or maybes. We say Yes to an independence referendum and Yes to independence."

They then pledge, "We will work with other pro-independence parties to deliver a resounding referendum YES vote."

There could not be a more unequivocal commitment to the formation of a separate Scottish capitalist state and an alliance with the SNP in order to achieve this goal.

Immediately following this ringing declaration, and beginning with the words "Beyond that," the manifesto concludes with a passage outlining the SSP's aim of creating "an independent socialist republic where the wealth is fairly distributed; where protection of the environment is paramount" and where "All citizens would be equal irrespective of gender, race, religion or sexuality in a country where the economy is no longer driven by greed and profit."

In reality, aside from such meaningless rhetoric, there is nothing "beyond" the SSP's pledge to an independence based on the preservation of capitalist economic and social relations.

Outside of this brief passage, every one of the SSP's programmatic statements chimes with the policies more consistently advocated by the SNP.

There is no majority support for independence for Scotland and the SNP is not at this point seriously proposing such a measure. Like similar nationalist formations throughout Europe, the threat of separatism is used primarily in order to extort more money from central government and ultimately in an effort to build relations with the banks and transnational corporations by seeking powers to offer a lower rate of corporation tax.

To this end the minority SNP government has suggested that two questions would be placed on a referendum ballot. These would ask firstly, if voters agreed that the Scottish parliament's powers should be increased, and only secondly if this increase should include the possibility of negotiating independence.

The SSP's actual programme is based upon similar political calculations. In response to the threat of growing unemployment, the manifesto states "Instead of slashing Scotland's budget, the SSP will fight for emergency funding to protect our young people."

This emergency money will necessarily come from Westminster, as negotiated by the SNP and cheered on by the SSP. The SSP's perspective serves no purpose other than to set working people against one other. Outside of a

unified struggle by the working class, such an exclusivist campaign to defend "Scotland's budget" implies cuts to social spending in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

There is a similar character to the SSP's brief declaration on the Afghan war, which is described as "a senseless military occupation which damages Britain's international reputation and does nothing to make the world a safer place."

This statement is indistinguishable from the positions advanced by the SNP. Moreover, in proclaiming concern with "Britain's international reputation", a reputation covered in criminality and filth, the SSP says far more than it would wish about how far it is from being a genuinely socialist tendency.

The war in Afghanistan is not "senseless", but like the war in Iraq and the hostilities towards Iran, arises from the strategic drive of British imperialism, including its Scottish component, to secure a share of vital oil reserves through a military and political alliance with Washington. The SSP are indifferent to such principled questions and their opposition to war does not rise above the level of pacifist phrases.

The SSP's alliance with the SNP is the chief mechanism through which it is tied to the interests of capital. It articulates the interests of a petty bourgeois layer that orbits around not only the SNP, but the trade union bureaucracy and any more powerful formation it feels will safeguard its own living standards--even if this means sacrificing the jobs, wages and social conditions of the broad mass of workers throughout the UK. For the same reason, it is even less concerned with the fate of workers throughout Europe and the rest of the world, which, aside from the brief mention of Afghanistan, does not rate so much as a mention by this parochial and politically moribund group in its manifesto.



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