

The Scottish Socialist Party and the financial oligarchy

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Colin Fox is convenor of the Scottish Socialist Party. He is also a member of the advisory board of Yes Scotland, the official campaign for a “yes” vote in the 2014 referendum on Scotland’s independence from England. He shares board membership with Nicola Sturgeon, Scottish deputy first minister of the Scottish National Party (SNP), the ruling party in Edinburgh. The SNP are currently imposing brutal social cuts in alliance with David Cameron’s Conservative/Liberal government in London.

Yes Scotland’s vice president is George Mathewson, a former CEO of Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) and owner of his own hedge fund. Fox’s role in Yes Scotland makes explicit the corrupt political alliance between the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), the entire ex-left milieu, and a section of the wealthiest social layers in Britain.

The SSP and similar tendencies claim that an independent capitalist Scotland would be a progressive development, even a step towards “socialism”. What they mean by “socialism” is merely a limited extension, solely in Scotland, of the capitalist state’s ownership of mineral rights and peripheral areas of production. This, it is suggested, could provide, amidst the worldwide catastrophic breakdown of the profit system, a platform for social reform.

This claim is a means by which a narrow layer of the upper-middle class seeks to popularise independence, which they view as their path to fame and fortune. The recent “Radical Independence Conference” brought many of these elements together, including the SSP, the rest of the ex-left, the Greens and a section of the SNP.

Recent SSP publications bring out the full extent of the SSP’s integration into bourgeois politics. Early in 2012, the Scottish government announced a public consultation exercise, seeking to give its referendum proposal some democratic legitimacy. The SSP response, penned by Fox, is an unqualified celebration of Scottish nationalism, replete with repeated invocations of the “Scottish people”.

Fox humbly petitioned the Scottish government, “We believe Scotland would be economically, socially, culturally and politically better off if we were able to make our own decisions, run our own country, and determine our own destiny.”

“We believe,” he continued, “an Independent socialist Scotland, a modern democratic republic, will serve our nations (sic) best interests.”

Fox’s assertion of a Scottish identity, a nation where all the classes can be united, where “the people”, rich and poor, worker and banking CEO, share their “own destiny”, is the basic rhetorical tool deployed daily to subordinate the interests of working people to capitalism. It shows there is nothing socialist about the SSP at all, nor has there been since its foundations.

Formed in 1998, the SSP brought together a collection of the ex-Militant Tendency’s members in Scotland, Stalinists, disaffiliated nationalists, Labourites, feminists, pacifists and Greens. Its purpose was specifically to win seats in the newly formed Scottish parliament at Holyrood by promoting a mildly left-sounding version of Scottish nationalism.

In 2003, the party won over 100,000 votes and had six of its leading members elected to Holyrood by posturing as a left alternative to Labour. As is well known, however, in 2004 the SSP imploded over a libel action fought by former leader Tommy Sheridan against a dirty tricks operation mounted against him by the Murdoch press. Over the next seven years most of the SSP leadership colluded with the Lothian and Borders police, the Scottish judiciary and the Murdoch press in an unprecedented and ultimately successful campaign to destroy Sheridan’s career.

Sheridan was jailed early 2011 for perjury, spending a year behind bars and a further six months wearing an ankle tag.

Sheridan has no discernible political differences with Fox, who replaced Sheridan as SSP convenor, but Fox is a more low-profile, malleable ally for the SNP. Most importantly, as was proved in the perjury trial, he is someone who has proved willing to work with the police, the judiciary and the financial elite whenever the occasion demands.

Fox’s and the SSP’s role is to provide the left rhetoric necessary to promote independence. This usually hinges on bogus claims that workers in Scotland are somehow more radical than their counterparts in England, and that the break-up of the British capitalist state, regardless of what emerges from it, makes Scottish nationalism inherently progressive.

In reality, while Scotland has areas of severe deprivation, workers face the same problems and the same class enemy as those in the rest of Britain and everywhere across Europe. Scotland is part of an imperialist nation and would be a (very junior) imperialist power, should it secure independence. It is host to its own financial oligarchy, which together with its upper-middle class hangers-on and placemen sees independence as a means of furthering their interests.

Glasgow and Edinburgh are both in the top 50 of the bi-annual Global Financial Services Index, at positions 41 and 37, close to Dublin, Oslo, and Copenhagen and far ahead of Moscow, Madrid and Rome. The sector manages £750 billion of assets, while 24 percent of the UK’s insurance and pensions sectors are based in Scotland. Edinburgh in particular hosts a large percentage of finance industry headquarters and up to 80 percent of all security brokers and fund managers in Scotland.

Recently, the current head of RBS, Sir Philip Hampton, told

Westminster, “We have no intention or plan to relocate from Scotland. We are very happy and Scotland is a very effective place at the moment to do business. If, as a result of a vote for independence, we found extra difficulties or cost pressures or whatever arising from that, then we would have to think about alternatives. But we don’t expect at the moment, we don’t identify any clear rationale for making major domicile changes.”

Those sections of the oligarchy who oppose outright independence are generally in favour of greater devolution or fiscal autonomy.

In his submission to the Scottish government, Fox makes no effort whatsoever to even formally distance himself from the very wealthiest layers—apart, that is, from the British monarchy. Fox, posturing as a republican, loyally grumbles: “We do not agree with the view, expressed in the consultation document ‘Your Scotland, Your Referendum’ [P4, January 2012], that ‘Her Majesty The Queen would remain as Head of State’ in an Independent Scotland.”

He goes on: “In our view the will of the people must be ‘sovereign’ both in the outcome of this referendum and in the Governance of our country. Scotland needs an elected Head of State not an un-elected, unaccountable hereditary monarch and we insist this profoundly important constitutional issue be resolved as part of the post-referendum negotiations with the UK Government.”

This is rebellion on its knees. Fox doesn’t agree with the monarchy, but is happy that the issue is left to be decided through horse-trading between capitalist governments in Holyrood and Westminster.

Shortly after their submission to the Scottish government, the SSP produced an “independence special” broadsheet attacking those opponents of Scottish nationalism who base themselves on a struggle to unite the working class against big business.

In it Fox proclaims that the SSP since its founding in 1998 “rejected the formulation ... that Scotland’s right to self-determination was a distraction from the British class struggle. We disagreed then and now, insisting that Scotland’s demand for independence is part and parcel of that class struggle.”

Why this is the case? Fox does not care to explain, because he functions as a tool of the SNP and various Scottish business figures, and is not in struggle against them.

Scotland is not an oppressed nation and its people do not suffer from national oppression. The oppression suffered by working people in Scotland, England and Wales is *class* oppression. To defend themselves against austerity, workers in Scotland and throughout Britain must unite with workers throughout Europe and internationally on an independent political strategy and seek to overthrow their class enemy.

To this essential perspective, Fox sneers at “the classic left argument that Scottish independence would undermine the unity of the British working class, is, for us, an out of date formulation.”

He continues, “Whilst it was true that working people in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee have more in common with their counterparts in London, Liverpool, Birmingham and Manchester than with rich Scots capitalists like Sir David Murray or Fred Goodwin the same was also true of those workers in Athens, Madrid, Buenos Aires, New York and Beijing.”

Fox does not explain what has rendered this “classic left argument” on working class unity outmoded, other than to allege that the SSP’s opponents—by which he means the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* —are falsely elevating the unity of the working class in Britain over the general unity of the working class.

But this is a crude evasion, not an answer. How does the erection of

new borders and the formation of a new mini-nation further the unity of the working class anywhere? Workers in Scotland and England share a common landmass, language, countless family, work and social links, not to mention centuries of shared political experiences. If national identity outweighs this in Britain, then it outweighs it everywhere.

The SSP champion national separatist movements wherever they arise, because they share the same goals and the same social interests. Separatist movements have emerged across Europe, for the most part in more prosperous regions including Catalonia, Flanders and Northern Italy. Universally, the regional elite demand an end to subsidies to poorer regions through central taxation, and for more power to cut corporation tax and better service the interests of globally mobile capital.

All the separatist movements respond to the devastating austerity measures being imposed on workers across Europe by the “troika” of the European Union (EU), the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank by in effect saying “cut someone else”.

At the same time, the separatists and their ex-left allies insist there can be no alternative to the capitalist EU. Rather, they all demand EU recognition and membership for their emerging “independent” states. So much for their claims to be opposed to austerity! The EU is the main instrument through which savage cuts are being imposed in country after country. And, in addition, so much for “self-determination” and other forms of national myth-making. The EU is presently imposing a virtual dictatorship over Greece, sending its employees to ensure that tax revenues and monies raised through privatisation are handed over directly to the banks. And it has imposed an unelected government in Italy for the same purpose.

Would Scotland’s fate be different? To ask the question is to answer it.

The SSP advances a pro-capitalist perspective for the division and fragmentation of the working class. It is a valuable aid to the social counterrevolution being imposed by all European governments and the EU on behalf of the continent’s corporate elite.

The issue before the working class is not the creation of new and ever smaller nation states, independent in name only and presided over by grasping cliques of local billionaires, but the abolition of EU and the nation-state system.

Only in this way can there be a rational organisation of the continent’s vast wealth to meet social need. The Socialist Equality Party stands for a politically unified struggle of the working class for the establishment of a workers’ government in Britain as part of the United Socialist States of Europe, and a world socialist federation.



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