

Socialist Party uses opposition to bedroom tax to promote Scottish nationalism

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In February, the Scottish National Party (SNP) presented its last budget to the Scottish parliament at Holyrood, prior to the referendum in September on Scottish independence.

The budget was also supported by the opposition Labour Party, which joined the nationalists in claiming it meant an end to the widely hated “bedroom tax,” introduced by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition last year. The tax sees claimants of housing benefit lose £14 per week if they are deemed to live in a property with one additional bedroom, and £25 per week for those with two or more.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported at the time, the £15 million in additional funding made available by the SNP to cover the costs for all of those due to pay the tax in Scotland pales in comparison to the cuts it made in other areas. Even this small sum will have to be found by cutting budgets elsewhere, which have already fallen in Scotland by 24 percent since the outbreak of the economic crisis. In this year’s budget alone, a further £220 million in cuts were unveiled for local authorities, on top of £1.5 billion since 2010-2011.

Covering the relatively low costs of the bedroom tax, equating to just 1 percent of all cuts imposed on local councils since 2010, is seen by the SNP as a small and popular price to pay for the opportunity to promote its reactionary project of Scottish separatism as a progressive alternative to the austerity policies of the Cameron government.

It could not have wished for more explicit support from the pseudo-left groups. In an initial article on the move, Socialist Party Scotland, aligned with the Socialist Party (SP) in the rest of Britain, crowed, “The bedroom tax has been effectively defeated in Scotland. The announcement that the Scottish government

intends to end the crushing burden of the hated and reviled tax is a huge victory.”

According to the Socialist Workers Party’s (SWP’s) *Socialist Worker*, the move was an “enormous blow to one of the Tories’ most hated policies.” It was “a huge victory for the thousands upon thousands of working class people who refused to accept the so-called inevitable, and are responsible for its defeat.” In another article, it was falsely claimed that the tax in Scotland was to be “fully mitigated.”

In reality, the funding announced by the SNP only covers the tax bill for one year, and nothing concrete has yet been announced about how this money will be dispensed, or what will happen to those who have already lost their homes or built up debts since it came into force last April.

Keir McKechnie, one of the SWP’s leading members in Scotland, provided a more honest assessment of the measure when he wrote, “Neither the SNP nor Labour want to go into the referendum on Scottish independence with people saying they’ve done nothing about the bedroom tax.”

The praise heaped on the SNP’s move is in keeping with the orientation of the anti-bedroom tax campaign, which has been dominated politically by the SP and SWP. Initial demonstrations in the lead-up to the implementation of the tax on April 1 last year attracted several thousand in a number of cities across Britain, but the pseudo-left set out to direct all those they attracted towards appeals to the trade union bureaucracy, the Labour Party, or in Scotland to the SNP.

They reiterated their claim, promoted by the pseudo-left since the devolution of powers to a regional parliament in Edinburgh in the 1990s by Tony Blair’s Labour government, that the Scottish parliament is

somehow more progressive than its counterpart at Westminster. Encouraged by the Scottish Socialist Party, which was set up to contest elections to the new parliament and contained supporters of the SP and SWP, the claim had much more to do with the interests of a privileged, middle class layer determined to secure their position in the newly created state institution than any genuine concern with the fate of working people.

Any pretensions the parliament had to democratic accountability have been thoroughly exposed in the way all parties have collaborated with successive British governments led by both Labour and the Conservatives to impose austerity measures on the working class.

The Scottish Anti-Bedroom Tax Federation, led by figures from the SP, sought to convince workers that the SNP could be pressurised to oppose the very austerity measures it has played such a central role in implementing. No connection was ever drawn by the campaign between the enforcement of the bedroom tax and the broader assault on spending on social welfare, education, health care, housing and other public services since 2008. To have done so would have exposed its assertions about the SNP's progressive nature, in comparison to the London government, as thoroughly dishonest.

The pseudo-left seized the opportunity to boost support for Scottish separatism. At demonstrations organised in Glasgow and Edinburgh, Scottish flags were prominent and the main message was one of opposition to "Westminster's cuts," ignoring the fact that the SNP administration was fully involved in implementing the tax in Scotland. The number of participants quickly dropped as it became clear that no perspective to fight the onslaught on public services and the welfare state under way throughout Britain was on offer. Instead, the federation became yet another vehicle to deepen working relations with the nationalists in anticipation of the integration of these ex-left forces into the structures of a newly independent Scottish capitalist state.

The campaign intervened energetically at the SNP party congress in October 2013, even organising a fringe meeting. Buses were provided to take campaigners to Perth to participate. It published a model motion on its website and urged supporters of the campaign to send it to SNP parliamentarians,

councillors and party members to force a discussion at the conference.

Ties were also cultivated with the regional trade union bureaucracies, which have played a critical role in blocking any working class resistance to the attacks on jobs and living standards. The Glasgow branch of Unison backed the campaign and made its offices available for meetings. Support also came from the Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC). In other areas of Britain, campaigners were directed by the SP and SWP to appeal to Labour councils and local union officials to oppose the Cameron government.

The demobilisation of the initial opposition to the bedroom tax assisted the governments at Westminster and Holyrood to continue their attacks on public services and social welfare. The SP and SWP work to sabotage a genuine campaign against these attacks with the poison of nationalist demagoguery and illusions in the SNP. The SEP fights, in opposition to these pseudo-lefts, for the unification of the working class across Britain and internationally, directing workers towards a break with the trade union bureaucracy and the formation of independent organisations of struggle based on a socialist programme. This remains the only way forward for working people opposed to the bedroom tax and the massive assault on their living standards.



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