

Vote “no” in the Scottish referendum—Fight for a socialist Britain

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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls for a decisive and unambiguous “no” vote in the September 18 referendum on Scottish independence.

All claims that “independence” is a democratic demand, offering an alternative to cuts and austerity, are lies.

The move for separation from the UK is being led by right-wing forces espousing nationalism, whether or not they attempt to dress this up in fake left language. The aim is to transform Scotland into a low tax, cheap labour platform for the benefit of the banks and transnational corporations.

The victims of this will be workers on both sides of the border, who will see a deepening of the ongoing offensive against jobs, wages and conditions that has been waged by all the major parties in both Westminster and Holyrood.

The unity and independence of the working class is the criterion against which every political party and every political initiative must be judged. This is essential under conditions in which the planet is being befouled with nationalist poison.

Scotland is not an oppressed nation, but part of an imperialist state. Its ruling elite has committed countless crimes and shared in the brutal exploitation of millions the world over. Waving the Saltire in people’s faces is meant to conceal the basic fact that workers in Scotland are not oppressed because of their nationality, but because of their class position within capitalist society. This is just as reactionary as the waving of the Union Flag by their opponents.

The Act of Union in 1707 provided the framework for the development of capitalism and a vast growth in the productive forces. This in turn formed the basis for the emergence of the first industrial working class in the world. Since then, working people in England, Scotland and Wales have fought side by side in epic struggles, including the great revolutionary Chartist movement for democracy and equality, the general strike of 1926, the mass strike movement that brought down a Tory government in 1974 and the year-long miners’ strike of 1984-85.

The advocacy of Scottish independence is a reactionary response to the bankruptcy of the nation state system, which no longer corresponds to the global organisation of economic life. In the last century, this fundamental contradiction gave rise to two of the most devastating wars in human history as the leading capitalist powers fought for world hegemony. Today, with the advent of global production, in which every country’s economy is integrated into a greater whole dominated by huge transnational corporations and banks, inter-imperialist and national antagonisms have reached

a new peak of intensity.

The primary function of a separate Scottish state would be to establish more direct relations with the major banks, corporations and speculators by offering to drive up exploitation, smash up wages and working conditions, destroy or privatise social services and eliminate as far as is possible taxes on corporate wealth.

The only progressive response to the crisis of the nation-state system is to bring an end to all national divisions by adopting the perspective of socialist internationalism.

The SEP is for a struggle against globally organised capital, not the offering of corporate tax incentives. We are for the overthrow of British imperialism and its state apparatus, not a negotiated settlement to set up a new repressive state.

We call for working people to reject nationalism and separatism and to mobilise an anti-austerity, anti-war movement seeking the removal of the Conservatives, Scottish National Party and their Labour and Liberal Democrat allies from power and an end to the rule of the parasitic and unaccountable financial oligarchy they speak for.

The SEP calls for the creation of a workers’ government committed to socialist policies. We stand for the formation of the United Socialist States of Europe, not the Balkan-style carve-up of the continent led by grasping regional elites who will use a “yes” vote in Scotland as a green light for their own separatist agendas.

The SEP’s insistence on class unity makes it an implacable opponent of the official “no” campaign, a right-wing alliance encompassing the Tories, Labour and Liberal Democrats and a number of business organisations. Whatever support that exists in the working class for independence is in large measure a result of anger at the austerity policies pursued by those parties leading the “Better Together” campaign, under conditions in which the trade unions have suppressed and betrayed all opposition to the ruling elite. But separatism only weakens and divides the working class in its struggle against these forces.

The official campaigns advocating either a “yes” or “no” vote never speak honestly of the issues involved. There is no reference whatsoever to what is happening in Britain and internationally, so that Scottish independence can be placed in its proper context.

Since the financial crash of 2008, the ruling classes throughout Europe have carried through a social counter-revolution—handing over hundreds of billions to the bankers, paid for by the working class. Wherever they live, workers face unemployment and underemployment, benefit cut-offs, wage cuts, police harassment, pervasive state surveillance and the growing danger of dictatorship

and war. The younger generations have no future. The National Health Service and the right to free, quality education are being destroyed, along with countless other rights and essential services.

Whether or not it is part of the UK, Scotland faces the same fate as Greece, Spain and the rest of Europe. The nations once cited by the SNP as an “arc of prosperity” to which it sought membership include Ireland and Iceland. Both are now victims of savage austerity measures and the collapse of their banking systems.

The real driving force for separatism comes from those social layers that see opportunities to make their own relations with global corporations and capitalist institutions such as the European Union. That is why independence finds its staunchest support from Scotland’s financial sector, which has become a major international player and is in direct competition with the City of London. It is a movement not of oppressed workers, but of bourgeois and upper-middle class elites.

The Scottish National Party acknowledges as much in its stated intention of keeping the pound and the Queen and seeking membership in the European Union and NATO. Nations large and small are the playthings of major corporate interests, as exemplified in the flagship SNP policy of reducing the rate of corporation tax to 20 percent. This policy will only help unleash a race to the bottom throughout the UK and exposes all the promises of greater spending on welfare, housing and education.

In Europe, a “yes” vote would be seized on to accelerate a similar process of breakup in Spain, Italy and Belgium, with disastrous consequences. In Northern Ireland, a vote for Scottish independence would be used as a focus for sectarian tensions. But the effect would be no less immediate in England itself. Already sections of the ruling elite, led by various Labourites, are championing English nationalism and regionalism. Whether or not the “yes” campaign is successful in Scotland, there are plans for devolution to be rolled out across England, with regional assemblies whose sole purpose will be to set workers in one area against those in another in the interests of big business.

The nationalists’ ability to portray independence as a progressive alternative to “rule from Westminster” depends above all on the myriad fake-left tendencies, such as the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), Socialist Workers Party, Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) and individuals such as Tommy Sheridan and SSP leader Colin Fox—who sits on the board of the “yes” campaign alongside hedge fund owners and SNP leaders.

There is nothing fundamental to distinguish their perspective from other regionalist and separatist formations of an explicitly right-wing character, such as Italy’s Northern League and Belgium’s Vlaams Belang. The real interests motivating their embrace of independence are those of a middle class layer seeking to personally benefit from the flurry of national and local government, institutional, cultural and trade union positions they hope will be created following the referendum.

The fake-left groups act as foot soldiers for the “yes” campaign by lying about its motives, aims and impact. Their specific role is to attempt to break down the significant opposition that exists to the separatist project among Scottish workers. As historian Neil Davidson said at one RIC meeting, “People in this room, people on the left, people out there on picket lines ... believe in the unity of

the British working class, they dismiss some of us who argue for independence as useful stooges of the ruling class.”

They are indeed useful stooges of big business. In line with this role, they argue ever more openly in capitalist terms. Colin Fox, for example, recently declared that a socialist option was “not immediately realistic, given our financial obligation to international bodies.”

He continued, “[T]he classic left argument that Scottish independence would undermine the unity of the British working class” is “for us, an out of date formulation.”

This open promotion of nationalism is politically criminal and brands Fox and his co-thinkers as enemies of the working class. For if national identity outweighs class unity in Britain, then it outweighs it everywhere. It means that the fake left are the advocates of the creation of innumerable mini-states based on ethnicity, language or religion.

This is a recipe for political reaction all along the line. No one should forget the tragic experience of Yugoslavia, whose breakup in the 1990s triggered a decade of bloody civil wars and a catastrophic collapse in living standards. Nor how sectarian divisions were exploited by NATO to wage war against Libya and provoke civil war in Syria. And no one can ignore how ethnic and linguistic divisions are once again being exploited to further NATO military aggression against Russia in Ukraine. In every instance, the fake-left lined up behind imperialism—all in the name of defending “self-determination.”

In opposition to all forms of nationalism, the SEP calls on workers and youth to renew the great traditions of class solidarity of the British working class on new and higher foundations—in a unified movement for the abolition of capitalism, in Britain, Europe and internationally. Those who agree with this perspective should join our party.



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