

Scottish Socialist Party seeks to divide the working class

Steve James
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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members attended a public meeting of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) held in Kilwinning, North Ayrshire, last Monday. Held in a working class area, following a leafleting campaign on the local estate, the meeting drew in 30 to 40 people.

The line of the platform was typical of many being held across the country in the run-up to the referendum on Scottish independence on September 18. Scottish nationalists and the ex-left tendencies have thrown all their resources into meetings, canvasses, stunts and leaflet drops to support a campaign, the central purpose of which is the division of the working class in Britain.

Both the main speakers, Colin Turbett and Ritchie Venton, are longstanding SSP members, union officials, and former members of the Militant Tendency. Both served up examples of the sort of the lies and half-truths with which the ex-left are seeking to wear down the profound distrust among broad layers of working people towards Scottish separatism.

Turbett, a social worker, noted the endemic unemployment, low life expectancy and job insecurity that plague the area. But for Turbett, this was not a consequence of the capitalist assault on workers' living standards. Rather, he declared, "This is what the UK represents to me".

This was not a view he had always held, Turbett went on: "Had we a vibrant aggressive trade union movement that defended our interests, had we a Labour Party that hadn't been continually moving to the right for the last 30 or 40 years, I am not sure I would be on this platform. I would say the whole idea of independence was irrelevant."

In other words, Turbett, like all of the ex-lefts calling for a "Yes" vote, does so because they are supposedly disappointed that the labour and trade union bureaucracy has abandoned reformist measures. These

supposed "Trotskyists", busy building ostensibly "socialist" parties, in fact want nothing more than a new basis through which to guarantee for themselves the privileged position within public service provision and academia once provided for them through their positions within the trade union apparatus.

Turbett did not explain why the reformism abandoned in the UK should still be viable in tiny Scotland, merely insisting that it somehow will. Still less did he explain the objective roots of the Labour Party's right-wing lurch. One and all, the ex-left tendencies have opposed any analysis of the accelerating impact of globally integrated production on the national reformist programmes to which they still proclaim adherence. They cannot do so, because what they really intend is to make themselves politically useful to the Scottish bourgeoisie by selling independence as a supposedly left-wing project when it is nothing of the sort, for which they expect to be duly rewarded.

Taking up Turbett's themes, Ritchie Venton, the main speaker and the SSP's industrial organiser, started with a lie. "The fact", claimed Venton, "that the Scottish Socialist Party is calling for a 'Yes' vote does not for a second make us nationalists."

He then set about concocting a fraudulent and reactionary historical counterfactual, a "what-if" to promote his nationalist line. "Let's imagine the Act of Union had never happened and we were offered the opportunity to join the United Kingdom.

"Would you," he continued, "join a state which means that Scotland is a food exporting country, and yet we have at least 1,000 food banks?" And "would you vote to join the United Kingdom...[in which] something like 47 percent of all investment goes to London and the South East, when they have only 27 percent of the population?"

Venton's assertion is that Scotland's development was retarded by the Act of Union of 1707, and that this 300-year-old mistake must now be undone. His ire directed against London and the South East—bereft of any reference to the working class in these regions—reflects grasping class interests in Scotland, which are enraged that integration in the UK is depriving them of opportunities to extract a greater share of the spoils drawn ultimately from the exploitation of workers in Scotland. This is the real class basis of the ex-lefts' alliance with the right-wing capitalist Scottish National Party (SNP) and its billionaire backers.

It is worth briefly exploring Venton's counterfactual. The voluntary unification of Scotland and England, led by merchant and agricultural capitalist interests in both countries, overcame centuries of incessant wars and created the largest single market in the world at the time. It laid the basis for the extraordinarily rapid development of capitalism in Britain in the eighteenth century, leading ultimately to the industrial revolution in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It gave powerful stimulus to the Enlightenment, which in unified Britain saw world-forming steps forward in science, industrial technique, philosophy and economics.

Above all, the Act of Union created the conditions for the emergence of the first industrial working class in history, the gravedigger of capitalism in Scotland, the UK and, along with its class brothers and sisters, all over the world.

In their retrospective opposition to the Act of Union, Venton and the SSP are exposed as reactionary in the fullest sense of the term. They are exposed as opponents of the development of humanity's productive capacity that took place under capitalism, let alone what will be possible under world socialism.

Most of Venton's contribution was a crude and incoherent proposal of limited national economic development, presented as socialism, none of it making any sense. He claimed, for example, that the National Health Service "has never been British"—rather, "it is divided into four national units and what you have is co-operation between them." After making this discovery, Venton of course neglected to explain the potentially disastrous implications of Scottish independence on that supposed system of cooperation between

"nations"—one of which he neglects to identify is the six counties of Northern Ireland.

The writer of this article pointed out that every single social ill mentioned by Turbett and Venton in Scotland is as bad if not worse in England, while workers in Scotland and England have shared over 200 years of shared struggle. I asked both speakers to explain their objections to a unified movement of the working class seeking the overthrow of the Cameron government and the establishment of a workers' government pledged to socialist policies.

In response, both Turbett and Venton expressed weary indifference. Turbett described talk of the unity of the working class as "abstract". Venton claimed he had no objections to a unified struggle, but "it's not happening."

Nor will it, if Venton and the SSP have their way.

The hostility from the platform to basic class questions was not shared by all the audience. A number workers at the meeting, some of whom had simply attended for information on jobs and pensions, expressed agreement with SEP campaigners and agreed to read the statement "Vote 'no' in the Scottish referendum—Fight for a socialist Britain".



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