

The class issues in the Scottish referendum

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2 September 2014

The following is an edited version of a speech given by Socialist Equality Party National Secretary Chris Marsden at a public meeting in Partick Burgh Hall, Glasgow on August 27.

There are real issues raised and motivations for the Scottish independence referendum and the false presentation of these issues by the pseudo-left groups.

I have thought a great deal how to summarise the pernicious and dishonest role played by these political tendencies in the referendum on Scottish independence. Fortunately, I was gifted an appalling article in the *Socialist Worker* August 12. It is entitled “Scotland’s currency row masks ruling class fears of independence”—so you get the message.

The bulk of it is an argument for Scotland not to keep the pound post-independence, and to adopt its own currency. This is supposedly because “Only if Scotland makes its existing currency independent of sterling will it have the powers to address taxation, welfare and government spending.” This is advanced as a prerequisite for the building of a semi-socialist utopia north of the border.

Of course, this will come as a surprise to the workers of Turkey, Bulgaria, Estonia and a host of other countries who are told that ditching the lira, lev, kroon or whatever, and adopting the euro is the path to prosperity.

One would imagine that Greek workers are even now champing at the bit to see the re-introduction of the drachma, so they can be paid in the equivalent of food stamps issued by a nationwide company store that would be almost worthless elsewhere in the world.

But let me concentrate on the last passage in the article, written by Carlo Morelli, who does not let the truth get in the way of a good argument. He writes that “the independence vote is not going to be won, or lost, on how great a capitalist economy an independent Scotland would be.”

That much, at least, is true, because it is a warning that the Scottish National Party (SNP) cannot sell its “independence” project to Scottish workers without someone else telling lies for them—by that I mean, without the SWP, Scottish Socialist Party, Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) and the likes of Britain’s loudest man, Tommy Sheridan, claiming that it is the basis for first creating a left reformist Scotland and then, much further down the line, a Scottish socialist republic.

Of course, when they write as if it can be 1974 once again and there is (god forbid) a tartan version of the old-style Labour Party in power, they in fact mean the SNP sitting in government in Holyrood. But they cannot admit as much.

So Morelli asserts that whatever the SNP says and does is somehow irrelevant “because the Yes campaign contains a strong working class demand for an end to austerity,” so “a Yes vote can act as a challenge to the current capitalist system.”

He then claims, “The Yes campaign’s current leaflet to every household demonstrates this. It covers childcare, equality, pensions, education and community all before mentioning businesses. This is because it is the working class vote which will determine the outcome of the referendum and why socialists should favour a Yes vote.”

Well, I’m sorry, but this is a flat-out lie.

I have read what I believe to be the three main leaflets of the Yes

campaign and they are all much the same—beginning with an appeal for Scottish business and boasts of the nation’s wealth.

I will focus on the one issued in the name of the Scottish government, which I assume is the one Morelli specifically refers to. But I could make the same essential points about them all.

It begins by urging a yes vote, not because Scotland is somehow oppressed, but because “Scotland is one of the world’s wealthiest countries.” It continues, “Our economy produces more per head of population than the UK, France, Japan and most other developed countries.”

For good measure it adds, “Experts agree that Scotland is one of the wealthiest countries in the world.”

The issue is identified fairly clearly as allowing the Scottish bourgeoisie to control North Sea Oil and other revenues, exemplified in the statement, “On Independence we would have sound public finance... Scotland more than pays its way. Estimates show that in each and every one of the last 33 years, we have generated more tax per head than the UK as a whole. Over the last five years our public finances have been stronger than the UK by a total of £8.3 billion—that is almost £1,600 for every person in Scotland.”

It concludes, “The issue is not whether Scotland is wealthy enough to be independent. The question is whether the Scottish or Westminster government should decide how we use our wealth.”

References to “every person in Scotland” should fool no one. This is booty for the ruling class—and for a layer of the upper-middle class, as exemplified in the passage that follows entitled, “Attracting and Retaining Businesses.”

“We have a great record in attracting firms to come to Scotland, drawn by our resources and talented workforce,” the SNP proclaims. “But with independence we can do more. We can use tax policy and our higher international profile to retain and attract company headquarters—making it easier to climb the career ladder here in Scotland.”

That is it in a nutshell: Get transnational corporations to move to Scotland based upon low corporation tax. Keep the revenue this side of the border, so that the Scottish bourgeoisie can get richer—and offer their ideological apologists in the petty-bourgeoisie the chance of a leg up into management positions—in both the private and public sector—where they can lord it over a highly exploited workforce.

That is the prospect that appeals to the layers represented by the 57 varieties of “left nationalists.” They talk “socialism” and “reforms” to the working class. But they sit down in conference with SNP and big business figures who know full well that this is not in the cards.

A myth of a Scottish social democracy is held up not because the working class stands to gain from independence, but because its proponents do.

The leaflet endorsed by the SWP in reality makes very few mentions of social policies, and these are worthless. Its reference to equality consists of listing a few statistics before stating that “Independence won’t solve this overnight—but it will give us the powers we need to tackle it.”

Childcare for the under-fives is cast as a way of “enabling more people to get back into work” so the money made by employers “will stay here and not go to the Treasury in London.”

Then there is the pledge to “extend the living wage already introduced by the Scottish Government and [to] encourage more private companies to guarantee a fair wage for a fair day’s work.”

The “living wage” is a miserly £7.65 an hour, when the average public sector wage is £16.28 an hour, and the average in the private sector is £14.16. Moreover, the Scottish government has already rejected a proposal to extend this from the public sector to private companies taking up public-sector contracts, claiming that it would breach European law. The European Union responded that this is simply not true.

SNP leader Alex Salmond rejected it because he is opposed to any measure that would give off the wrong signal to potential investors.

The role of the fake left nationalists is to sell the working class a pup—to go into areas where the SNP would fear to tread and urge support for the creation of a capitalist, not a socialist, Scotland.

This has been a political imperative since the SNP began its efforts to ditch its justified depiction as Tartan Tories in the 1980s—a project that brought together Alex Salmond and the likes of Jim Sillars, his wife Margot Macdonald, and the present SNP Justice Secretary Kenny MacAskill in the 79 Group.

These same types now lead the Yes campaign and organisations such as the Radical Independence Campaign. We wrote of how the RIC is sending hundreds of its activists into working class areas, seeking to lend the reactionary separatist agenda of the SNP a progressive cover by claiming that it is workers who are demanding nationhood.

The RIC has split, with one of its main spokesmen Robin McAlpine forming Common Weal amid an unseemly fight over assets. But both organisations are far from radical, supporting nothing more than the adoption of a German and Scandinavian economic model.

Whether or not Scotland keeps the pound, adopts the euro or creates its own currency, it wants to be part of the EU—an organisation that insists on tight limits on public spending and which has led the way in imposing savage austerity in Greece, Spain, Portugal and throughout the continent. The fake left have nothing to say on this, as it would interfere with the narrative that breaking with Westminster rule will be a return to a cold and wet version of the Garden of Eden.

The ruling class knows this and relies on the liars and their lies to hide the facts from working people. The *World Socialist Web Site* this month ran an article on a document produced for the EU following the crash of 2008 by the European Union Institute for Security Studies. It states that “the responsibilities of the police and armed forces are increasingly being merged, and the capacities to tackle social protest built up.”

A Professor, Tomas Ries of the Swedish Institute of International Affairs writes that the central threat to “security” is a violent “conflict between unequal socioeconomic classes in global society,” which necessitates a “symbiosis” with the global corporations.

The rich have to be protected, he explains, since “the percentage of the population who were poor and frustrated would continue to be very high, the tensions between this world and the world of the rich would continue to increase, with corresponding consequences.”

In the summer of 2013, the International Labour Organisation stated that the potential for social unrest in European Union countries is higher than anywhere else in the world, and that yawning gaps between rich and poor are the major trigger.

A World Economic Forum report issued November last year warned that, with unemployment at around 27 percent in Spain and Greece and youth unemployment much higher, as high as 75 percent in some parts of Greece: “There is a growing consensus on the fact that unless we address chronic joblessness we will see an escalation in social unrest.”

How will they deal with this reality in Scotland, as in England? Through state repression.

Look at Ferguson in the United States and see Glasgow tomorrow.

This is what underlies the decision by London Mayor Boris Johnson to

buy three water cannons. However, this is dwarfed in its implications for policing by the decision to permanently arm police taken by the chairman of the Scottish Police Authority.

He did so after consulting with no one other than the afore-mentioned Justice Secretary MacAskill.

Anyone who raises any of these questions, who warns the working class of the entirely negative consequences of separatism, is dismissed as a “fear-monger” by the Yes chorus.

All of them insist that any reference to the impact of nationalism and regionalism elsewhere is somehow slandering the “Scottish people,” who, we are told, are universally nicer and more left wing than in England and, indeed, the rest of the world. This “innate” sense of social justice is held up as a guarantor against any nastiness being associated with Scottish nationalism.

How else does one account for such a stupid article as that posted on the RIC web site July 19 utilising Israel’s brutal offensive against Gaza to argue for Scottish nationalism.

After all, is this not the terrible end product of Zionism? This is a national movement which was advanced as a socialistic project remedying a genuine world historic crime against an entire people—the Holocaust—and not largely imagined or centuries-old grievances against England. And what of the terrible experience of the Palestinians themselves with a national struggle under the leadership of the bourgeoisie, which has left them trapped in a de facto prison camp led by corrupt and reactionary regimes in both the West Bank and Gaza?

What of Iraq, where US imperialism’s deliberate whipping up of religious and national antagonisms could plunge the Middle East region into fratricidal slaughter, and has already opened the way for renewed military intervention by Washington and London?

What of Ukraine, where language groups are being pitted in a civil war that could well lead to a war fought on European soil against Russia?

Of course, it needs not be said that those who protest have no problem portraying almost everyone in England, and above all those south of the Watford gap, as rabid Thatcherites, supporters of the UK Independence Party, the British National Party, or worse.

But does anyone seriously believe this? Or is it mainly an appeal to people who are desperate for an end to austerity and militarism, but who as yet see no way forward?

I believe the latter. And let me ask you this: Does anyone here believe for one moment that there are not many millions in England, Wales and throughout Europe who feel the same way and who are also looking for an alternative?

The nationalist groups openly declare that there is no chance of a unified working class response and that independence means Scottish workers will be able to leap forward politically and socially, unburdened by the restraining influence of the more backward English.

Excuse me, but what a load of rubbish.

The working class throughout the UK has shown no lack of fight and no lack of desire for a more serious struggle. But they have all been betrayed, not only by the Labour Party, but by the very same trade union bureaucracy that the fake lefts all toady up to.

They use Labour’s betrayals to justify an alliance with the SNP, the Greens, Plaid Cymru in Wales—capitalist parties all. And then they proclaim that the only organisations that must be maintained as all-UK bodies are the trade unions. That is the price they are willing to pay to maintain their own privileged existence within the union apparatus.

We, the Socialist Equality Party, represent the only genuine alternative to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, the SNP, et al.

We are not merely calling for a No vote, but for the unified mobilisation of the working class north and south of the border, throughout Europe and internationally for the overthrow of capitalism.

As we say in our statement: “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.”

We want to bring an end to all national divisions by advancing the perspective of socialist internationalism as the basis for the organisation of the workers’ movement. We are for the overthrow of British imperialism and its state apparatus, not a negotiated settlement to set up a new repressive state.

The fake left nationalists offer peace with capitalism in return for an (alleged) £1,600 per person in extra tax revenues. Judas Iscariot would be proud. It is selling the political birthright of the working class for a mess of pottage.

We want workers to rise to the occasion, to meet the tasks posed by the raging crisis of world capitalism by developing an anti-austerity, anti-war movement that will end in the creation of a socialist workers’ government in Britain, as part of a United Socialist States of Europe.

The greatest disservice to the working class performed by the nationalist left is that they encourage workers to adopt the most narrow, parochial, short-sighted response to the very real social problems they face. Everything depends on the working class doing the opposite.

Not taking the path of least resistance, in the hope of short-term gains that will never materialise, but making a stand on political principles that are rooted in the essential character of the working class as an international revolutionary class—the gravedigger of capitalism.

That perspective is embodied in and fought for by the SEP, British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International—the world party of socialist revolution founded by Leon Trotsky. You should join it and build it.

*For more coverage on the Scottish referendum campaign visit:
www.socialequality.org.uk*



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