

UK trade union bureaucracy split on Scottish independence

Jordan Shilton
17 September 2014

In the campaign for the referendum on Scottish independence, the trade union bureaucracy has been split on the issue, with a minority supporting a yes vote.

Earlier this month, the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) announced after a close ballot that it was backing independence. It joined the Prison Officers' Association in Scotland on the nationalist side.

Nationalist leaders hailed the RMT vote as an expression of the democratic character of the yes movement, and a sign that it spoke on behalf of working people.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The trade union bureaucracy speaks for a privileged layer of the middle class seeking to secure its interests at the expense of its own members. The main concern of the functionaries in every union has not been the defence of the working class, but guaranteeing its own bargaining and consultative positions with government and local authorities.

The dispute between the unions backing a yes vote, which are led by forces aligned with fake-left groups, and those calling for a no vote is over whether this should be carried out through a devolved arrangement within the UK or in an independent Scottish state.

This was summed up by a joint statement issued by six trade unions backing a no vote and the official Better Together campaign. Boasting that they spoke for 130,000 workers in Scotland, the shop-workers union USDAW, the general union GMB, the Communication Workers Union (CWU), Community, the train drivers union ASLEF, and what remains of the National Union of Mineworkers wrote that they were speaking out for "Scotland remaining part of the United Kingdom."

Without issuing a word of criticism of the official Better Together campaign, which is led by parties despised by workers across Britain, they continued, "Separating Scotland would damage the rights and conditions of working people across the country, and would lead to a

damaging race to the bottom. It would threaten the many rights and improvements that our unions have campaigned for, and won, down the years."

True enough, but when such declarations come from organisations which have collectively enforced an unending series of betrayals of every struggle mounted by workers for decades this is nauseating. The reality for workers across Britain is that the unions are synonymous with the enforcement of the demands of government and the employers at the expense of their members.

Their role in the independence debate has been fully in line with this record.

Those unions calling for a no vote or maintaining official neutrality have studiously avoided making an explicit appeal to the class interests of workers across Britain in opposition to nationalism—the only viable basis upon which Scottish separatism can be opposed. All that Trades Union Congress (TUC) leader Frances O'Grady could muster at this year's Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) was the vague pledge that workers would have to continue to show "solidarity" regardless of the referendum's outcome.

The trade unions have facilitated the promotion of regionalism for years. As well as providing a means to prevent a unified movement of the working class from emerging, they viewed it as a key mechanism to intensify their collaboration with government, local authorities and employers. In the 1990s, the TUC played a leading part in the campaigns for a Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, and in 2004, it backed the plan for an assembly in the north east of England, which was ultimately rejected by voters.

This has encouraged the development of sections of the bureaucracy in favour of secession, reflected by the STUC's refusal to take sides in the referendum. As a *New Statesman* article pointed out last year, "The onset of devolution and the transfer of control to Edinburgh of,

among other things, transport, health and education policy created a new layer of state power with which Scottish branches of British unions had to negotiate, reducing their reliance on larger Westminster-focused UK-wide structures.”

Reducing their reliance, yes, but also providing opportunities for getting many feet under many tables.

Although only two smaller unions have officially endorsed the pro-independence campaign, a significant faction of the bureaucracy has come out openly in favour of independence—forming Yes Scotland’s official trade union section, “Trade Unions for Yes.”

A 2012 article published on Yes Scotland’s web site, written by Derek Durkin, now a Unison official and formerly with the CWU, bemoans the record of the Labour Party in power, contending that the vision advanced by the yes campaign is more progressive. Writing that he wants “a future where the rights of workers are at the forefront of government policies, where social need takes precedence over greed and where the most vulnerable in our society are cared for rather than priced as a commodity,” Durkin goes on to declare that “a majority of people in Scotland aspire to such a situation.”

While expressing doubts about the Scottish National Party’s (SNP) ability to implement such a vision, he concludes his piece, “There is one absolute certainty that has been proven over the past thirty years, it will not come within the UK.”

Durkin blithely claims that there is no majority for socially progressive policies in the UK, only in Scotland. Given that the working class has time and again shown the opposite, Durkin is in fact slandering English and Welsh workers and tacitly backing the lying claims of the SNP that it is a progressive alternative.

His is, moreover, a political apology for the trade union bureaucracy which naturally evades any blame for preventing workers from fighting back against the employers and the political advocates of corporate greed, Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat and SNP alike.

Even those unions officially remaining neutral have praised the SNP highly.

Responding to the publication of the White Paper on independence last November, which laid out the SNP’s programme, Unite’s Scottish Secretary Pat Rafferty hailed the document for its “welcome proposals,” such as “keeping public services in public hands.”

Above all, he noted “with interest proposals for the establishment of a national convention of employment and labour relations” which he hoped signified a more

“pluralistic” approach to trade union relations.

As well as “pursuing more detail on proposals for wider trade union legislation,” Rafferty stated that he would be enquiring as to “The role of collective bargaining in re-balancing the future Scottish economy.”

The White Paper referred to by Rafferty contained the pledge to join NATO; an aggressive nuclear alliance led by US imperialism. But this was of little concern to him, as he demonstrated with a call for a “Scottish defence diversification” company to ensure that the defence industry could be maintained following the removal of trident nuclear weapons from the river Clyde.

He is dazzled by the prospect of working in cahoots with the SNP and the employers.

Offering a progressive justification for such a reactionary agenda has been the task of pseudo-left groups like the Radical Independence Campaign and Scottish Socialist Party.

Calling on the unions to back independence, the vice-president of the Public and Commercial Service union’s John McNally, also a member of the pseudo-left Socialist Party, wrote earlier this year that working people engaged in struggling for Scottish independence were battling for “self-determination.”

While advising “socialists in the trade union movement” to provide “an honest and rigorously critical assessment of what is being offered” on both sides, this amounted to little more than acting as a ginger group for the SNP. Whereas he saw Labour as “wholly in the grip of corporate interests,” the SNP was an “amalgam of different and antagonistic class forces” which could be pressurised. There was a “qualitative difference in both tone and substance between the yes and no campaigns.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact