

Scotland's No vote and the crisis of the British nation state

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (UK)

20 September 2014

Independence for Scotland was defeated in Thursday's referendum by 55.3 percent to 44.7 percent on an 84.6 percent turnout.

There was an initial sense of relief in ruling circles, given that at one point, according to opinion polls, the Yes campaign looked set to secure a majority—threatening the imminent dissolution of the 307-year union between Scotland, England and Wales. Such a prospect had been likened to a new “Lehman’s moment”—a reference to the bank failure that triggered the 2008 financial crash. There were fears too that a Yes victory would have weakened Britain’s ruling elite on all fronts, prompting warnings by politicians, economists, corporate executives and military figures.

The British pound and UK shares both rallied Friday morning, after having suffered major losses in recent days. Alex Salmond, leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), announced his intention to resign in recognition of the Yes campaign’s failure.

But by the end of the day, gains for shares and sterling had swung into reverse as it became clear that the acute crisis of the British nation state was far from over.

Most worrying for the bourgeoisie was the fact that the majority against separation came despite, not because of, the campaign by the major parties—Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat—which formed the backbone of the “Better Together” camp.

The campaign revealed the huge level of disaffection and hostility towards the Westminster elite, all of whom are associated with illegal colonial wars and austerity.

That a majority rejected efforts to divert anger over this state of affairs into support for the creation of new

national borders is testimony to the strong sense of shared identity among working people and a well-founded mistrust of the pro-big business SNP. However, the Yes campaign was able to successfully exploit social and political discontent among a section of workers and youth to increase support for independence by approximately 15 percent from 2012. More than two out of five voted for separation, with Glasgow, Scotland’s largest city, registering a majority Yes vote.

The SNP owes everything to fake-left forces—the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), Tommy Sheridan, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Radical Independence Campaign. Their role was to conceal the reactionary social and political interests represented by Scottish separatism and paint it in pseudo-socialist colours. To this end they acted as the foot-soldiers of the Yes campaign, recasting the SNP as part of a broad movement for a more progressive post-independence Scotland.

The fake-left tendencies now claim that the increase in the Yes vote is itself proof of the working class credentials of Scottish nationalism. It is nothing of the sort.

The enormous development of globalised production and financial markets has provided a section of the regional bourgeoisie with the opportunity to secure direct relations with the transnational corporations and banks, bypassing central government. That is why the SNP’s central demand was for a cut in corporation tax. Around this bourgeois faction gravitates a middle class layer of state functionaries, academics and trade union bureaucrats that provides the social basis for the fake-left groups.

SSP leader Colin Fox summed up their future course,

claiming that the result was “independence deferred.” They are mooted the possibility of forming a new “left,” i.e., nationalist, party in Scotland that could include sections of the Labour Party and the SNP.

The No vote has in no way lessened the dangers facing working people across Britain. There are deep divisions within the ruling elite on virtually every question. Far from a period of “reconciliation” opening up, the next months will see a bitter struggle on every front.

In the aftermath of their defeat, the SNP and its allies are demanding the greatest possible concessions from Westminster in a bitter scramble to control vital resources, such as taxes on North Sea Oil, from which they hope to become personally very wealthy.

For his part, Prime Minister David Cameron used the result to insist that Scotland had had its say and it was now time to listen to the “millions of voices of England.” While guaranteeing that the three parties’ pledge of more powers for the Scottish parliament would be “honoured in full,” he pledged to introduce “English votes for English laws”—ending the right of Scottish and Welsh MPs to vote on certain issues now dealt with in the Scottish parliament and Welsh Assembly.

Drafted by Labour, and presented as an alternative path to “home rule” for Scotland, the measures to expand the powers of the Scottish parliament include a commitment to extend tax-varying powers and oversight of certain areas of social welfare to Holyrood. Cameron’s announcement makes clear that these measures will, in fact, be used to encourage national and regional competition everywhere, with one commentator claiming that the “slumbering beast of English nationalism” had been awakened.

In addition, Cameron hopes to permanently cripple the Labour Party by excluding Scottish and Welsh MPs, on whom Labour relies, from voting on English matters—prompting Labour Party leader Ed Miliband to reject Cameron’s proposals.

Whatever emerges from the internecine conflict in ruling circles, the bill will be paid by the working class, who will be pitted against one another in a race to the bottom in terms of jobs, wages and social conditions.

The referendum campaign must serve as a profound warning. Without a socialist reorientation of the working class, the deepening crisis of British and world

capitalism can take on reactionary forms—above all in the deliberate fostering of national divisions.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only tendency that advanced a political alternative. We urged a No vote in the referendum based on uniting working people against all sections of the bourgeoisie in the fight for a socialist Britain.

We warned that the nationalism whipped up by the SNP and the fake-left would strengthen similar right-wing tendencies in Europe and internationally. The SEP counterposed to the Balkanization of the continent into a patchwork of mini-states and ethnic cantons the fight for the United Socialist States of Europe.

In the course of our campaign, we sold over 10,000 copies of our statement “Vote No in the Scottish referendum—Fight for a Socialist Britain” and discussed with tens of thousands of workers and young people. Many expressed relief at meeting socialists opposed to nationalism and upholding working class unity.

Our intervention centered on combating the lies and distortions of the pseudo-left groups. Explaining that the potential breakup of the UK was rooted in the deepening crisis of world capitalism and the outmoded division of the planet into antagonistic nation states, we urged the adoption by the working class of a new socialist and internationalist program and leadership.

In the next period, this political offensive must and will be deepened, not just in Britain, but in a unified offensive by our comrades in Europe and internationally.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact