

Prison officers' union signs no strike deal with the Scottish government

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Last month, the Prison Officers Association (POA) in Scotland signed a no strike deal with the Scottish National Party (SNP) government in Edinburgh.

In exchange for a one-off bonus payment of £2,000 to each worker, the POA committed itself not to call any strike in the next two years over the issue of pay. This sum equates to between 4.7 and 6.2 percent of prison officers' wages, meaning that over a period of two years the increase will struggle to keep up with inflation.

The POA leadership in Scotland accordingly suspended a strike ballot over pay, which had already been initiated in advance of negotiations with the Scottish government. On top of pay concerns, prison officers have seen attacks on their pensions in recent years, while the retirement age has been raised to 68, in line with other public sector workers across Britain.

The union bureaucracy falsely claimed that the POA had not committed itself to a strike ban. Scottish chair of the POA, Phil Fairlie, said the agreement merely indicated that the issue of pay had been resolved, but he then pledged that "we would not be balloting for strike action on this issue through the existing pay deal period".

The one-off payments being made to the 3,500 workers in a £7 million package from the SNP government can legally be clawed back from any worker who takes strike action.

The agreement is yet another indication of how the trade unions now function as instruments for suppressing all independent activity by the working class in defence of its interests. But what adds to the significance of such a betrayal is that the POA was one of the first trade unions to join the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), formed by the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party to contest the 2010

general election.

POA General Secretary Steve Gillan and Assistant General Secretary Joe Simpson are both members of TUSC's national steering committee.

In an interview with the *Prison Watch* blog, Gillan was unapologetic in his defence of the deal, urging other trade unions to follow suit. "What I would say to the trade union movement is follow our lead and go in and negotiate a good deal for your members," he advised.

Together with his fellow union heads, Gillan knows that the brutal austerity measures being imposed by the ruling elite throughout Britain cannot carry on unopposed. Anger is mounting among working people over the growth in social inequality, the destruction of social services and the constant attacks on their pay and working conditions. He promotes a de facto strike ban as a means to suppress the emergence of any resistance to this offensive.

Gillan is the same man who, just last year, was hailed in an article in the *Socialist*, the SP's newspaper, for criticising the Labour Party for their failure to defend the rights of public sector workers. The article enthusiastically reported on an "excellent fringe meeting" of TUSC held at the POA's 2014 annual conference. Simpson spoke at the meeting to denounce the "thieving rob dogs" running the country, declaring that he was standing as a TUSC candidate because, "We need an alternative because Labour has totally forgotten about working class people."

Fast forward nine months, and the fraud of such rhetoric is apparent for all to see.

TUSC was founded by the SP, SWP and the Stalinist leadership of the Rail Maritime and Transport union, then led by Bob Crow, to promote the illusion that the trade unions represented a political opposition to the

right-wing pro-business policies of Labour and the only basis for the creation of a new workers' party.

It acts as an apologist for the trade union apparatus, in return for which the pseudo-left groups are allowed to occupy positions within the highest echelons of the bureaucracy. TUSC lends support to a dozen Labour MPs led by John McDonnell. Its members function as little more than an adjunct of the Labour "left," while insisting that workers confine themselves to supporting only those reformist policies acceptable to the union leaders holding TUSC's purse-strings.

The POA's move is also an indictment of the embrace by the pseudo-left of Scottish nationalism.

The SNP relies wholly on the pseudo-left groups to portray itself as a left alternative to the major parties. The POA and RMT both joined last year's Yes campaign, in the referendum on Scottish independence that was backed unreservedly by the SP, SWP and their ilk.

Gillan proclaimed in his *Prison Watch* interview, "Whether we like it or not, the SNP have played a good card. They are supporting public services in Scotland. They are supporting public sector workers in Scotland."

In reality, the SNP has led the regional administration at Holyrood since 2007 that has imposed spending cuts. In its most recent budget for 2015-16, it slashed spending by £500 million, bringing total spending cuts in Scotland since 2010 to 10 percent. Meanwhile, it cut taxes for businesses and announced plans to open up new areas of the public sector to privatisation. In the current general election campaign, the SNP is preparing to back a potential Labour government at Westminster.

The response among the pseudo-left to the POA deal has been both shame-faced and duplicitous.

The SP commented only on its Facebook page, targeting the SNP for its meagre protest while making only a one-line reference to the POA. "The Scottish POA leadership were wrong to support this and should have insisted on the bonus payments without strings," they write. Before adding somewhat bizarrely, "This shows the SNP leadership in a real anti-trade union light."

"Anti-trade union" in this regard is a political fraud. This is an agreement endorsed by the POA, not one levelled against it.

The SP then urges, "All SNP members in their trade union group should be passing motions in their

branches condemning SNP ministers for this and defending the right to strike under all circumstances."

Thus, the toxic combination of a pro-trade union and pro-SNP orientation proceeds regardless of the unfortunate fact that both are conspiring against the fundamental interests of the working class.

A brief article published by the SWP blandly reported the details of the agreement before citing Fairlie's claim that it was not a no strike deal. Nothing negative is said of either the POA or the SNP—in a report that manages to combine an *apologia* for the rest of the trade union bureaucracy with sowing illusions in the Labour Party!

Scottish Trades Union Congress General Secretary Grahame Smith, "described it as 'totally unacceptable' for the SNP or any employer to 'bribe' workers to give up the right to strike," the *Socialist Worker* reported. "The Labour Party criticised the POA deal. But Smith pointed out they 'should also be prepared to commit to repeal in full the legislation that removes the right of prison officers elsewhere in the UK to strike'."

The SWP refers here to Labour MSP (Member of the Scottish Parliament) Neil Findlay, who denounced the agreement as "astonishing", before describing the right to strike as a "fundamental right."

This comes from a spokesman for a party that maintained all of the anti-trade union legislation brought in by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher, and which worked closely with the trade union bureaucracy to suppress strikes and attacked the working conditions in the public sector during its 13 years in office. This too passes without comment by the SWP, who do not want to unduly disturb their cosy relations with the union bureaucracy on both sides of the Scottish border.



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