

RISE: The “Scottish Syriza” that dare not speak its name

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At the start of the year, the main activity of Colin Fox and Jonathan Shafi, leading lights of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) and the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC), had been the promotion of the Greek ruling party Syriza as the model on which a new “left” party in Scotland was to be based.

Fox and Shafi, at Syriza’s invitation, reported enthusiastically from Athens on Syriza’s January election victory. For these promoters of Scottish nationalism, Syriza’s success was proof of the viability of a perspective based on national economic development under capitalism and within the framework of the European Union.

Given Syriza’s shameless role in imposing even more brutal austerity measures than those dared by the previous New Democracy ruling coalition, carried out in defiance of the July referendum’s massive vote against EU austerity, it is small wonder that Greece warranted barely a mention last weekend at the founding conference of Fox and Shafi’s new party.

Gone was any reference to RISE (Respect, Independence, Socialism, Environmentalism) as the “Scottish Syriza.” The words “Greece” and “Syriza” never passed the lips of Fox, Shafi or others among RISE’s aspiring luminaries.

To the extent that the social catastrophe inflicted on Greece was mentioned by the approximately 700 people in attendance, it was treated as an embarrassment.

Thus the speaker from the German Left Party (Die Linke), Andrej Hunko, MP for Aachen, declared that the crisis in Greece “broke our hearts...because we tried to support the Syriza attempt as much as we could.”

Syriza is the Left Party’s sister organisation and Hunko made no criticism of its betrayal. Instead, he claimed that it was inevitable, as a “small country” like Greece could not “change the whole European Union.” Nonetheless, he made clear the Left Party’s continued loyalty to the EU—the instrument through which the major European powers, led by Germany, have laid waste to Greece as an example to workers across Europe.

No clearer signal could be given of the reactionary perspective on which RISE has been formed. Those behind this latest attempt by the pseudo-left to cobble together an alliance for elections to the Scottish parliament do not want any scrutiny of the role they played in facilitating the betrayal of the Greek

working class, lest it interfere with their preparation of new betrayals.

Their duplicity and indifference to the catastrophe inflicted on Greek workers was mirrored in their take on Scottish politics.

RISE is an alliance between the SSP, the RIC and others in the pseudo-left and trade union bureaucracy. For more than a decade, these layers have been tireless advocates of Scottish independence in a “left” garb. Their sowing of nationalist divisions between Scottish and English workers expresses the interests of a section of the Scottish bourgeoisie and upper-middle class, who seek to benefit from the creation of a separate Scottish state operating as a low-tax investment platform within the EU.

In the run-up to the September 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, Fox sat on the board of the official “Yes Scotland” campaign alongside former banker and hedge fund chairman Sir George Mathewson, while the SSP and RIC sought to mobilise support for the Scottish National Party (SNP)-led independence drive in working-class neighbourhoods.

Independence was defeated by 55 percent to 45 percent and Fox’s hopes that his services to the big-business SNP would bring him rewards were bitterly disappointed.

He had boasted that should the nationalist bloc of the SSP, Greens and SNP get a majority by the time of the Scottish parliamentary elections in 2016, “the very next day we’re all on the first train from Edinburgh to David Cameron.”

This was a reference to the SSP’s intention to be at the table when the spoils from the intended carve-up of the UK’s national assets were to be parcelled out amongst the various factions of the ruling elite.

Instead, the SSP was excluded from the Smith Commission, convened by the Conservative government in the aftermath of the referendum to draw up new constitutional arrangements for the UK.

In addition, Fox’s overtures to the SNP for an electoral alliance were rejected by that party. In May’s general election, the SNP, which has formed the government in Scotland since 2007, won all but three of 59 Scottish parliamentary seats to Westminster. Its anti-austerity rhetoric enabled it to supplant the Labour Party, which suffered a catastrophic loss of all but

one of its previous 41 seats. The SSP, which stood just four candidates in the election—so desperate was it not to be seen to be in conflict with the SNP—won just 895 votes.

Despite this, speaking at the RISE founding conference, Fox proclaimed that “since we last met here, in this very hotel room, as the RIC, Scotland has changed beyond all recognition, and we here should be immensely proud of what we have achieved and what has changed.”

In the next breath he continued, “And yet for all that it has changed politically, far too little has changed socially and economically as far as the improvements secured by working-class people in Scotland are concerned.”

In fact, it doesn’t matter one iota to the pseudo-left that little has changed “socially and economically” for working people. This is not the criterion by which these petty-bourgeois “left” fakers measure success.

What really counts, what makes them so “immensely proud”, is the “political” changes—by which they mean the progress of Scottish nationalism in the corridors of power. In this they see the possibility of their own social advancement, over and against the interests of the working class.

The leading lights in RISE are well aware that popular support for the SNP cannot last. The gap between the SNP’s increasingly thin left-sounding rhetoric and its aggressive implementation of right-wing policies cannot but produce a reckoning.

RISE’s purpose therefore is to save the project of Scottish independence—and the lucrative opportunities they hope it will offer them—from the inevitable turn against the SNP by broad sections of workers.

Fox insisted, “We want to make it clear that the independence movement does not belong to the SNP.” RISE is to contest next year’s election on a limited critique of the SNP’s role in government, while channelling deepening social discontent behind the call for another independence referendum.

In line with this, the attitude toward the possible success of veteran “left” Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn in the Labour Party leadership contest was distinctly cool.

Most speakers who mentioned Corbyn either wrote off his campaign or directly attacked it. Fox, for example, stated, “I am a friend and huge admirer of Jeremy Corbyn, and we should all raise a dram to his astonishing achievement. But...we should also recognise that Jeremy Corbyn does not support independence, he does not support more powers for the Scottish parliament and he does not support a second referendum either.”

The pseudo-left are bitterly hostile to the fight for the independent political mobilisation of the working class against capitalism and its political representatives. In Scotland, this has taken the form of their insistence that English workers are too “conservative” and “backward” to be won to socialism. Consequently, the only way forward for Scottish workers is to make an alliance with their own bourgeoisie, form an

independent state, and at some unspecified—and never to be arrived at—date, use it to introduce “socialist” measures.

The fact that Corbyn’s criticisms of austerity and “neoliberalism” have struck a chord, and could even see him crowned the next Labour leader, disrupts their divisive narrative.

Moreover, as Fox indicated, RISE and the Corbyn campaign, whose supporters include the Labour Party’s newly elected deputy leader in Scotland, Neil Findlay, are potential competitors in the scramble for parliamentary seats.

Should Corbyn win election, his efforts to revive a moribund and despised party, and thereby rescue Labour as the principal political instrument of British capitalism, would jeopardise RISE’s posture as the only electoral alternative to the SNP in Scotland.

In the opening plenary session, Tam Brotherston indicated the tensions this was causing. Brotherston was a shop steward at the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS) in Glasgow, occupied by workers in 1971. The UCS workers were betrayed by the Stalinist leadership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, a school in which Brotherston has clearly spent many years.

Speaking of Corbyn’s possible election, Brotherston said, “I don’t care if he was to form a cabinet comprised of Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, I would still demand that Scotland had an independent voice.”

Corbyn’s campaign has nothing at all to do with Marxism, as those assembled in Glasgow know full well. But Brotherston’s remarks, dripping with visceral hatred for revolutionary socialism and working-class unity, drew loud cheers and whoops.

While the pseudo-left may not want any longer to publicly claim the mantle of “Scotland’s Syriza,” the founding conference of RISE left no doubt of the tradition in which they stand.

The authors also recommend:

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[13 June 2015]

Scottish Socialist Party defends Syriza

[13 August 2015]



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