

Scotland's RISE electoral coalition descends into crisis

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Last year saw the launch of the self-proclaimed “Scottish Syriza,” the RISE (Respect, Independence, Socialism and Environmentalism) coalition. RISE leaders intended to emulate the “success” of their Greek role-model, which had formed a government pledged to oppose austerity.

No sooner had RISE launched, however, than its components were forced to distance themselves from their Greek role model which, just one month earlier, had betrayed a massive anti-austerity mandate and signed up to all the brutal measures demanded by the European Union and International Monetary Fund.

Nevertheless, RISE aspired to return eight Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) at the next Scottish general election, calculating that they would need about 16,000 votes per region, 128,000 in total. Colin Fox, co-leader of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), RISE's main component together with the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC), said the Labour Party's “existential crisis” meant that the task of providing effective opposition to the ruling Scottish National Party (SNP) would fall to RISE.

Things turned out differently. The group did not win a single regional list seat and polled 10,911, 0.5 percent of the vote, or less than 10 percent of their target. RISE was even outpolled by former SSP leader Tommy Sheridan's crisis-ridden Solidarity Scotland, which won 14,333 list votes across Scotland. Taken together with the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), the fragmented and feuding pseudo-left groups polled 28,864 regional and constituency votes. By contrast, in 2003, a year whose results RISE were hoping to emulate, the SSP alone polled 245,735 regional and constituency votes and elected six MSPs.

Dominant in Scotland for decades, in 2003 the Scottish Labour Party held the vast majority of

Westminster seats, formed a minority government in Holyrood and dominated local government. Over the intervening 14 years, in line with the collapse of Labour in Britain and social democratic parties worldwide, Scottish Labour has suffered a rout due to its pro-business and warmongering policies. The main beneficiary has been the Scottish National Party (SNP), however. Today, Labour polls less than half the vote of the SNP and has just one Westminster seat, 24 in the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood, less than the Tories, and is likely to lose its remaining local authorities. Although the SNP-led “Yes” campaign decisively lost the 2014 referendum, SNP membership is now many times that of Labour.

The SNP won all but three of 59 Westminster seats and won the recent Scottish election, albeit with a reduced vote thanks to a low turnout in working class areas due to its imposition of cuts. In power since 2007, the party is forming a minority government, its third government in succession, in order to advance an anti-working class legislative program.

Commenting on RISE's electoral humiliation in the nationalist blog *Bella Caledonia*, reprinted in the Pabloite *International Viewpoint*, RISE organiser Jonathan Shafi, of the RIC and formerly of the International Socialist Group and the Socialist Workers Party, complained, “By the time [RISE] had launched, the energy of the referendum had been incubated in the SNP.”

“[W]e convinced ourselves of their being political space for the far left in an election where the SNP, Labour and the Greens were all competing for the radical vote,” he continued. “In 1999 and 2003 when the SSP broke through, the space for the radical left was much more accessible.”

Shafi offered no explanation of the pseudo-left's

decline and the SNP's rise. But the pseudo-left's central achievement has been precisely to ensure that the main beneficiaries from the collapse of the Labour Party in Scotland is the SNP—a tax-cutting, neo-liberal, pro-NATO, pro-European Union (EU) party. The SSP, latterly alongside the RIC and Solidarity Scotland, have worked year after year to portray Scottish nationalism as a progressive answer to pro-business, Conservative and Labour, austerity governments in Westminster, which the SNP successfully exploited by judiciously employing a little leftist rhetoric.

RISE is led by an aspiring middle class layer of academics and commentators seeking to build their careers through the creation of a new Scottish capitalist state. To this end they have offered their services as allies of the SNP in presenting its right wing nationalist project, directed towards breaking up the working class and fragmenting the social provision on which it depends, in vaguely socialist-sounding terms.

During the 2014 referendum, the SNP worked with the RIC and SSP, using them and Solidarity to mobilise for a “Yes” vote in working class areas. Solidarity now calls routinely for an SNP vote, with Sheridan hoping to secure a position for himself in the party.

All three groups hoped for a quid-pro-quo after the referendum, However, the SNP membership ballooned, expanding from less than 25,000 to over 100,000 in a matter of weeks. Presented with tens of thousands of new members, the SNP concluded it had little need of its varied suitors.

An additional consideration is the political unreliability of all three groups—in particular with regard to the SNP's key aim of supporting EU membership in the June 23 Brexit referendum in line with its desire for EU membership for Scotland after any independence referendum. SNP leader and Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon proposed herself as one of the leading lights in the “Remain” camp.

RISE, however, were unable to come to a unified position, with the SSP determinedly pro-EU while others such as academic Neil Davidson and former SNP leading light Jim Sillars calling for a “Leave.” Solidarity also supports the “Leave” camp.

RISE's central election pitch was for a second Scottish independence referendum. Entitled “Another Scotland is possible,” their manifesto called for a new independence poll “within the Lifespan of the Next

Holyrood Parliament, with or without Westminster's Permission.” This is not currently much use to the SNP either, which wants another independence vote only under more favourable economic and political conditions.

As a consequence, RISE and Solidarity Scotland were both unable to convince the SNP to encourage its supporters to give them their second preference vote.

Their disastrous performance raises the possibility of RISE breaking apart. While its founding meeting was attended by over 700 people, a conference in late May drew a mere 40. There are said to be sharp divisions within the SSP over continuing participation. In the SSP's *Scottish Socialist Voice*, party leader Colin Fox complained ruefully “Our ‘2nd vote for a 2nd referendum’ message simply did not resonate with Yes voters in the way we had hoped.”

The common conclusion of the RISE leadership is that their main mistake was to be overly critical of the SNP. Writing in the *National*, Carolyn Leckie, formerly an SSP MSP, declared, “I voted RISE,” but warned that “it really does need to tone down some of the over-the-top rhetoric that some of its activists directed towards the SNP.”

RISE official Jamie Maxwell was happy to concur, telling *Bella Caledonia*, “Bluntly accusing the SNP of being rightwing wasn't smart. The Greens struck a more constructive tone and were rewarded for it.”

For his part, Shafi called for a RISE to focus on building a new “extra-parliamentary movement” to build a “broad movement for independence again.”

Taken together, these positions amount to a call to end all but the most loyal criticism of the SNP and to work alongside it once again as nationalist apologists for austerity, dictatorship and war.



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