

Scottish National Party makes renewed right-wing independence pitch

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Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has published a draft bill for a second referendum on Scottish independence. It specifies October 19, 2023 as the date for the poll, defines the question to be put, “Should Scotland be an independent country?”, and outlines who can vote.

Since the power to legally call a referendum lies with the Conservative government in Westminster, which has ruled out doing so, Sturgeon has requested a ruling from the Supreme Court on whether the Scottish government can act unilaterally.

She told the Scottish parliament in Holyrood Tuesday that a defeat would prove, “No matter how Scotland votes, regardless of what future we desire for our country, the UK Government can block and overrule. The UK Government will always have the final say.” This would mean, Sturgeon continued, “if the law says that is not possible, the General Election [due 2024] will be a ‘de facto’ referendum.”

Sturgeon and the Scottish National Party (SNP) are orchestrating a reactionary stunt on behalf of a section of the bourgeoisie in Scotland.

Particularly under the brutal and boorish rule of Boris Johnson, there has undoubtedly been a growth in support for independence from the government in Westminster. The last Scottish independence referendum in 2014 delivered a 55 to 45 percent “No” vote. According to the latest Ipsos Mori poll, 51 percent are in favour.

But such polls only underscore the deeply divisive nature of an effort to make Scottish nationalism the dominant issue on both sides of the border.

With the working class throughout the UK coming into struggle against the Johnson government, and amid the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, the pro-austerity, pro-war SNP advances a nationalist policy of divide and rule.

There is no progressive content to the call for Scottish independence. No one has ever seriously tried to explain how workers in Scotland are specifically oppressed over and above workers in England by British imperialism. The furthest the argument goes is that Scotland is forced to accept governments and policies it does not choose. But not voting for Johnson or his predecessors is something the bulk of the working class in Scotland share with their counterparts in England and Wales.

Moreover, the main issue of concern for the SNP is Scotland remaining within the European Union, not as a democratic issue but from the standpoint of the economic interests of the Scottish

bourgeoisie and a privileged layer of the upper middle class. Speaking to Sky News this week, Sturgeon referred to Scotland voting 65 to 35 percent against Brexit and said, “Back then [2014], Scotland was told we would lose European Union membership if we voted for independence and now we are out of the European Union because we didn’t become independent—that’s happened against our will.”

The surprise victory of the Brexit campaign of the most right-wing elements of the Tory Party in the 2016 referendum—animated by fantasies of a global renewal of British imperialism through Thatcherite deregulation, a deepened alliance with US imperialism and the freedom to strike global trade relations—has undoubtedly acted as a spur to social reaction, trade and military war. But this was only one expression of the deepening of inter-imperialist and national antagonisms that have reached such malignant and deadly dimensions today.

The SNP’s anti-Brexit stance in 2014 was in fact shared by most of the British bourgeoisie, whose agenda was to pursue trade war from within the EU, not outside of it, and to spearhead a drive to war as Washington’s point man in Europe acting to police the independent global ambitions of Germany and France.

As has been proved by the savage austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights throughout the continent, and the lineup of all the EU powers behind the US-NATO war with Russia, both alternatives in the referendum on EU membership were then and are now hostile to the fundamental interests of the working class.

A Scotland freed from Westminster would be “independent” in name only. Home to just five and a half million people, it would be even more ruthlessly subordinated to international finance capital than it already is, with the SNP charged with enacting tax and spending cuts and scrapping regulations to make the region attractive for investment.

The SNP wants to regain membership of the EU while preserving access to the UK market. But the threatened collapse of the Northern Ireland Protocol amid an explosion of sectarian tensions is a warning of the political realities that national divisions create.

Economically, such a policy would facilitate a ferocious race to the bottom between Scotland and the UK, with attacks on workers of the kind already set out in the SNP’s spending review to 2027. According to the Institute of Fiscal Studies, “the axe is set to fall on a wide range of public service areas.” These include a savage 8 percent in real terms cut over the next four years for local

government, universities, prisons and rural affairs. According to the Unison trade union, this will equate to around 40,000 job losses, with the public workforce reduced to pre-pandemic levels. Cuts on this scale made in England and Wales would be equivalent to 480,000 jobs—a perspective Johnson would happily embrace.

Public bodies are to find annual “efficiencies” of 3 percent. Even prior to the spending review, National Health Service workers were offered a well below-inflation 5 percent pay rise and local government workers a grindingly low 2 percent.

An independent Scotland would also remain a loyal member of the imperialist war camp. Sturgeon commented in May in reference to the war in Ukraine, “I’m even more firm in my view today that coupled with a strong relationship with the United Kingdom, membership of the European Union and NATO will be cornerstones of an independent Scotland’s security policy.”

Sturgeon is in addition offering her threadbare status as a politician seeking “national self-determination” to portray NATO’s imperialist war aims in Ukraine in a similar light, declaring with reference to the war, “At its heart the Scottish independence movement is an internationalist project.”

The SNP’s vestigial opposition to Trident nuclear submarines being based at the Faslane naval base near Glasgow would, like previous opposition to NATO, be swiftly jettisoned. Stewart McDonald, the SNP’s defence spokesperson, told the BBC regarding NATO, “We would join on similar terms of Norway or Denmark in that we don’t want to permanently host nuclear weapons from other states but we certainly would take our commitments as members of the alliance seriously.”

The operative word in McDonald’s statement is “permanently.” Phillips O’Brien, professor of strategic studies at the University of St. Andrews, told the *Daily Express*, “If it defined anti-nuclear as ‘at no time will nuclear weapons be allowed on a naval ship in Scottish waters’ then that indeed would probably make Scotland not eligible for NATO, but I don’t think they’re defining it that rigidly.”

Former SNP defence spokesperson and Lieutenant-Colonel in the British Army, now a Liberal Democrat, Stuart Crawford, suggested in the same paper that the nuclear naval base, “might be the biggest bargaining chip Scotland might have in any possible future independence negotiations.”

Workers in an independent Scotland would confront the same political challenges as they do today but would do so while cut off from their class allies in the rest of the UK.

A politically criminal role is being played by the pseudo-left in providing a left cover for the SNP and its scheming for a Scottish capitalist state.

Writing for the Scottish Socialist Party in the pro-independence *National*, Ritchie Venton claimed, “the subservient relationship with Westminster, and financial straitjacket under devolution, means that—like the Tories—the SNP/Green government is operating the same pay restraint.” Freed from such subservience, he insinuated, the SNP could honour a “people’s mandate to defy and defeat Tory cuts to pay, jobs and services.”

The Socialist Party Scotland, affiliated to the Committee for a Workers’ International, claims in its statement responding to Sturgeon’s announcement, “We stand for a united struggle of the

working class in Scotland, England and Wales against the Johnson government and for a socialist alternative,” before adding, “That’s why Socialist Party Scotland fights for an independent socialist Scotland.”

Slapping the slogan “an independent socialist Scotland” on the SNP’s push for a referendum makes independence no more progressive than calling for a “left exit” did for Brexit—its sister Socialist Party’s policy in 2016.

Equally so adding the call for “a voluntary socialist confederation with England, Wales and Ireland as part of the struggle for socialism internationally.” No explanation is ever offered as to why encouraging national divisions here and now facilitates a future struggle for socialism either in the UK or internationally. The SSP, SPS et al have long ago written off any prospect of unified working-class struggle, let alone a programme of social revolution—routinely branding workers in England as politically backward and championing the creation of a Scottish state as a supposedly more accountable vehicle for passing various limited social reforms.

The fight for socialism requires a joint struggle by the British, European and international working class.

As the Socialist Equality Party wrote ahead of the 2014 referendum, “The unity and independence of the working class is the criterion against which every political party and every political initiative must be judged. This is essential under conditions in which the planet is being befouled with nationalist poison.”

“Separatism,” the SEP explained, “only weakens and divides the working class” in its struggle against capitalism. Moreover, “if national identity outweighs class unity in Britain, then it outweighs it everywhere. It means that the fake left are the advocates of the creation of innumerable mini-states based on ethnicity, language or religion,” the Balkanisation of the world.

In their struggle against the austerity and war policies of British imperialism, workers across the UK must fight for the overthrow of the Johnson and Sturgeon governments and the building of a socialist Britain within a United Socialist States of Europe and the world.



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