Oppose the separatist agenda of the Scottish National Party and pseudo-left groups: For working class unity not national division

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The UK Supreme Court last month ruled unanimously that if the UK government and parliament refuse to authorise it, "then the Scottish parliament does not have the power to legislate for a referendum on Scottish independence."

The verdict rejected the case put forward by the Scottish government at a hearing in October. It thwarts First Minister and Scottish National Party (SNP) leader Nicola Sturgeon's draft Independence Referendum Bill, published in June, which sought to legislate for a poll on October 19, 2023. Scotland's Lord Advocate, Dorothy Bain KC, advanced a case arguing that an "advisory" vote on Scottish independence would have no constitutional impact and therefore did not require the British government's approval.

The SNP's intention was always to use an expected legal rejection to portray Scotland as the victim of an undemocratic constitutional set-up. Immediately following the decision, Sturgeon told a pro-independence rally that the SNP would treat the next UK general election as a "de facto" independence poll, with all votes for pro-independence parties counted as a yes vote.

Small nationalist demonstrations by members of the SNP and various pseudo-left groups protested the verdict. At one held in Glasgow's Marriot Hotel, Sturgeon said of the verdict that "the myth that the United Kingdom is a voluntary Union of nations has been comprehensively – and permanently – shattered…"

A pro-imperialist project

It is necessary for workers to look clearly and soberly at the political aims and class interests advanced in the name of "Scottish independence" and reject Sturgeon's claims to be fighting for "democracy" for the "Scottish people".

The separatist agenda championed by the SNP, its Alba splinter and pseudo-left satellites articulates the interests of social forces bitterly hostile to the fundamental interests of the working class.

Firstly, and decisively, the promotion of nationalism in the name of championing "self-determination" disarms the working class in the face of the most dangerous development in the world—the escalating NATO-led proxy war in Ukraine against Russia.

Like its imperialist counterparts in Westminster, Washington, Berlin and Paris, the SNP-Scottish Green coalition at Holyrood has lined up squarely behind the war, citing the defence of Ukrainian "sovereignty" and "democracy" as justification. As long ago as 2015, Sturgeon stated she considered her government to be a "key ally of the United States" and supported UK training of Ukrainian forces.

In June this year, the Scottish government gave £65 million to a £1 billion arms package sent by the UK government to Ukraine. They are pitching the world into a conflict whose real aim is securing control of Russia's strategic oil, gas and mineral resources, preparing the ground for a confrontation with China and threatening nuclear war.

The SNP's central aim in stepping up its nationalist rhetoric is to cut across rising class tensions in Scotland. For years, the SNP, its splinters and satellites have been able to leech on popular hostility to the Tories, Labour, and the little-Englander nationalism surrounding Brexit by offering the creation of an independent Scotland as their remedy for all ills. They are now attempting to do so under far more explosive conditions, amid an eruption of imperialist military violence and war and the worst cost-of-living crisis in decades.

Nationalism and the class struggle

None of the fundamental questions confronting the working class in Scotland or anywhere else have a national solution. The policies pursued by the SNP government prove that austerity, the homicidal "let it rip" response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war waged by NATO against Russia in Ukraine, are the response of the bourgeoisie in every country to the crisis wracking world capitalism as the major imperialist powers seek to control world markets and essential resources.

The SNP follows its Tory and Labour counterparts in seeking to claw back the trillions handed over to the major corporations and banks during the pandemic and the cost of the Ukraine war and sanctions against Russia from the working class.

The promotion of nationalism is intended to cut across the international upsurge of strikes and protests that this offensive against the working class is provoking. It is a movement developing in every country, against governments that act as enforcers for global corporations and an international financial oligarchy. And only such a global movement of the working class, unified organisationally and politically, offers any basis for defending jobs, wages and essential services, and above all unleashing the immense social power of the working class against militarism and war.

The divisive impact the promotion of Scottish nationalism has on the unity of the working class is the essential measure of its deeply reactionary character.

For years, the SNP was able to capitalise on the suppression of the class struggle throughout the UK by a rightward-lurching Labour Party, in alliance with the trade unions. The SNP sought to pose as a representative

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of anti-Tory sentiment, portraying itself as to the left of Labour on social issues, with minimal reforms paid for thanks to a 20 percent per capita advantage on public spending enjoyed by the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales.

Today, workers throughout the UK are involved in industrial action that has brought them into a head-on confrontation not only with the Tory government but the sabotage campaign mounted by the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy. This movement has the potential to develop into a fundamental challenge to capitalism in Britain and across Europe.

Pseudo-left advocates of separatism

With education, rail, refuse and other workers across Scotland in direct conflict with SNP-run councils and SNP/Scottish Green government plans for £1.2 billion in cuts, pseudo-left groups are rallying to the call for "national unity" rather than class unity. They are calling for a Scottish Independence Convention next year at which they would once again step forward as the SNP's recruiting sergeants.

The SSP's Colin Fox appealed to Sturgeon, explaining "Scottish Socialists warned the First Minister and the SNP/Green government" against relying on the Supreme Court and calling on them to "now accept new tactics are urgently required.

"This defeat for the First Minister not only weakens her – it weakens our entire movement," he whines. "The Scottish Socialist Party has reached the view [!] that the leadership of the independence movement cannot be left solely to the First Minister and her closest staff but must include the mass of Yes supporters."

The proposed Independence Convention would unify "all pro-independence parties, existing Yes groups" to agree a common programme "capable of persuading a majority of our fellow Scots of the merits of independence and a serious route map for its achievement."

In its June 21, 2014 statement, "Vote 'no' in the Scottish referendum—Fight for a socialist Britain," the Socialist Equality Party outlined a socialist and internationalist response to the demand for separatism. It differentiated the standpoint of the working class not only from the SNP, but from pseudo-left tendencies that became the staunchest advocates of nationalism:

"All claims that 'independence' is a democratic demand, offering an alternative to cuts and austerity, are lies," the SEP wrote. The SNP's real aim was "to transform Scotland into a low tax, cheap labour platform for the benefit of the banks and transnational corporations. The victims of this will be workers on both sides of the border, who will see a deepening of the ongoing offensive against jobs, wages and conditions that has been waged by all the major parties in both Westminster and Holyrood."

The SEP insisted, "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."

The statement rejected claims that Scotland was an oppressed nation and that separatism was "anti-imperialist" because it would lead to the break-up of the British state. Scotland did not suffer national oppression but was a component part of an imperialist state whose ruling elite has "committed countless crimes and shared in the brutal exploitation of millions the world over. Waving the Saltire in people's faces is meant to conceal the basic fact that workers in Scotland are not oppressed because of their nationality, but because of their class position within capitalist society."

Against those who portray the Act of Union in 1707 as a great betrayal of Scotland's national destiny, the SEP wrote that it not only provided the framework for the development of capitalism and a vast growth in the productive forces, but laid the basis "for the emergence of the first industrial working class in the world. Since then, working people in England, Scotland and Wales have fought side by side in epic struggles, including the great revolutionary Chartist movement for democracy and equality, the general strike of 1926, the mass strike movement that brought down a Tory government in 1974 and the year-long miners' strike of 1984-85."

Addressing the potential break-up of the UK, the SEP explained that globalisation—the integration of production across national boundaries, dominated by huge transnational corporations and banks—had brought both inter-imperialist and national antagonisms to a new peak of intensity. The national division of a globally organised economy "that gave rise to two of the most devastating wars in human history" was once more spurring a struggle by the major powers to redivide the world between them and provoking trade and military war.

Scottish and other separatist tendencies had emerged as a reactionary response by bourgeois forces to the globalisation of production, for whom, "The primary function of a separate Scottish state would be to establish more direct relations with the major banks, corporations and speculators by offering to drive up exploitation, smash up wages and working conditions, destroy or privatise social services and eliminate as far as is possible taxes on corporate wealth."

The pseudo-left groups arguing for Scottish nationalism are the political representatives of a petty bourgeois stratum hoping to piggy-back the regional bourgeoisie's efforts at self-enrichment at the expense of the working class, by securing positions in the "flurry of national and local government, institutional, cultural and trade union positions they hope will be created" following independence.

Their differences with regionalist and separatist formations of an explicitly right-wing character in Italy, Belgium and elsewhere are purely rhetorical. Their occasional references to socialism notwithstanding, the Scottish Socialist Party's Colin Fox made clear that they consider even minimal reformist measures "not immediately realistic, given our financial obligation to international bodies," declaring that "the classic left argument that Scottish independence would undermine the unity of the British working class" is "for us, an out of date formulation."

This right-wing trajectory now finds the pseudo-left groups acting not only as cheerleaders for the SNP, but for fascist groups in Ukraine such as the Azov Brigade and the Right Sector.

Lessons of Yugoslavia

What the pseudo left promote as "anti-imperialist" is the creation of innumerable mini-states, based on ethnicity, language or religion, that has on every occasion led to disaster. The SEP warned, "No one should forget the tragic experience of Yugoslavia, whose breakup in the 1990s triggered a decade of bloody civil wars and a catastrophic collapse in living standards. Nor how sectarian divisions were exploited by NATO to wage war against Libya and provoke civil war in Syria. And no one can ignore how ethnic and linguistic divisions are once again being exploited to further NATO military aggression against Russia in Ukraine. In every instance, the fake-left lined up behind imperialism—all in the name of defending 'self-determination'."

At that time, the apologists for the SNP rejected all such comparisons as illegitimate, declaring that Scottish nationalism was of an entirely different character—a "civic nationalism" that was inclusive, anti-racist and peaceful. But the submission to the court from the SNP in furtherance of its latest demand for a referendum makes absolutely clear the pro-imperialist and anti-working-class pedigree of Scottish separatism.

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Presented in the language of the United Nations Charter and international legal precedents, arguing for the "inalienable" right of the "Scottish people" to self-determination, it chooses as its primary example the politically catastrophic breakup experienced in the former Yugoslavia—divided into Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo—as recognised in the British government's submission to the International Court of Justice in 2008.

This submission recognised the right to secede by "distinct peoples" within a state, rather than colonies, which suffer "oppression… so as to oppose tyranny."

For the working class the SNP's upholding of Kosovo must sound a warning. It was in the former Yugoslavia that the promotion of "self-determination" was first utilised as a strategy by imperialism to reassert control of territories lost to it through revolution and to divide and disorient the working class.

The 2008 Kosovan declaration was the culmination of nearly two decades of imperialist provocations and interventions into the former Yugoslavia, resulting in a series of wars that saw bloody ethnic cleansing, and NATO's 1999 air war on Serbia, that claimed 140,000 lives. The corrupt and impoverished Kosovan state functions today as a NATO and EU protectorate, facilitating imperialism's control of the Balkan region.

The imperialist goal of carrying out a fresh redivision of the world in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union has continued ever since in a series of wars all over the world. It has now assumed its most dangerous form in the proxy NATO war against Russia.

The political cynicism of the SNP is underscored by the other reference cited in its legal case of Britain declaring a "belief in the inalienable right of self-determination" when its representatives insisted in 1983 that "the Falklanders have a right of self-determination which no one can take from them."

Citing this "right" provided the basis for Thatcher's dirty Falklands/Malvinas war in 1982 that claimed almost 1,000 lives. The Thatcher government used the resulting nationalist fervour to secure re-election and launch attacks on the working class, culminating in the 1984-85 miners' strike.

Scottish capitalism versus international socialism

For most of the period since the failed 2014 independence referendum, the campaign for a renewed effort has centred on convincing business and finance that independence would overcome the economically disastrous effects of the Brexit referendum, held just two years later, and offer a possible reintegration into the European Union.

This underscores how independence is intimately bound up with preparing Scotland as a cheap labour low tax investment platform, rather than lofty declarations by Sturgeon of "Scotland's democracy movement."

As former SNP Deputy Leader, Jim Sillars, admitted in Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* on November 24, "It's time to cease wallowing in grudge and grievance, stop pretending that Scotland is a colony. We were as enthusiastic colonisers as any Englishman ever was." Rather, "With the rise of Asia and Africa we face intense competition, and only with sovereign control of all that matters to a nation, will Scots be able to prosper."

In its 2014 statement, the SEP outlined a political alternative for the working class to the global eruption of nationalism—the struggle for world socialist revolution:

"The only progressive response to the crisis of the nation-state system is to bring an end to all national divisions by adopting the perspective of socialist internationalism.

"The SEP is for a struggle against globally organised capital, not the offering of corporate tax incentives. We are for the overthrow of British imperialism and its state apparatus, not a negotiated settlement to set up a new repressive state.

"We call for working people to reject nationalism and separatism and to mobilise an anti-austerity, anti-war movement seeking the removal of the Conservatives, Scottish National Party and their Labour and Liberal Democrat allies from power and an end to the rule of the parasitic and unaccountable financial oligarchy they speak for.

"The SEP calls for the creation of a workers' government committed to socialist policies. We stand for the formation of the United Socialist States of Europe, not the Balkan-style carve-up of the continent led by grasping regional elites who will use a 'yes' vote in Scotland as a green light for their own separatist agendas."

Building a genuine socialist party to unify all sections of working people in the struggle against nationalism and for socialism in Britain, Europe and internationally is the task to which workers must now dedicate themselves.

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