

Pseudo-left groups seek new nationalist diversions as Scottish National Party unravels

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8 August 2023

The meltdown of the Scottish National Party (SNP), culminating in the resignation and arrest of former First Minister and party leader Nicola Sturgeon, is a debacle for the pseudo-left groups.

In a matter of weeks, the SNP fell from a position of apparent unrivalled dominance in Scottish politics to one where much of its national leadership has either resigned or is preparing to resign. The party is subject to a police investigation into its finances while Sturgeon has been replaced by Humza Yousaf, a man predicted to lead the SNP into electoral disaster.

In response, pseudo-left groups who all support Scottish nationalism have stepped up their efforts to save the perspective of Scottish independence from the shipwreck of the party most associated with the project.

Writing for the Socialist Party Scotland (SPS), in an article published June 23 to coincide with a recent SNP conference, “Where now for Scottish independence?”, SPS General Secretary Philip Stott captures the perplexed mood and reactionary outlook of the entire milieu.

Stott bemoans the fact that the SNP crisis has made the prospect of a second independence poll, seeking a different result to that of 2014 when independence was rejected by 55 to 45 percent, seem distant.

Stott notes that there is an intensification of the class struggle. But this is only of interest to him because, in Scotland, it can perhaps be manipulated into backing a nationalist agenda—even when he notes that many strikes are “seeing workers pitted against SNP politicians.” He continues, “This working-class fightback has the same roots of class anger as the 2014 indyref itself. Blocked, temporarily, on the national question, not least because of the misleadership of the SNP, workers have continued to fight on the cost-of-living issue. By using the strike weapon the class struggle has been taken onto a higher level.”

Scottish independence and Brexit

Stott’s conflating of the 2014 referendum with the current wave of strikes is bogus. The 2014 poll, like the Brexit vote across the UK two years later, did contain an element of protest. Sections of workers, abandoned by the Labour Party and the trade unions, facing the destruction of whole industries, austerity and endless pressure on living standards, voted against what they saw as the establishment position.

But this only drew them behind rival sections of the ruling class, those promoting Scottish separatism in 2014 or Brexit in 2016. Responsibility for this lies with the pseudo-left who portrayed by turns both an “independent” putative Scottish state and then an “independent” British state as mechanisms for implementing a platform of national reform. The first was based on extracting Scotland from the UK, the second through supposed British autonomy from the “bosses club” of the European Union

(EU).

None felt the need to explore the contradictions between these two positions, despite the Scottish independence project being predicated on seeking EU membership, with the new state functioning as a cheap labour, low-tax investment platform for transnational corporations seeking access to the Single European Market. But it is entirely appropriate for the pseudo-left groups to advance one programme for “Scottish workers” and an opposed one for the whole UK.

Scottish independence is no less of a right-wing project than Brexit. Following the 2014 referendum, Sturgeon, who replaced Alex Salmond as SNP leader and first minister, oriented the SNP towards making a detailed economic case for independence that could convince the leaders and opinion formers of British and international capital of the profits to be made.

At the same time, to secure a majority for a second referendum, Sturgeon and the SNP continued to spin fairy tales that independence could provide resources for more social spending, better wages and the like—claims amplified by its pseudo-left echo chamber. This claim relied materially on the marginally higher social spending made possible by the UK’s Barnett tax distribution formula, which originated as a sop to stifle demands by the SNP in the 1970s to control the revenues from “Scotland’s oil and gas” in the North Sea.

The propaganda was initially successful, given the widespread hostility to the Tory government at Westminster and the rightward trajectory of the Labour Party—and even survived efforts by Jeremy Corbyn after becoming leader in 2015 to offer the prospect of a more “left-wing” Labour Party. The SNP eclipsed Labour in Scottish national and local government and its membership ballooned to as many as 120,000.

Following the 2016 Brexit vote, Sturgeon also positioned the SNP as a key player in the drive to restore British links with the EU, hoping to garner influence and political support from the leading European powers and the most pro-EU sections of the British ruling class and from broad sections of the working class and middle class—a majority in Scotland—who viewed Brexit as an economic and social disaster.

Catalonia and the SNP

Events in Catalonia dealt Sturgeon and the SNP a serious blow. Scotland and Catalonia are both wealthy regions within major European powers with separatist movements. Representing sections of the regional bourgeoisie and upper middle class, these movements seek a greater share of profits extracted from the working class through direct relationships with global finance, transnational corporations and the EU, rather than via the UK or Spain—generally complaining that taxes paid are being funneled to the capital city and to poorer regions.

In 2017, when the Catalan nationalists held an unauthorised referendum on secession from Spain, the EU, concerned over the stability of several member states, backed the brutal repression by the right-wing Popular Party government in Madrid. This destroyed the SNP's hopes for support from the EU apparatus in Brussels as a counterweight to Westminster, convincing Sturgeon of the need for a cautious approach to any second poll.

This alienated significant elements within the SNP, including former leader Alex Salmond, who formed his own Alba Party calling for a more aggressive drive for a referendum. The conflicts came to a head last year when the UK Supreme Court threw out an SNP case exploring the Scottish government's right to call a poll unilaterally.

Conflict with the working class

Over the same period, Sturgeon and the Scottish government have come ever more sharply into conflict with the working class, a process greatly accelerated by the pandemic.

Across the UK, millions of local government and health service workers, professionals, postal workers, teachers and lecturers, rail and bus workers have held determined and extended strike struggles in defence of wages, living standards and working conditions. These strikes, driven by the global crisis of world capitalism, erupted simultaneously with powerful movements and protests emerging across Europe and internationally.

The strikes revealed the social power of the working class, cutting across all national divisions and refuting in practice the pseudo-left's promotion of Scottish and Welsh nationalism. Regardless of regional differences and nuances, workers have been confronted by the Tory government in London and the devolved nationalist and Labour administrations in Edinburgh and Cardiff, with equal hostility.

In response, the pseudo-left tendencies are desperately seeking a means to revive the stalled drive for a second Scottish referendum, whose primary impact would be to break up a unified movement emerging in the working class.

They have seized on Salmond's proposal for a revived Scottish Independence Convention, urging "a broad and inclusive political and civic gathering of the independence movement" aiming "to field one single candidate in each constituency on a joint platform seeking a mandate to negotiate independence." Salmond hopes, having survived the SNP leadership's attempt to jail him for refuted sex crimes, to bring together all the independence parties—including the SNP, Alba, the Greens and the pseudo-left Scottish Socialist Party [SSP] in electoral pacts.

Several pseudo-left figures have already joined Salmond's party, including former SSP leader Tommy Sheridan, the Common Weal think-tank and former International Marxist Group member and SNP MP, George Kerevan. The SSP's current co-spokesperson, Colin Fox, called for an independence convention as soon as Sturgeon resigned to deliver "our shared goal."

Stott's SPS is a component of the former Militant Tendency in Scotland from which emerged the SSP and Tommy Sheridan's now disbanded Solidarity party. What became the SPS extracted themselves from the SSP over its too-overt nationalism. It retains links with the Socialist Party of England and Wales and its international affiliates in the Committee for a Workers International.

Stott's concern is that the convention as outlined by Salmond and Fox would be discredited from the start. He muses, "While supporting an independent socialist Scotland we can have no faith, never mind an electoral agreement, with the leaderships of the likes of the SNP, and

indeed Alba and the Greens, who have a record of making cuts and attacking workers."

Stott's reference to an "independent socialist Scotland" established at some undefined point after independence is common to all the pseudo-left groups. It is the preferred formulation to conceal their real perspective of support for an independent capitalist Scotland.

Aware of this, Stott adds, "If inequality, poverty and the rule of the capitalist elite is to continue post-independence, why should the working class support independence? That's why Socialist Party Scotland links the fight for democratic rights to the struggle for socialism."

Trade unions and the "right to decide"

The only right Stott genuinely upholds is the "right" of the trade union bureaucracy to control the working class. Despite minor rhetorical differences, the SPS with the rest of the pseudo-left are all encouraging the trade unions to play a leading role in promoting a second referendum.

As long ago as 2021, the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) voted in support of a motion that "the Scottish Parliament should have the power to hold a referendum on Scotland's future and should not require UK Government consent." Speaking at an SNP conference last year, STUC leader Roz Foyer told delegates, "We see the SNP as political allies of the trade union movement."

The STUC does not support independence, but significant sections of the trade union bureaucracy do. And posturing as being concerned over democratic debate while sowing divisions between workers in Scotland and the rest of the UK is like catnip for the union bureaucracy.

Stott turns to the STUC to uphold the "right to decide" after the trade unions and the Scottish governmentlike their counterparts across the UK—have daily collaborated to derail and close down strike after strike in the interests of the corporations. Repeated massive majorities for strike action have been ignored or squandered by trade union officials, seeking to preserve their cosy arrangements with management and local and national government as negotiating partners, in return for policing the class struggle.

The SNP, Alba and war

It is striking that Stott makes no mention of the escalating war crisis centred on Ukraine. This reflects concern that even a feeble pacifist appeal, that would at one time have been the stock-in-trade of the "left", would expose the reactionary character of the nationalist, trade union and pseudo-left forces he hopes will unite in a push for a new referendum.

The SNP enthusiastically supports NATO's war against Russia. Sturgeon herself wrote in March, "All of us want to see a speedy and decisive victory for Ukraine over Putin's aggression, so that the country can once again live in peace and democracy, with its independence and territorial integrity restored."

Salmond's Alba Party, with the pseudo-left in tow, nominally opposes NATO membership despite Salmond's role in leading the SNP into supporting NATO in 2012. It supported the Minsk Accords and criticised NATO expansion in the immediate aftermath of the invasion but has since maintained complete silence.

Shortly after Russia's invasion, the SSP issued a March 6, 2022 statement supporting both Ukrainian "self determination" and "national rights of all minorities including those in the Donbas and Luhansk regions

up to and including the right to democratic, independent self-government,” calling for a ceasefire and “negotiated political settlement”. This was to be their last word on a war that threatens to escalate into all-out conflict between nuclear powers.

The SPS reproduces the political line of its international co-thinkers, publishing the criminally complacent ruminations of Tony Saunois asserting that “it is not in the interests of western imperialism or Putin to allow this conflict to develop into an all-out war between NATO forces and Russia, to become a third world war, with a nuclear arms exchange.” Instead of a call for unity between Russian and Ukrainian workers, he calls for a “cross-ethnic, armed, democratically controlled defence force” to wage the war on NATO’s behalf.

No ostensibly left organisation in Scotland takes up an active struggle against war. Instead they champion the further national division of the world capitalist system that is the root cause of war. The call, “Workers of the World Unite!” is replaced by “Workers divide on national lines!”

Should an independent Scotland ever arise, it would be a minor, heavily militarised, pro-NATO imperialist power. Run by a narrow clique of financiers and nationalist politicians, it would be locked in brutal competition with much larger rivals for profits and investment through the further evisceration of workers’ living standards. Nothing the pseudo-left proposes mitigates this in the slightest or has anything to do with socialism.

The overthrow of capitalism in Britain demands the political mobilisation of the entire working class to dismantle all the state institutions of capitalist rule—the police, military, judiciary, intelligence services and the ancient junk of the monarchy, the church and all their trappings—not their preservation under the Saltire rather than the Union Jack. Such a movement cannot be conceived outside of a powerful and integrated movement of the European and international working class, seeking the reorganisation of economic life to meet social need not private profit.

The issues posed to working people in Scotland are the same as those posed to workers in Britain and internationally. Faced with collapsing living standards, war, climate disaster and daily assaults on democratic rights, no way forward can be found through tinkering with the nation state system. To fight for their independent interests means workers rejecting all forms of nationalism, including its British and Scottish variants, and forging a political movement for a United Socialist States of Europe and the establishment of socialism worldwide.



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