

Scotland: Workers should reject the false promises of independence

Andy Yorke, WP No 377 Mon, 17/03/2014 - 17:38

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ALTHOUGH POLLS continue to show a majority against complete independence, but in favour of increased powers for the Scottish parliament, 'Devo- Max', the latest YouGov poll (3 March) registered erosion of the pro-Union majority: 53 per cent against independence and 35 per cent for.

The narrowing of the majority to 18 points is a direct result of Cameron and Osborne's campaign. Their threats, including denying Scotland the continued use of the pound, exclusion from the EU and the exit of banks and financial institutions, has rightly angered many Scots. The idea that they could be bullied into staying in the UK was a huge miscalculation.

Scotland's First Minister and SNP leader Alex Salmond bases his appeal on the promise that an independent Scottish government will halt the austerity and the destruction of education and health services imposed from Westminster.

He promises that independence would mean a more prosperous country with less inequality. North Sea oil would pay for a return to the social welfare policies that used to be Labour's trump card before Blair, Brown and Miliband abandoned them.

Marxism and Nationalism

Socialists defend the right of the Scottish people to decide their own future, whether to separate from the UK or to seek greater autonomy within it. We totally condemn the threats and bullying of Coalition ministers. Likewise, we oppose the exclusion of the so-called 'Devo-Max' option in the wording of the referendum.

If the Scottish people vote yes, every worker and democrat in the rest of the UK should campaign for the Westminster Parliament to recognise and implement that decision immediately and without any discriminatory measures. The UK labour movement should take political and, if need be, industrial, action against any measures by our rulers to thwart the full realisation of the Scots' democratically expressed wishes.

The Russian revolutionary, Lenin, compared self-determination to divorce: Marxists must support the right unconditionally but that does not mean that they always advocate its implementation. Indeed, Marxists have always preferred the largest possible states because they have the potential for the largest possible class struggle.

The exception to this is where one nation is oppressed, politically or economically, within a larger state dominated by another nation. This was the case when the whole of Ireland was held within the UK, and remains the case in 'Northern Ireland'. However, while Scotland is a distinct nation within the UK, as

opposed to a region, like Yorkshire, it is not an oppressed nation.

Certainly, the Acts of Union of 1706 and 1707, which created the United Kingdom of Great Britain were not expressions of the democratic wishes of either nation, since neither parliament was itself democratic. However, Scotland rapidly became integrated into the rising British Empire, participating in the oppression of India, Ireland and all the other colonial possessions.

This enriched Scottish capitalists, creating a powerful industrial and banking sector centred on Glasgow, 'the Empire's Second City'. Scottish regiments were often the crack forces of colonial conquest. Today, although it suffered heavily from Britain's post-war industrial decline, Scotland ranks third in GDP per capita and household income after the two wealthiest English regions, London and the Southeast.

According to the SNP, independence and control of North Sea oil revenues would give it the eighth highest output per capita in the OECD club of industrialised countries. It is the promise of this potential wealth that the SNP is dangling in front of voters, desperate to escape the economic blight of Tory austerity and a Labour 'alternative' that can only offer austerity-lite.

The SNP's promised land

Since the 1980s, the SNP has targeted Labour voters with limited but significant reforms, combined with pledges to business of fiscal responsibility to prove it is a party fit to govern. Besides blocking the Coalition's NHS privatising reforms, scrapping university tuition fees and funding tenants to neutralise the cruel bedroom tax, the SNP government has promised an expansion of free nursery care and school meals, conditional on achieving independence. These reforms, coupled with Labour's commitment to continuing Coalition austerity, gave the SNP its landslide victory in 2011.

However, independence is no guarantee of a better life for Scottish workers. The SNP's post-independence plans for deregulation and a 3 per cent tax cut for business as a whole are aimed at hiking profits and attracting international investment. Even with oil, taking a share of the UK's debt and with state spending billions above its tax revenues, the SNP's promises of small rises in the minimum wage, benefits, pensions and a dramatic expansion of childcare would have a large question mark over them.

If further proof were needed, the SNP's policy of keeping the pound would mean accepting monetary and some taxation policy from Westminster and the City of London. If the country stayed within the EU, the same would be true for huge areas of public policy. Along with plans to keep NATO and the monarchy, the 'independence' of Scotland would be more symbolic than real.

The SNP, and the wing of the Scottish capitalist class it represents, wants to grow Scottish capitalism by being more neoliberal than the UK, thus initiating a race to the bottom. The social reforms would soon prove to be just window-dressing, to be discarded once the new owners are safely in command. They will declare that workers must wait till the new independent state has found its feet and is prospering, that is, when its bosses are making big profits. It will be a long wait in present global conditions.

Class and independence

None of this should be a surprise since the SNP is not a party of the Scottish working class. Still less is the SNP a party of the Scottish people as a whole, as every Marxist should know, this is a nonstarter since parties represent classes. It is a capitalist party, even if it has adopted some social democratic reforms to avoid the old 'Tartan Tories' jibe.

That is why it is wrong for the pro-independence Scottish Socialist Party and other leftists to work with the capitalist SNP in the Yes campaign. Rather than 'warmly welcoming' their decision to fund tenants hit by

the bedroom tax, socialists should have exposed the way Salmond & Co financed this by taking money from other services and condemned the policy as merely a tactical manoeuvre.

Those who claim that independence will shatter any illusions in the SNP, as workers clash with an SNP government showing its true capitalist colours, ignore the power of nationalism to appeal for sacrifices for the new nation. The SNP will have firm allies in the union bureaucracy of an independent Scotland, which will put up no more resistance than the UK bureaucracy as a whole has done in over five years of austerity.

Similarly, those like the Socialist Workers Party and International Socialist Group who say that 'breaking up the British state' means weakening imperialism are talking nonsense. Scotland would be a small imperialist power, like those of Scandinavia and Benelux. Through Nato and the EU, it would be totally at the service of the big imperialisms. The vacation of Faslane would be a minor irritant not a major blow. To talk this sort of nonsense is unworthy of people who regard themselves as Leninists.

'Socialists' who fail to challenge nationalism, which divides workers and is a deadly enemy of internationalism, are not aiding the class-consciousness of Scottish workers but undermining it. Those that reinforce separatism are just helping the nationalists in their task of dividing the working class and dulling its class-consciousness.

Those, like the SSP, who argue it will be easier to achieve reforms, create jobs or redistribute wealth in an independent Scotland are giving a socialist gloss to SNP lies to the working class. None of these things are possible without class struggle. If Scottish workers can fight for austerity after independence in a mass movement of strikes and protests, then why not do it now, hand-in-hand with their English, Welsh and Irish brothers and sisters?

We believe socialists should call for a No vote in the referendum, making it clear that this is in no sense a vote for the United Kingdom of British imperialism, its flag, its queen or its state institutions. Whatever choice they make, socialists in the rest of the UK will continue to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with their Scottish brothers and sisters in the fight for working class power, border or no border.

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