

# Socialism, the 'National Question' and the Independence Convention in Scotland

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This article was written as a contribution to the debate within the Scottish Socialist Party over the proposal for an Independence Convention – essentially a cross-party alliance to press the case for an independent Scotland. This idea was first floated by Alan McCombes, the SSP's National Policy Co-ordinator, in a discussion paper 'After May 1st: Which way forward towards independence and socialism?', and the campaign was formally launched in September 2003 at a fringe meeting at the Scottish National Party conference.

## Introduction

There is a dual starting point for the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) in relation to the “national question” and the Independence Convention in Scotland today. The first concerns how the cause of the socialist project embodied in the SSP can be advanced from where it presently is in relation to the substantial support for independence in Scotland; the second is how the SSP can meaningfully engage with far wider numbers of people in order to bring them towards itself than is presently the case. The success of the SSP in the 2003 elections in Scotland was a historical turning point in the fortunes of the left in Scotland. The question then poised is, can this turning point become a progressive turning point in the history of society in Scotland?

This contribution to the debate in the SSP seeks to alter the terms of the debate and change the emphasis because it is evident that the polarisation that exists in the debate,<sup>1</sup> between primarily the *Socialist Worker* Platform and the International Socialists (CWI in Scotland) on the one hand, and the leadership of the SSP, the International Socialist Movement (ISM) and the republican platforms on the other, cannot be productive in its current form. Although there are quite important points of difference between the *Socialist Worker* Platform and the International Socialists (CWI in Scotland) in their criticisms and/or rejection of the Independence Convention, and there are also differences in the reasons why the ISM and republican platforms support the proposals, what both those for and those against have in common is that they are in the main

arguing past each other, often arguing against imaginary positions attributed to the other side and engaging in stereotypes and caricatures which are of “strawmen” theses.

Consequently, this paper examines the rationale for the Independence Convention, the arguments against it and makes an assessment of the purchase of the Independence Convention. It concludes that in terms of strategic orientation and tactical concerns at the present time, the proposals for the Independence Convention are to be welcomed: the merits outweigh any demerits.

Before looking at these issues and arguments, it must be borne in mind that the SSP's *raison d'être* is the creation of an independent socialist Scotland not only to bring about a just and fair society where the majority of people, i.e. the working class, run society in their own interests (broadly defined as being run on the basis of meeting social needs), but also to make a contribution to the creation of a Britain-wide and global socialist project. It is, therefore, incumbent that the SSP takes a major step forward from merely having this as a formal policy goal and as a slogan to a position where it makes the goal of an independent socialist Scotland a living and important part of its concrete work.

## Orientating on a Wider Radical Milieu through a Transitional Method

The key salient reason for supporting the Independence Convention is bound up with making an assessment of what are the most effective means by which to orientate on a wider number of people in Scotland that can be won to the cause of socialism, defined here as the SSP.

Significant as the SSP's success was in 2003, it still only represents 7% of those that voted (where less than 50% voted). We cannot ignore this. SSP membership is around 3,000. Significant as though this is, this is still a tiny minority. There are a number of numerically significant and politically advanced milieux which are available to the SSP in these terms of reaching out and drawing people towards the SSP. There are the collective anti-globalisation/anti-capitalism/social justice milieux, the anti-war/anti-imperialism/anti-occupation movement, and the trade union movement. The Independence Convention seeks to relate to a further milieu, that of those in favour of independence for Scotland. Three key questions arise at this point. These are: why the pro-independence milieu?; why prioritise independence?; and why independence not socialism?

There are a number of components to the answers to these questions which centre on the attested reality that a) the pro-independence milieu represents the largest single body of most radicalised working class opinion in Scotland today, and b) this milieu see the means of independence as the most credible means by which to create a better, more progressive and just society in Scotland. The evidence for this is derived from the Scottish Election Surveys and Scottish Social Attitude Surveys of 1979, 1992, 1997, 1999 and 2002.

Support for independence amongst the social groups that comprise the working class has grown between 1979-2002: routine non-manual: 8% to 25%, skilled manual 5% to 34%, semi-skilled manual 8% to 34%, and unskilled manual 8% to 40%.<sup>2</sup> This then also intersects with the growth in support for independence from the left and those that identify themselves as "Scottish" rather than "British". In 1992, 30% of left-wing opinion supported independence with 46% doing so in 2002<sup>3</sup>. In 1979, 11% of those identifying themselves as "Scottish" supported independence with 36% of those doing so in 2002. With a population of 5m in Scotland and extrapolating from these figures, around 1m people can be identified who are of key importance for the SSP; those who are working class and on the left, identify themselves as "Scottish" and who are pro-independence. The crucial point here is that amongst the key constituency for the SSP, namely the working class, the most radicalised section of opinion is pro-independence.

The leadership of the SSP and ISM have not argued that the Independence Convention is to be prioritised to the exclusion of all other issues, campaigns and orientations. Work on these must remain on going. The SSP is not facing an "either/or" situation. Socialists have always had to fight on many fronts because they do not control the terrain on which they fight. Capitalism and the

ensuing exploitation and oppression take many forms. The SSP must relate to the existent progressive and anti-establishment struggles that are going on. From the recent SSP trade union conference, there are three issues to pursue (political representation, poverty pay and privatisation). There are the campaigns to be reignited over free school meals and the council service tax. And so on. And so on.

Not only is this the case, but the SSP also faces a situation where many of the milieux referred to above intersect with each other because the issues and causes they are concerned with are closely, and often inherently, related: anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, anti-war, and anti-exploitation at work are related to questions about the nature and purpose of society in Scotland and elsewhere. These people in these milieux are potentially open to the work and campaigns of the SSP. However, the SSP also needs to recognise something of greater significance, namely that the support for independence is a numerically large, more overarching and longer-standing phenomenon. In this regard, it represents a continuing aspiration that is of a transformational character: not independence in and of itself but as a means to creating a better society, creating "another Scotland".

The posing of the issues: "Is independence more realisable than socialism?" and "Socialists must choose independence or socialism (based on an assumption that they are antagonistic)" is to view the issues the wrong way round. The Independence Convention is not just about attempting to relate to the more radicalised working class milieu identified above, i.e. the pro-independence milieu, important though that is in its own right. It is also about recognising that engaging in a struggle through the Independence Convention to create an independent socialist Scotland is a means by which to contest the nature of the current and future society in Scotland amongst wider numbers of workers. By engaging in this struggle, opportunities are opened up that can help to develop the advanced consciousness of these workers. This is only possible because a) in the minds of the pro-independence milieu, independence is a means to an end, i.e. a better society, b) the gaining of independence that gives rise to this kind of more just society will require widespread and deep-seated mobilisation as the key point of a fierce struggle against the interests of the rich and powerful, and through this the transformation of consciousness to more advanced level becomes possible, and c) in the course of this the SSP will find a receptive audience to its position for an independent socialist Scotland.

In this context, what does "relating" to this milieu mean? It means taking the lead to create the required social movement for a progressive society through the struggle for independence, to

give it the ballast of a socialist perspective, creating the opportunity to speak to, debate and engage with hundreds of thousands of workers, as well as to shape the movement itself. There is no problem in creating such a tangible movement from the pro-independence milieu. Any movement, like the current anti-war movement or the Scotland United movement of 1992, has to be created by dint human agency, i.e. the hard work of activists. The arguments that a) because an independence movement does not exist, we should not create one, and b) the absence of an independence movement means we should not bother with independence fail to comprehend some critical points. The milieu of radical, pro-independence thought has not had and does not have a single organising point or series of organising points around which to focus like the outbreak of war, like the G8 summits, like the European Social Forum or like marches to support striking workers. That is the nature of this milieu. It does not make it any less real or important. Given the radical nature of this milieu, its "members" will have been on the anti-war demonstrations and marched in support of various striking workers. So part of the point of the Independence Convention proposals is to give expression to this milieu, to give it something to crystallise around. This is about a process of representation and mobilisation.

In concrete terms, this means organising petitions, staging demonstrations, holding public meetings, debates and conferences, getting motions passed in various democratic or representative bodies (trade unions, community organisations etc), knocking on doors and so on where the SSP would be saying to the pro-independence workers, if you are serious about creating a better society through independence, your participation is required and this is the kind of mobilisation that is needed to achieve it. But the work to create an independent socialist Scotland will only be partly fought for through the Independence Convention. The SSP in the rest of its work must take the opportunity to raise the demand of an independent socialist Scotland and gain support for this by relating it to other struggles. Ultimately, if the SSP can raise the issues of workers striking against an imperialist war to protest against it (as opposed to stop the preparations for war), there is no reason why it cannot raise the issue of striking to support an independent socialist Scotland. There are no other organised forces in Scotland that are prepared to do this; not the SNP and not the Green Party. But there are members of these parties that are prepared to work with the SSP on this project. The SSP would demonstrate that by taking the lead it was the best fighter for an independent socialist society meaning a fairer, more equitable society.

This orientation and organising method is similar in broad measure to the way in which the SSP organised its 2003 election campaign. It did not prioritise arguing in an abstract way that socialism is the key to ending the inhumanity of capitalism, although it is and although the SSP believes that it is. Rather it related to people through a series of immediate issues on poverty, housing, education, anti-imperialism and so on where these were presented as the tangible first manifestations of "another Scotland is possible". This was to relate to people in a way which represented taking them several steps forward as part of a way of opening up space to raise wider and more fundamental issues about society and capitalism. It was not about asking them to sign up to pure revolutionary demands in a "take it or leave it" manner.

### **Independence or the Class Struggle?**

A question many ask is "why put effort and resources into this independence struggle, when the "answer" is the all-Britain class struggle in the here and now, and ultimately the fight for socialism throughout Britain, which can deliver more much?" This is a correct position in the abstract but not in the present situation. There is no getting away from the fact that on all measures the working class, labour and trade union movements throughout Britain have been seriously weakened in the last 25 years. They are now a shadow of their former selves. It is the material of pipe dreams to suggest the class struggle in Britain, centrally founded on the industrial struggle, is about to revive. We are not anywhere near an upswing and no carping on about this strike and that strike, however large and however inspiring, can alter this reality. It is a measure of the unbalanced political perspective that can continually asserts that two swallows can make a summer.

We also have to fully recognise that the size of the left and far left elsewhere in Britain, particularly the active components, are a fraction of what they once were and they are badly divided. The left, such that it is, is in no position to suggest that its intervention and work can fundamentally make a qualitative or significant difference to the overall level of the class struggle at present. Furthermore, the Socialist Alliance is not only at least five years behind the SSP, it is hopelessly divided, it is qualitatively poorer compared to what was the Scottish Socialist Alliance and the goodwill expressed towards the Socialist Alliance from independents and a wider milieu has been squandered through sectarianism on all sides. Respect: the Unity Coalition is at such an early stage, has been constituted as an electoral alliance and is progressive rather than socialist. It does not manifestly change this assessment of the all-Britain state of affairs. Therefore, in terms of issues

of strategy and ensuing tactics, there is no credible sense in which the all-Britain class struggle presents us with the only route out of our current situation.

It is highly ironic to argue as some do (e.g. Davidson 2003) that this perspective of pursuing an independent socialist Scotland through an Independence Convention is based on pessimism in terms of building a mass socialist party. Quite apart from using an increasingly unproductive and polarised (sic) dichotomy of pessimism versus optimism, this strategy is precisely about engaging with and appealing to a far wider milieu and one that is radical in order to lay the foundations for a mass socialist party. Thus, the Independence Convention presents one innovative means by which to take the socialist project a substantial individual step forward. Used by the SSP in the way outlined above, it can form part of the (working class) class struggle for “another Scotland”. There is no sense in which it can credibly be argued that the struggle to shape an independent Scotland as a socialist Scotland is a diversion from the class struggle. The problem with such criticism is its starting point of counterpoising the situation as “independence or the class struggle”. The class struggle takes many forms.

### **Independence or Socialism?**

Nowhere in the rationale for the Independence Convention can be found the conceptualisation of independence being a pre-condition of socialism. Contrary to some critics (e.g. Stott 2003), the thrust of the proposals is about developing and deepening the forces for socialism through an important means of fighting for a more socially advanced form of society in Scotland. Upon creating such a kind of society which is more progressive without being socialist, the prospects for achieving socialism would in all likelihood be closer and more attainable. Nowhere has the banner of socialism been dipped or sidelined in this process. It is about fighting for the movement for independence to have a socialist perspective with socialist leaders in every part and level of that movement.

### **The Continuation of Capitalism Under Independence?**

The argument made that the Independence Convention is by hook or by crook about creating an independent capitalist Scotland is a red herring. Another variation of this position is that the Independence Convention is about creating by hook or by crook a separate Scottish state where the argument runs “what is the point of swapping a British capitalist state for a Scottish capitalist state?” Those that argue these positions are taking an ultra-left position that is politically immature. What these arguments fail to understand are two

crucial and inter-related points. The first is that with the centre of political gravity in the body politic in Scotland being to the left of that which exists in the body politic in England, the prospect of creating at least a more favourable, i.e. social democratic, political settlement in Scotland under independence is significant. The second is that in contesting the nature of a future society in Scotland and in mobilising for this kind of progressive independence settlement, significant opportunities arise to engage in debate with the radical, pro-independent milieu that offer one of the best prospects of drawing them towards us on a socialist basis.

The first point needs fleshing out. Socialists are for reforms that make workers’ material lives better, whether this be fighting to create them in the first place or fighting to maintain or extend them thereafter. But socialists are not just for reforms for this reason alone. Socialists advocate them, support those fighting for them and engage in these struggle to achieve them because such arguments and mobilisations offer the prospects of a) showing workers themselves their collective power and what can be won through collective action, b) in engaging in struggle, workers can develop their class consciousness, and c) highlighting the limitations to the extent to which far-reaching reforms can be gained under capitalism, thus focusing attention on the need for socialist revolution. In short, these struggles offer a means by which workers can then go further and engage in building up the forces for a socialist revolution.

### **Is there a “national question” in Scotland?**

This may seem a very strange question to ask. The terms of much of the current debate are based on the existence of a “national question” in Scotland. It cannot be convincingly argued or established that Scotland or the Scottish people are or have been oppressed by Britain, the British state or the English. In this sense, there is no national question and certainly nothing on a par with that which has existed and still does exist in many other countries in the rest of the world. But the rub is that this is not what is critical. What is critical is the existence of not only a high level of national consciousness but one which is predominantly coloured by a complexion of radicalism. Thus, what is far more important is that a substantial section of opinion within society in Scotland has the following characteristics<sup>4</sup>. Those who identify themselves as predominantly “Scottish” (“Scottish” and “more Scottish than British”) are consistently and significantly more left wing than those in Scotland and England who identify themselves as predominantly British, equally Scottish/British, equally English/British, and English. Those who identify themselves as predominantly “Scottish” (“Scottish” and more



“Scottish than British”) consistently and significantly self-ascribe themselves as more working class than those in Scotland and England who identify themselves as predominantly British, equally Scottish/British, equally English/British, and English. Here “substantial section” means around 3m people in Scotland. These issues of identity are key means of identity today. And it is amongst these that are to be found the, *relatively* speaking, more radical, pro-independence milieu who see independence as a means to “another Scotland”. So what we have is a radical and sizeable “section” of society in Scotland which is the most sizeable radical “section” of society which the SSP must orientate on to push forward the socialist project.

The issue of whether Scotland was or was not oppressed is then not of critical significance. What is of critical significance is that it is a firm and increasingly clear aspiration on the part of this radical (pro-independence) milieu that the idea of gaining independence provides a credible terrain on which to fight for a left-wing transformation of society in Scotland. This then provides the SSP with a fertile terrain on which to operate. Socialists need to recall that there is no clear straightforward or mechanical relationship between developed working class consciousness and the material conditions under which that consciousness develops. The role of human agency is the key intermediate determining force in this equation. That is to say, for example, that immiseration does not necessarily lead to radicalisation. As with the relationship between national oppression on the one hand and national consciousness, national identity and political worldviews on the other, there is again no clear straightforward or mechanical relationship between consciousness and the material conditions under which that more advanced consciousness develops. The fact that the radical, pro-independence milieu exists is enough to make it significant, no matter its origins. Indeed, the origins of this milieu are in the grasping of a way to find expression for a set of left-wing beliefs and values within Scotland under the hegemony of capitalist neo-liberalism first under and within the regimes of Thatcherism and, now, New Labourism. This should allay the fears of some (e.g. CPB 2004) of the dangers of national or competitive chauvinism).

### **Not the SNP? Not Just the SNP!**

Some (e.g. Davidson 2003, Gonzalez 2003) to varying degrees believe the Independence Convention proposals are about orientating on, and even trying to form a bloc with, the SNP as a political force. This view comes from an ultra-left position which posits that relating to the progression aspirations bound up with independence is to risk contamination with issue of nationalism and to do anything other than

argue pure internationalism is a heresy. But it also comes from an undue and unhelpful concentration by McCombes on the SNP: not in terms of the SNP, its members, supporters and voters being the only political organisation or force worth orientating on but in terms of a disproportionate discussion of developments in the SNP *together with* an absence of spelling out and thinking through the other political forces and opinions which are both left-wing and pro-independence.

The radical pro-independence milieu is far wider than the SNP membership, supporters and voters. This milieu covers the terrain of members, supporters and voters across a large part of the political spectrum covering both the SNP and the Labour Party as well those who do not vote, do not have any party allegiances and who reject formal politics. It is well-established that not all of SNP members, supporters and voters are pro-independence and not are all on the left. But support for independence amongst SNP supporters has increased overall from 37% in 1979 to 68% in 2002. The same two points are also true of the many Labour members, supporters and voters. Support for independence amongst Labour supporters has increased overall from 4% in 1979 to 25% in 2002. Thus, socialists should not dismiss the sizeable existence of the supporters and remaining members of the SNP and Labour who are on the left and who do see independence as a way to give expression to their radical beliefs.

At the same time, socialists must also recognise that the support of the radical, pro-independence milieu for “another Scotland” through independence is concretely related to the trajectories of the two main left-of-centre parties, the SNP and Scottish Labour. One the one hand, we have the combined move of the SNP away from its former social democratic programme towards liberal democracy and its deprioritising of the centrality of independence. To left-wing opinion inclined to support the SNP, the SNP committed a double and inter-linked treachery: it became rightwing and *de facto* dropped independence, giving up on the goal of the creation of a progressive society through independence. On the other hand, we have the rejection of social democracy and the take up of neo-liberalism by Labour along with its continuing rejection of independence. This has created a vacuum where no mainstream party is offering a left-wing programme that is allied to a goal of creating a progressive society in Scotland through independence.

At this point, it is worth making a slight diversion in order to consider the nature of support for the SSP in 2003 election. Again the *Socialist Worker* and CWI platforms have both argued that the SSP policy of an independent socialist Scotland was not critical to the SSP’s success in gaining 130,000 votes in May 2003.

Rather, they argue that the SSP's positions on the war and social questions (housing, health, pay, education etc) were the key factors. This is correct but it is only a partial truth because it juxtaposes those issues against the issue of the aspirations for "another Scotland" through an independent progressive or socialist Scotland. It is far more convincing to posit the issues in the following way. Support for the SSP's policies on the war and social questions for the majority of SSP voters hinged on a wider and more coherent platform of revulsion against neo-liberalism and capitalism and revulsion against the neo-liberal and pro-capitalist parties which in themselves reflect the desire for a more socially just and equitable society. Put another way, the motivation to vote SSP was not instrumental on a single-issue basis. In turn, much of the support for the coherent reforming electoral programme of the SSP was quite compatible with, and supportive of, the aspiration of an independent socialist Scotland.

### **Not Majority Support for Independence or the SNP? So What?**

Both the positions of the *Socialist Worker* (Davidson 2003) and CWI (Stott 2003) platforms seek to utilise arguments concerning the changing strengths of Scottish identity and changing support for independence and for the SNP to invalidate the arguments for the Independence Convention. So to does Rogers (2003), as a representative of the *Solidarity* platform (Alliance for Workers' Liberty) and to a lesser extent the CPB (CPB 2004). In essence, these arguments revolve around the significance of either declining support and/or the absence of majority support. This approach is mistaken for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the approach to assessing the significance of levels of support for independence cannot solely start from the basis of whether it commands the majority support amongst the population as a whole or workers in particular. Socialists have never made popularity a *sine qua non* for judging whether to work for certain causes (as the CPB (2004) recognise). Rather, socialists must examine the nature of goals of the causes and whether they advance the socialist cause. The argument has already been made that the nature of the support for independence amongst workers is for left-wing reasons. That is the critical factor<sup>5</sup>. But it is not the only important factor. There is the issue of the transitional method to create an increase in the size and strength of the forces for socialism as outlined before. If there was a referendum on independence in the not-too-distant future, it would not be an outright failure if a "yes" vote was not triumphant. Sure, the outcome would be a setback where the progressive aspirations in the "yes" voters would be disheartened. But the *process* of fighting for a referendum as a result of the work of the SSP

giving the movement leadership would heighten respect and profile for the SSP as well as result in the creation of opportunities to relate to and engage wider numbers in the radical, pro-independence milieu.

Having made this point, we can now move on to the supporting points. Thus, secondly, the size of the radical, pro-independent milieu is vastly bigger than the numbers that voted for the SSP in the May 2003 election. If the SSP is to advance it needs to engage with and draw towards it far larger numbers. The workers in this milieu are a key part of that necessary constituency and process. Thirdly, it does not fundamentally matter whether the degree of consistent support for independence is significantly lower (as it is) than the overall level of support expressed for independence over time. What is happening here is precisely the phenomenon outlined earlier. At different points over time the majority of pro-independence supporters have seen independence as a more or less credible way to create a better society while a minority believe that it has always been a credible way to create a better society. The point is that both groups have seen independence as a credible way to create a better society. The SSP must relate to these people. That does not, of course, mean they are not other ways to relate to radicalised milieux. Fourth, the same configuration is true for support for the SNP. Many of the radical, pro-independence milieu have voted SNP because at various junctures it had formal and *de facto* positions that were not only to the left of Labour but it also argued that these could be realised through independence. The core SNP vote of 10% indicates the fluidity of the contemporary political process. Fifthly, it goes without saying that the pro-independence milieu does not support independence as an end itself. Finally, and to repeat the point, for those progressive or radical milieux that do not support independence, there are other means and forums by which to orientate on them as outlined above.

### **Breaking Up and Destroying the British State**

The current rationale for the Independence Convention (i.e., McCombes 2003) places too great an emphasis on the importance of breaking up the British state. The breaking up of the British state is not an unimportant reason to support the proposals but it should be clear from the preceding arguments that it does not necessarily constitute a central component in the rationale. Why is this the case? The breaking up of the British state has a tendency to be formulated as a specific policy goal or a desired policy outcome and not a tactical means by which to relate to wider numbers. This relates to the assessment that a) it is not evidently clear that independence of itself would strike a blow against the imperialist power of the British state or that of the United States where Britain plays a

key supporting role, and b) it is not evidently clear that independence of itself would be a huge democratic advance. Both the extent of the blow against imperialism and the extent of democratic advance will be heavily influenced by the nature and basis of independence. This is not, however, to fall back onto the very arguments that have hitherto been criticised and which state that independence would still be under capitalism and under a capitalist state.

But it is to be more sensitive to the recognition that we cannot be exactly sure what precise shape or form society in Scotland would take after independence. The nature of society in Scotland after independence will be shaped by the relative balance of an array of competing forces; the nature and strength of the pro-independence forces, the nature and strength of the anti-independence forces both within and without Scotland and Britain. Of course, the SSP should do its utmost to strengthen and shape the pro-independence forces but we cannot know in advance what the fruits of these efforts will be. Maybe, the independence settlement would be less than we wanted, i.e. looking like a standard parliamentary liberal democracy. Maybe, it would look like a direct and participative form of layers of democracy (the workplace, the community, the municipality, the region, the national state). Therefore, the SSP is on stronger ground to use the Independence Convention as way to relate to radical thought rather than try to guarantee specific outcomes, no matter how desirable. And it can be firmly stated that fighting for independence opens up further space and gives further opportunities by which to contest the nature of society in Scotland and thus advance socialist arguments<sup>6</sup>.

That said, it is simply not credible to take an abstentionist position of being in favour of the break up of the British state through independence for Scotland but not being prepared to engage in the battle to achieve that where there is a sizeable radical, pro-independence milieu. Neither, is it credible to posit that the Independence Convention proposals and the fight for independence are either separate from the cause of socialism in Scotland, nor that they are only and exactly the same. We must be wise to the dynamics and fluidity of the environment in which we currently operate in and those that will exist for the foreseeable future.

### **Breaking up the British Working Class?**

In the abstract, it is plausible, but only plausible, to argue that independence for Scotland would break up the unity of the British working class<sup>7</sup>. However, we cannot be bound by dealing with issues in the abstract. We have to deal with the situation as actually we find it. If we were witnessing a period of an offensive upswing in the class struggle in Britain on a par with 1910-

1914 or 1968-1974, then it would, in all likelihood, be incorrect to struggle for independence for Scotland as a major part of socialists' activity.<sup>8</sup> But we must not make a fetish of the unity of the working class in Britain in the present period because in doing so we romanticise not what actually is but what we would like the working class in Britain to look like and act like. The unity of workers in struggle is the key issue on whatever basis that is constructed or may take. When the Glasgow medical secretaries won their strike in 2002, it was not because of the "unity of the British working class"/"unity of the working class in Britain". Rather, it was because of their strategic position in the hospitals allied to their collective determination, i.e. lack of strike-breakers, willingness to take more than one-day strikes and so on. Therefore, unity is not the only issue. We must be explicit: we need unity around a platform of combativeness and militancy.

Why would independence imply or lead to Scottish-only unions and Scottish-only collective bargaining, as some argue? The most conceivable circumstances in which this could happen would be if the forces that won the struggle for independence were based on competitive nationalism and/or creating an autarky. Neither of these is present in any way. To repeat, *ad nauseam*, the pro-independence forces are of a progressive and radical nature. So what would unions look like under independence? Based on the maxim of "unity is strength" the unions today would be exactly the same after independence. Why? Because today employers are organised and operate throughout Britain without regard to the any implications arising from existence of Scotland, England or Wales. Any after independence the situation will not be different. The structures of capital and the employment relationship will not fundamentally change. Workers employed by Scottish Power, Stagecoach and the Royal Bank of Scotland are located in Scotland and England. Today, as in the future, being in the same union is essential for these workers and it is recognised as such.

If that argument is true for workers employed by private sector companies, it is equally well true for workers employed in the public sector but for different reasons. These concern not just the threat of becoming part of the private sector, real though that is, but that workers in the public sector need to organise around the same issues concerning pay and conditions in Scotland, England, and indeed, France, Italy and so on. Equal pay for work of equal value, comparability and "a fair day's pay for a fair day's wage" recognise no boundaries. High wages for one group can be used to create leapfrogging by others in an upward spiral.

Focusing on the alleged danger of Scottish-only unions and Scottish-only collective is another red herring. The salient issues are in fact not merely



about the continuation of all-Britain unions but ever more about creating alliances between unions in different countries and ultimately international unions as the process of globalisation and integration of capitalist production, distribution and exchange continue. Global unions are needed to match global capital. State formations are not the logic by which to determine union organisation. Even in the “heart of the beast” in North America, many unions are international unions, comprising workers in the U.S. and Canada. It makes no sense to be otherwise in terms of uniting workers working for the same employer and in the same industry. Therefore, it is not at all convincing to argue that independence at some point in the not-too-distant future would split the working class and the trade union movement in Britain.

This argument ties in with the supposed SSP policy to have separate Scottish unions and collective bargaining. This policy simply does not exist. It is a figment of ultra-left imagination. What does exist is a view, not a party policy, amongst some that this situation might not always be the case: that is to say that there may come a point in time when it is appropriate to have Scottish-only unions and Scottish-only collective bargaining. For the reasons outlined immediately above, this view does not hold up to examination because unions do not need to mirror national state structures.

### **Internationalism or Parochialism?**

The charges of nationalism, parochialism and national socialism (“socialism in one country”) against the Independence Convention proposals are unfounded. The charges are made from the ultra-left position that takes its starting point the counterpoising of internationalism to nationalism. In this mindset, ideal-types of internationalism to nationalism are created which determine subsequent thought. In this debate, no serious thought has been given by these critics to how issues of the demands for a progressive form of independence might be deployed to the socialist cause. Some platforms in the SSP may not like the form that the SSP’s internationalism takes and/or the extent to which it takes place, but it cannot be seriously argued that the SSP is not internationalist. What also needs to be recognised in this debate is the importance of the work the SSP is involved in through the European Anti-Capitalist Left as part of laying a foundation for progressive working class struggle and representation on a European level. Similarly, what also needs to be recognised is the important extent to which the SSP is a “beacon of hope” and a model for regroupment and advancement for socialists elsewhere in the world.

### **Dangers of Nationalism?**

The expression of Scottish identity and national consciousness are not synonymous with nationalism and Scottish nationalism. Rather than being fundamental expressions of national oppression, they are in the main expressions of a sense of *political oppression* where a left-of-centre worldview is prevented from significantly influencing the organs and bodies that comprise society in Scotland by a dominant political Britain-wide class instituting neo-liberalism. The SSP does not, therefore, in the current situation, where it works for an independent socialist Scotland, need to be seriously concerned about the supposed dangers of a) accommodation to nationalism, and b) pressures to identify with their a Scottish state/ the state in Scotland and Scottish capitalism/ capitalism in Scotland (cf. CPB 2004:49)

### **Scotland in advance of England?**

Recognising the representative relative strengths of socialist and social democratic forces in Scotland, England and Wales, is not about suggesting or implying that workers in England or Wales are less combative than workers in Scotland. In any case, contrasting the radicalism of workers in England and Wales to those in Scotland is unhelpful in that a more productive comparison would be to compare workers in Scotland with similar sized regions of the rest of Britain, or Strathclyde with Merseyside, Tyne and Wear, South Yorkshire and so on. But, and concomitant, socialists have to work in the differing situations that they find themselves in as outlined previously and they need to recognise that the results of the efforts of socialists can be more productive in some situations rather than others. Respect: the Unity Coalition again does not alter this situation.

### **Advancing from the Devolved Settlement**

The cause of an independent socialist Scotland has gain increasing purchase from the dispiriting popular experience of devolution not living up to the expectations most working people had of it for bettering their material lives. It has also not led to a rejection of devolution in principle. But, of course, this has not happened in a straightforward way. Support for a stronger parliament is another consequent manifestation. But there is the possibility of relating to and positively engaging with this latter body of thought for a stronger parliament because it expresses the desire for social change.

### **Strengthening Reformism and Reformist Consciousness?**

One of the challenges facing socialists in the pursuit of the Independence Convention is that this method might develop the consciousness of the radical, pro-independence milieu further but thereafter no further. That is to say that, in essence, the majority of this milieu might not advance to a



full-blooded socialist consciousness and then because of this, this reformist consciousness becomes an impediment to achieving socialism. This is a serious issue but it is not any more serious and any more difficult than the general problem associated with transforming social democratic or reformist consciousness into socialist or revolutionary consciousness. This problem must be acknowledged if socialists are to effectively try to deal with it. The means by which to do so revolves around creating and engaging in mass struggles that are capable of transforming consciousness.

### **Mobilising for Independence and Contesting the Terms of Independence**

Earlier, the issues about the form an Independence Convention should take and how it should be built were briefly touched upon. The hallmarks that the SSP needs to insist upon there being are popular and wide-ranging participation, and this existing over a considerable period of time. If we recall the Constitutional Convention, it was a semi-permanent assembly of the “good and worthy” of the progressive political elite. That does not mean we should condemn it out of hand. No matter its social composition, it played a significant role in giving expression to popular sentiment and pushing forward the case for devolution. But socialists need to try to ensure that an Independence Convention has far wider participation and from those who comprise the radical, pro-independence milieu. Socialists also need to ensure that it is based on a strategy towards mobilisation and not towards demobilisation and passivity. This means it cannot be just confined to being merely a semi-permanent working group or committee of representatives of those forces involved (which will be necessary to draw up the constitutional arrangements for a referendum and independence). Whilst the *raison d'être* of the Convention must be to promote the case for independence, this will only have purchase where this is done meaningful as a way of helping resolve social questions.

The most difficult issue for the Independence Convention after its initial launch is how it can develop momentum and progress over and above settling the constitutional arrangements in terms of a) widening participation of the radical, pro-independent milieu and b) moving towards independence which will result in at the very least a progressive political settlement. This means how can it avoid the fate of the previous initiatives like Scotland United in 1992? Scotland United did not progress, not because it could not, but primarily because internal cross-party unity on objectives was not forthcoming and because the initiative merely reflected a specific juncture in time (i.e. an outrage at the continuation of Tory rule when “Scotland” voted for anti-Tory parties) without

attempting to link the struggle for democratic change with the struggle against the policies of the Tories and neo-liberalism. This then focuses attention on the issues about direction, dynamics, organising focus, and how to relate to other campaigns. The Independence Convention cannot merely be an endless series of public meetings and discussions. It must provide a means of more stimulating involvement for participants. It must also be able to relate to the lived experience of workers as a key component of showing how social issues could be resolved in workers' favour in the short to medium term. So, the Independence Convention needs to show how it can become a forum through which more immediate social issues can be discussed and then campaigning carried out on these. Similarly, the Independence Convention must be able to positively relate to the vast array of campaigns that will originate well outside its orbit. In essence, the Independence Convention must find issues around which it can organise and gain momentum. These are particularly important considerations because the radical, pro-independence milieu is at the moment (sic) a milieu and not a movement and its concerns are wide-ranging and *relatively* amorphous. But the fact that the SSP is taking a lead in establishing the Independence Convention means it can steer the Convention towards this kind of desired format.

### **Reform or Revolution?**

The whole underlying thrust of this pamphlet is to suggest that seeing human history and social process simply in terms of reform or revolution is to view the world in an untenable way. It is not that “reform” and “revolution” do not exist as conceptual constructs and as living entities. However, to counter-pose reform to revolution as two mutually exclusive phenomena is to be unable to come to terms with how understand how human consciousness develops and to be bereft of a practical method of linking the struggle for reforms with the struggle for revolution. The reason why this tendency exists within the SSP is also partly attributable to the leadership of the SSP having not yet spelt out how it defines socialism and how this is most likely to be achieved. This means discussing the nature and role of a transitional programme, transitional demands, the relationship between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary struggles, the role of insurrection and mass mobilisations. The danger in not doing so is that the impression can be given that the SSP is merely a version of a social democratic party or of “Old Labour”.

### **The Dangers of Abstract Propagandism**

Socialists cannot merely take theory and organising principles that are correct at the level of general abstraction, make them into slogans and dogma and then act on that basis. Socialists must

assess the balance of forces and the context in which they operate in order to decide how best to move forward. For example, socialists should not rule out working with non-socialist and non-working class forces in the struggle through the Independence Convention for an independent socialist Scotland. These are not issues of principle but of strategy and tactics. Of course, in doing so we should work with these forces whilst maintaining our agenda and pursuing the building up of support for the socialist project. That is not opportunism. Socialists must be strategically and tactically flexible in the single-minded pursuit of our goal. We must recognise there are many ways to skin the proverbial tiger.

### Conclusion

The Independence Convention proposals are a means by which to relate to a radical, pro-independence milieu. The fulcrum of the multi-faceted argument here is an explicit recognition of a transitional method (as opposed to an unchanging transitional programme that socialists have often used in the past) by which to further develop the consciousness of the existing radical, pro-independence milieu into a socialist, not social democratic, consciousness. The parts of the argument are often quite different in form and emphasis from those of the leadership of the SSP. They are made because they represent stronger and more substantial arguments for the Independence Convention. However, great care needs to be taken in order to ensure that the prospects of the actual form of the Independence Convention are as conducive to the needs of socialists as possible.

### Notes

1. The key contemporaneous documents in this debate are those by Alan McCombes ('After May 1st: Which way forwards to independence and socialism', SSP National Council document, August 2003, then as article in the SSP *All Members Bulletin* No.10, October/November 2003, and 'Why socialists should back independence for Scotland' *Scottish Socialist Voice* 22 August 2003), Neil Davidson's pamphlet *Is Independence a Road to Socialism in Scotland* (Socialist Worker Platform, October 2003), Nick Roger's article 'Socialism and Scottish Independence' *Weekly Worker* 2 October 2003 (available on line at <[www.cpgb.org.uk](http://www.cpgb.org.uk)> and as paper 'Socialism and Independence: a reply to Alan McCombes' Independence Convention Proposals', September 2003), Mike Gonzalez's short paper 'The Debate that will not go away' and Philip Stott's 'Scotland and the National Question' (available on-line at <<http://publications.cwiscotland.org/Natstate.htm>>, September 2003). The heated debate between Alan McCombes, Neil Davidson and various contributors at the SSP's

*Socialism 2003: Another Scotland is Possible* conference in Glasgow in October 2003 reflected the various arguments presented in these documents. After this debate was, in effect, brought to a conclusion in the SSP (for the moment) at the National Council in November 2003. A themed edition of the *Scottish Left Review* (No. 20, January/February 2004 <[scottishleftreview.org](http://scottishleftreview.org)>) contained contributions from SNP, SSP, CPB and the Labour Left (the Campaign for Socialism) on the issue. Thereafter, the Communist Party of Britain through its Scottish Committee published *Breaking the British State: The Way Forward to Socialism in Scotland* (January 2004). This publication is, nonetheless, taken as being part of the debate, albeit in some ways external to it. The Communist Party of Scotland then replied at length to the CPB pamphlet (*Morning Star*, 12 February 2004).

2. Relatedly, support for a strong domestic parliament grew from 26% to 44% in the period 1979-2002. Given the weakness of the current Parliament and resistance from the governing parties to increasing its powers, a large section of this opinion could be won to the independence position as their aspirations are not realised. Already, there is widespread disappointment amongst wide layers of society in Scotland with the lack of progressive difference made to the majority of people's lives in Scotland.

3. No figures are available for this milieu between 1979 and 1991.

4. The array of data that demonstrates this is contained within the shortly forthcoming *The Political Economy of Scotland: Red Scotland? Radical Scotland?* by Gregor Gall (Welsh Academic Press 2003). It is unfortunately too vast to present in this paper. The data is an aggregation of data from the Scottish Election Surveys and Scottish Social Attitude Surveys of 1979, 1992, 1997, 1999 and 2002 as well as the British Social Attitude Surveys.

5. Whilst it is the case that the significant levels of self-ascription of being "Scottish not British" and "more Scottish than British" do not necessarily result in comparable levels of support for independence, this is not important in the context of the statistics quoted above the support for independence judged by social group, national identity and a left-wing political worldview and their intersection.

6. It is interesting to note that in an even headed assessment of the case for independence, the CPB (2004) also raises the same type of issues doubting the significance of the "breaking up the British state".

7. The CPB pursues this same line of argument as the SWPlatform and CWI that independence would break up the "unity of the working class".

8. The term "in all likelihood" is used because we cannot predict the exact nature of an offensive struggle or the nature of the period in which it would be shaped.