

Appraising the SW Platform in the Scottish Socialist Party

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This article was written in early 2004 for circulation within the *Socialist Worker* Platform, the organisation of SWP supporters in the Scottish Socialist Party. Gregor Gall left the SW Platform in January 2005 after 15 years of membership in it and the SWP.

We are grateful to Gregor for providing us with a copy of the document, which received widespread circulation on the internet after it appeared on the *What Next?* website, and was printed in the *Weekly Worker* (which didn't even do us the courtesy of acknowledging where it came from). However, we are publishing it here as agreed with the author, because it offers an important critical view of the functioning of the SWP.

Introduction

This document is written with the hope of stimulating a debate within the SW Platform which will result in a critical self-appraisal of its development and relative successes and failures since being created in May 2001, and in turn, lead to different political perspectives and practices. It is motivated by a position where there is a realisation that there are serious weaknesses in the Platform which itself is held to be a serious revolutionary socialist organisation and therefore worth the time appraising rather than dismissing outright no matter the trenchant criticisms that follow. Thus, the concern is to avoid "throwing the baby out with the bath water". To this end concrete suggestions are made for the future direction of the Platform at the end of this document.

At the meetings about joining the SSP just prior to May Day 2001, there was a relatively long period of internal discussion and debate. At the last meeting where the decision to join was taken, there were some 120 comrades present with a paper membership of around 200 at the time. At the last all members meeting in 2003 – the aggregate prior to the SWP national conference in November 2003 – attendance was around 60. This may or may not indicate the shrinking of the Platform and the active size of the Platform (which on balance, I think it does) but what is not open to doubt are the following: a) fewer members are coming to important Scottish meetings and without the

previous routine of branch meetings (which were clearly far from perfect) and the use now of fortnightly Marxist Forums, far fewer members are coming to these local based meetings, and b) despite the much vaunted "new mood" (of which there have been several iterations over recent years), the same old (old and the same) faces still turn up to meetings. Members are extolled of the opportunities for growth in influence and members but these have no manifestation in subsequent Platform meetings. This situation is not confined to Scotland judged by reports in the SWP Party Notes and accounts from a number of comrades in England. Thus, this document begins by analysing why the SWP as a de facto organisation throughout Britain is not in a healthy state and is certainly not of the size, influence and vibrancy frequently stated by the SWP's national leadership (the Central Committee and National Committee).

Notes and Theses on Characteristics of the SW Platform/SWP

In analysing the SW Platform, we must also analyse the SWP in Scotland and in Britain prior to 2001 as well as the SWP in England and Wales since 2001. The organisations share the same biologies. The central characteristics of these organisations are argued to be those of a) ultra-leftism, b) sectarianism, c) a command and control culture, d) absence of internal democracy, e) exaggerated political perspectives, f) voluntarism,

and g) prioritising cadre accumulation. These are identifiable as separate characteristics although they are, in the case of the *SW Platform/SWP*, inherently bound up with each other.

a) *Ultra-leftism*

There is a clear tendency to posit the existing structures and processes of capitalism with those of (revolutionary) socialism in a way that does not directly and effectively relate to the consciousness of where the most radicalised non-socialists are. What is correct in the abstract is in practice posited in a way that separates the *SW Platform/SWP* from potential supporters rather than draw them nearer. For example, bourgeois democracy is counter-poised to workers' democracy in an either/or, take it or leave it, way. Reform is counter-poised to revolution in the same way. This alienates potential support by putting the *SW Platform/SWP* too far away from where most people are without relating to the material circumstances and their existing political consciousness. It marginalises the *SW Platform/SWP*. People, thus, see the *SW Platform/SWP* as hopeless dreamers and far too unrealistic. There is no part in the *SW Platform/SWP* perspective for a method of taking people from where they are a few steps further down a long road to socialism. All that exists is the notion that under struggle people will become radicalised and their consciousness develop. On the one hand, there are loads of people not involved in struggle. On the other, the evidence of this kind of radicalisation *en masse* is absent. We are not living a period of widespread mass, active struggles no matter what we would like to be the case. The anti-war and anti-globalisation movements, important as though they are, do not constitute these. On top of this, there is no sense in which the *SW Platform/SWP* looks at its forces and concludes that "x" rather than "y" is thus possible in the current period. The notion of the small cog turning a larger cog is ripped out of its present context, making it an ineffective metaphor. Rather, the goal is set and the members have just get on with striving for it.

b) *Sectarianism*

Sectarianism can be simply defined as elevating points (over tactics, strategic) of difference to differences in over principles, goals and grand outcomes. Difference becomes more important than commonality and unity. Flowing from this, working with other forces, no matter attempts at united fronts, becomes very difficult and fraught. Control of campaigns and organisation thus takes on a key importance. Arrogance and self-righteous are unhealthy by-products. The sister to this type of sectarianism is the emphasis on party building (i.e. recruitment, party initiatives like open letters, petitions etc) and selling of party literature (i.e. a weekly newspaper *inter alia*) to the exclusion and detriment of strengthening the left and the work-

ing class overall. The former became the *raison d'être* of the party. Interestingly, in the last few years, this emphasis on party building has not been quite so strong. It has been replaced by campaign building of issues in which the party has decided to take a lead in. But in any case the sectarian mentality is still to the fore even if recruitment is not.

c) *Command and control culture*

The culture of being scared of dissent and independent thinking comes from leadership fear of debate becoming a diversion from activity and at worst an obstacle to activity. Rule by diktat and exhortation based on enforced political agreement is, for the leadership at the centre, more efficient, more effective and more responsive for the executive of party initiatives. Plurality of perspectives and extensive debate are not seen as desirable in a combat organisation.

d) *Absence of internal democracy*

Absence of internal democracy only becomes a problem for ordinary members when political differences emerge amongst individuals disagreeing with the leadership line where the leadership is unwilling to engage in serious debate and be open-minded. Options facing members are usually shut up or leave.

e) *Exaggerated political perspectives*

In order to motivate members to super-activism and to create self-confidence in the party, exaggeration of the prospects for growth of the organisation, paper sales or periphery as well as that for trade union, oppositional movements and the working class is necessary. Exaggeration breeds further exaggeration and not balanced perspectives. While it may be thought that a broken clock will always shown the right time twice a day, continually exaggerated perspectives mean that even this becomes a remote possibility. For example, each time a sizeable strike takes place, this becomes "the most important ever". By now, we must be well off the Richter scale. Other examples are the constant parodying of "two swallows making a summer". Another aspect of this characteristic is that political perspectives seldom look further than 6 months to a year forward so that the organisation operates on a basis of campaign-itis. Whilst flexibility of operation is needed, the downside is that organisational priorities become, in effect, an endless series of campaigns where an overall elaborated political perspective of the current era is absent.

f) *Voluntarism*

An essential trait of (small) far left organisations is to normally implicitly suggest that their actions (through their members) make a significant difference to the material and political conditions.

Thus, to some extent the actual and difficult material and political conditions that socialists find themselves working within are stood on their head. Concomitantly, it is implicitly suggested that if members are increasingly active and if there are more members, even more influence can be exerted. Again, in the abstract this might be true but in this period with the forces of the far left being very small, this is applied mechanically and without any sensitivity. Thus, an attitude of "Just do it!" prevails with the only thing standing between success and failure being members' effort.

g) Cadre accumulation

In order to make an impact in the world as part of the struggle for socialism, party growth and party matters are prioritised. Along the way, it is of almost no importance if members leave because leaving is believed to be the consequence of people who have lost their way from the right way and have become pessimistic. Consequently, those who remain members are obviously the most loyal. These are the members who can sustain twists and turns in perspectives and continued exaggeration because no matter whether these come true or not, there is always the next struggle to be involved in/the next issue to taken up with. Retrospection has no role here. What this amounts to is an accumulation of primitive cadre.

h) Decline in attention to industrial work and industrial analyses

Whilst the last twenty years has witnessed a very difficult environment for trade unions to work within and this has had a knock-on impact on the ability of socialists to work effectively to gain influence within unions, the SWP has increasingly paid less consistent attention to its industrial work. For example, up until about 7 or 8 years ago the pre-conference discussion document prepared by the Central Committee would have had a specific paper on the SWP industrial analyses and its industrial work (no matter that *Socialist Worker's* industrial coverage has remained at 2-3 pages per week). Going back many years earlier, the SWP had bi-monthly industrial discussion bulletins and published pamphlets on specific unions and workplace issues/union campaigns/strikes etc. Since about 1995, trade union work has merely warranted a section within general political analyses. The effect of these symptoms has been to have a party that has an increasingly thin and unnuanced analysis of industrial struggle as a whole and in particular with regard to certain industries and unions. SWP analysis of industrial struggle and SWP intervention in industrial struggle appears to have become subsumed to political struggle. Nothing wrong with that in the abstract, but in practice this means that the degree of divergence between the two has not been recognised and navigated leading to less serious

work and less returns from interventions in the last decade (and notwithstanding recent advances in establishing "rank-and-file" newspapers and national executive election successes in Amicus-AEEU, CWU and PCS).

Explaining this Overall Trajectory

Where do these tendencies come from? Some may think there are inherent characteristics. Some are but what is critical to understand why they have become so pronounced. This is most credibly explained by the following which centres around a) the period of the downturn, b) the political "brand" of the SW Platform/SWP, c) the influence of student cadre, d) the impact of small numbers, and e) relations with the working class and radicalised milieu.

a) The period of the downturn

In order to protect the organisation from the dramatic move to the right and the defeats of the working class from 1979 onwards, the SW Platform/SWP deliberately steered a course to the left. This gave ideas and ideology the key role in motivating members and shielding them from the outside world. Differences in ideas with others became of paramount importance, heightening sectarianism. The nature of Russia became a shibboleth. The building of the party in a period of hostility assumed paramount importance.

b) The political "brand" of the SW Platform/SWP

Given the relatively small size of the SW Platform/SWP in its early days (c1965-1985), its exclusion from widespread engagement with Labour Party members as a conscious result of building an independent revolutionary organisation outside Labour, its trenchant criticism of the Communist Party and trade union leaders, the brand of the SW Platform/SWP became "ideology" over and rather than "activity". The cutting edge of the ideology was its internationalist revolutionary purity with its black and white dichotomies. Notwithstanding the impact of the downturn on the far left, the appeal of the brand was ideological purity while the practical consequence was for many years, and arguably still is, political marginalisation.

c) Student cadre

The emphasis on purity of ideology was conducive to building amongst students in higher education. What is important is that many of these students members retained their membership thereafter and the bulk of the present and longstanding leading members were recruited when students. Consequently, in the period in which they have been active (denoting certain important shaping conditions), they have carried this ideological purity and ultra-leftism with them. It reinforced Cliff's leadership and the post-Cliff leadership.

d) The impact of small numbers on political perspectives

This problem affects the majority of left-wing organisations for much, if not all, of their existence. The lack of proximity to exercising real (sic) influence over workers and other milieux allows organisations and their leaderships to be exempt from paying attention to the nuances and practicalities of the responsibilities of widespread authority and influence within the working class and the trade union movement. It thus allows the continuation of revolutionary purity. Indeed, it reinforces revolutionary purity for the belief is that only if others could move towards the right perspectives then the organisation would grow, rather than the organisation contemplating moving towards them by dint of orientation.

In the case of the *SW Platform/SWP*, this problem is particularly acute. Being the biggest far left group in Britain while others have imploded means being able to dominant much of what goes on in the left but the rub is the left is fraction of its former size. The *SW Platform/SWP* is a big fish in a small pool which has been unable to break out of its marginalisation. Despite perspectives which continually extol the possibilities of growth, the *SW Platform/SWP* has not grown since the early to mid-1990s in real terms. Recruitment levels have not been as high as previously while medium and long-term retention rates are very low. Blame is thus accorded to a) the loyal remaining members by the national leadership for not realising the possibilities for growth, and b) not having the right ground-level party structures so sets of branches are continually reorganised (merged, split) and branches per se as the basic unit of the organisation are periodically stood down and then reintroduced.

e) Relations with the working class and radicalised milieu

The *SWP* has never gone beyond the poorly thought out position of quasi-spontaneity-ism in its method of orientating on the working class and radicalised milieu. There is no conceptualisation of an overarching mechanism with attendant strategies of how to relate to the target audiences or of how human consciousness changes. What does exist is campaign-itis and spontaneity-ism where party work takes on no long term plan or character. Consequently, few roots and solid ones at that have been sunk amongst the target audiences, particularly where overall cadre turnover is high.

It is too ambitious for this short paper to try to lay out an alternative mechanism or *modus operandi* to that of the *SWP/SW Platform*. What can be done is to agree that the demise of the Tories, the disillusionment with new Labour, the unmasking of the brutality and inhumanity of neo-liberalism, capitalism and imperialism all present opportunities for socialists. But in saying

this we need to contextualise the opportunities not in terms of possibilities, a very loose and unproductive formulation, but in terms of probabilities and prospects. Therein, it should be recognised that there is competition for the attention and loyalty of people from social democracy and the Labour left (as well as the *BNP* and *Nazis*).

More important than this though is the need to be able to relate to the target audiences in a way than makes tangible connections rather than create distance between socialists and their audiences and thus isolation and marginalisation for socialists. In essence, socialists need to be able to raise issues and demands which combine being where the consciousness of the most radicalised milieux is at the same time as being several steps ahead of these milieux so that socialists can both reflect and lead. This would be part of taking them on a journey towards a revolutionary socialist consciousness as well as creating the forces necessary for revolutionary socialism. Put around the other way, there is little point be absolutely correct in the abstract but completely marginalised in practice. It is not unrevolutionary to raise basic and non-revolutionary demands and to connect with these struggles so long as this is part of a wider transformative project. The thrust of the analysis here is to see the socialist project in terms of a transitional method (which the *SW Platform/SWP* has previously used, namely the two cases of the *Action Programme* [Mark 1 and Mark 2] and *Callinicos's Anti-Capitalist Manifesto* [Polity, 2003]). But such a transitional approach or method must be considered in a nuanced way rather than coming down to a replication of unchanging, formulaic transitional programmes that do not spring organically from the aspirations of a substantial section of the most radicalised workers.

What the Platform is Doing and What it Should Be Doing

The opportunities and challenges for the Platform in Scotland are in many ways different from those facing the party in England and Wales in terms of the manifestations of particular political trajectories, the specificity of the body politic and the left in Scotland after devolution and operating within the *SSP* as a new political formation in the socialist project.

While the Platform is formally committed to the *SSP*, in practice this has been far less the case since 2001. Some outside the Platform believe this informal lack of commitment has accelerated in the last couple of years. To the Platform, the *SSP* has been just one of many sites of struggle and milieux in which it operates. Not only is this analogous to the situation in England and Wales for the *SWP* but it is also a working out of positions adopted by the *SWP* of which the Platform remains an integral component. Politically and organisation-

ally, this is inept and inopportune because of what the SSP represents and how it is open to being influenced.

The SSP is a political project that is currently far in advance of anything in the rest of Britain, politically and organisationally. Moreover, it is also far in advance of any other left organisation since the zenith of the CPGB. Without taking a detour to discuss the political character of the SSP, it needs to be understood that it is neither nationalist, reformist, centrist nor social democratic. To characterise it as such is ultra-left is to fail to appreciate the strategy of political implantation through campaigning for reforms linked to the dissemination of basic socialist idea through a transitional method (see before). This is not necessarily to be without criticism of the way in which the SSP project is being carried out but it is to appreciate what the project is trying to do and what it has achieved so far. Organisationally, the SSP allows differing Platforms to exist and has a fully-functioning democratic structure where national policy is determined by two-monthly national councils and an annual national conference which is the sovereign body of the SSP. This allows individual members, members acting in concert across branches and branches to put forward motions to determine SSP policy and to hold the national executive and MSPs to account. Platforms are also entitled to put forward motions. Of course, determining policy is not the be all and end all for implementation and effective implementation are necessary corollaries but it is the start of the process.

For all the issues and campaigns that the Platform holds to be important in the current period, these are much less influential amongst wider layers and numbers for the lack of their thorough grounding throughout and in the SSP. Not only has there been the tendency for the Platform to decide to side step the SSP with regard to much of this work because it requires time and effort to win the SSP to these positions but there is also a sense in which, reflecting the SWP strategy in England and Wales seeking to relate to the “new movement”, that the SSP is not regarded as being worth the effort by dint of the quality of its members not being the most radical compared to those outside the SSP like school and university students, anti-war activists and anti-capitalist/globalisation activists.

Clearly, the thrust of the position adopted in this paper is that the Platform should centre all its work at the first point of departure from within the SSP. There is no credible sense in which the Platform faces an “either/or” choice of working inside or outside the SSP for the work it wants to carry out and for the people it wants to reach out, relate to, work with and ultimately recruit. But there is also another sense in which the Platform needs to change. Not only should it pursue its own

agenda as outlined but it must also be prepared to work in areas and forums which it did not initiate and which emerge from other parts of the SSP like the Women’s Network, the Independence Convention or the development of a programme of political education for the SSP.

For this to happen, the Platform must develop politically and organisationally. Operating within the SSP as a broad party of left-wing class struggle with such extensive implantation is a political challenge which is unparalleled for any IST group in the recent past. Platform members need to understand some issues which have either not been important before for them or which they know relatively little about, such as national identity, the tactical use of Parliamentarians and the transitional approach. Simply, believing that how the Bolsheviks in the Duma operated or that the Russian Revolution forms the only or even most convincing model of socialist revolution is not to deal with the nature of capitalist society as we currently find it. This understanding has not been achieved to any great extent to date, with Marxist Forums in essence being replications of those in England and Wales, with titles set according to the political tradition of the SWP or the contemporary will of the SWP Central Committee. A programme of political education for the Platform is needed here (see below).

On top of this, there are also issues which arise in Scotland which have not arisen elsewhere or have not arisen in the same way as elsewhere such as toleration zones for prostitution thus presenting the Platform with significant challenges. This means being able to develop politically in certain ways that are divergent from the SWP Central Committee based in London and the general thrust of the IST. This particularly concerns the adaptation of general tenets to national or local conditions and requires a flexibility and independence of thought as well as the existence of an advanced political consciousness and understanding. At the moment, only small parts of these attributes exist amongst or across certain sections of the Platform. More accurately, these reside in certain individuals and are therefore not part of the political culture and understanding of the Platform. This points to the need to prioritise cadre development and to operate a looser political culture that can facilitate such developments.

Organisationally, the Platform should develop as an autonomous section of the IST in the way that other sections have done elsewhere in Europe and further afield. What would this mean? Beginning with the obvious, it would mean having formal structures which would comprise an annual policy making conference preceded by regional aggregates and discussion bulletins led off by the Scottish Committee of the Platform. This to some extent would mirror the structure of the SSP itself and follow, by preceding it (sic), the SSP policy-

making timetable and so on. Following on from this, the Platform should have its own Party Notes type bulletin rather than circulate that of the SWP and publish more pamphlets which are specific to Scotland, Scottish conditions and issues and manifestations of international or cross-Britain phenomena in Scotland. An obvious example would be seriously engage with the so-called “nationalist left” and “left nationalists” and the distinctive hegemonic political (left social democratic) culture in Scotland. Another essential activity is political education in the form of day schools or meetings and day schools and meetings that do not conform to the standard fare of the anointed expert doing a lead off following by discussion and then comeback. Rather they would be structured to allow the genuine thinking through of issues and problems. Central to this move towards autonomy within the IST would be a constitution which would act as a foundation for the above and formally guarantee heterogeneity of thought through allowing for platforms and currents *within* the Platform. Finally, much more thought needs to be given to the role of the SWP’s publications (primarily *Socialist Worker*, *Socialist Review* and the *International Socialism Journal*) within Scotland, as well as within the SSP as a distinct political entity and where, within it, Platform publications are not permitted to be sold outwith SSP structures. Indeed, there is a need for the Platform to at least have its own website and journal/newsletter.

Most of what the SWP in Scotland has done

since reconstituting itself as a Platform within the SSP has been to carry on with the same political routine developed outside and prior to the SSP. The changes that have arisen have essentially only arisen as a result of changes in the *modus operandi* of the SWP in England and Wales. Thus, it is problematic to say that the process of forming a Platform as such was actually carried out. Consequently, and echoing what was argued above, the Platform does not fully engage with the milieu in which it now operates within and therefore is incapable of (fully) punching its weight within the SSP. The unwritten law in joining the SSP was pretty much “business as usual” without appreciating what the SWP in Scotland was actually getting involved in. This has led to a disorientation in outlook amongst members within the Platform who often act as SWP (sic) members within the SSP. Some comrades spend very little time operating as SSP members, merely coming to the odd branch meeting to raise this or that issue or campaign as and when they deem this necessary. Others attend their branch meetings far more regularly but contribute relatively little through meaningful engagement as opposed to just stating their positions in an abstentionist way. It is hard in these circumstances for respect and credibility to be built up for the Platform with the SSP. It is even harder given the basis of the previous sectarianism towards the Militant/Scottish Militant Labour and the mistaken approach by the SWP towards the Scottish Socialist Alliance, i.e. of dismissive rejection. ■

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