

The SW Platform in the SSP: A Response to Gregor Gall

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GREGOR GALL has produced an interesting document [‘Appraising the *SW* Platform in the Scottish Socialist Party’] and a valuable one in that it deals seriously with issues that many Socialist Workers Party members don’t consider even in an unserious way. However, it seems to us to have severe problems. We are afraid that Gregor finds himself in the position of a doctor who enumerates the symptoms, then gives a faulty diagnosis and finally prescribes a cure that won’t do any good. Gregor’s recent exit from the *Socialist Worker* Platform would seem to confirm this deficiency. What we want to do here is to explore some of his points, the problems we think exist in his analysis and whether any practical lessons can be drawn.

We don’t intend to take up Gregor’s points about the absence of democracy inside the SWP, the lack of a realistic perspective or the leadership’s reliance on voluntaristic exhortation. Those would be common points between us. On the *SW* Platform’s decay since its entry into the SSP, we see no reason to dispute his empirical account. We would only make the observation that the SWP could have joined as a loyal opposition, where in fact it has been neither loyal nor oppositional. It has generally failed to raise its distinct politics against the SSP majority or the dominant International Socialist Movement platform, Neil Davidson’s historical writings notwithstanding. Rather the Platform has found itself in a whole number of non-political, or better sub-political, disputes with the SSP leadership essentially around the question of divided loyalties. Thus the comrades have achieved the worst of both worlds. If what Gregor says is true, that some Platform members have essentially absented themselves from the SSP while others (himself included) have concluded that they can best function as members of the SSP without a connection to the SWP – well, that is only to be expected.

Gregor makes another important point, which is that today’s SWP is suffering from the political equivalent of attention deficit disorder. Short-

termism in perspectives is compounded by a culture in which the strategic issues – developments in the labour movement, for example, which have not been seriously analysed by the party for years – are downplayed while the campaign of the moment is ludicrously exaggerated. And when the campaign fails – well, there’s always the next campaign, and it’s better to bail out and move on before it fails definitively. Thus an accounting is put off indefinitely. This may be convenient for the Rees-German leadership but hardly helps the comrades learn any lessons or better orient themselves for the future.

What we fail to recognise is Gregor’s view that the main problem with the SWP is ultraleftism and an exaggerated concern with revolutionary purity. The SWP’s self-image as the Bolshevik Party de nos jours is extremely important, of course, but ultraleftism these days exists almost exclusively on the verbal level, in occasional rhetorical flourishes. (We accept these might have been more frequent in Scotland due to the party’s formerly dismissive attitude to the Scottish Socialist Alliance/Scottish Socialist Party.) In fact the SWP’s behaviour in recent years has been defined by a shift away from opportunism as a method and towards opportunism as a principle. Gregor recognises this indirectly when he writes of the party’s fake spontaneism and rejection of transitional politics – in effect the idea is that the demands don’t matter, all that matters is getting people mobilised and the logic of struggle will do the rest. More recently party theoreticians have put forward a concept very similar to the old Militant idea that reformist demands become revolutionary when those putting them forward are subjectively revolutionary. An example is Callinicos’ “transitional programme” in his *Anti-Capitalist Manifesto*, which is very largely the programme of Attac. This formalises the party’s pre-existing practice of building by being the loudest and most enthusiastic advocates of whatever is popular this week. However, this thoroughgoing opportunism has not been accompanied by the SWP abandoning its aggressive sectarianism,

which may often be mistaken for ultraleftism.

Gregor's discussion as to a "transitional programme" or as he prefers it a "transitional method" becomes more confusing still when one looks at what he means by this. For Gregor it seems that a "transitional method" is an approach that will allow forward movement via a series of transitional demands that can mobilise large numbers in pursuit of a defined goal. In Gregor's mind this goal is that defined by the SSP of an independent Scotland which as he has argued in his pamphlet on socialism and the national question in Scotland cannot but be a progressive demand. Leaving aside this doubtful assertion, which is dependent on conjectural factors, it would seem that for Gregor his "transitional method" is to function as a method of mobilising nationalist opinion behind the goal of an independent Scotland with a welfare state. As Gregor is at pains to defend the internationalist credentials of the SSP it would appear that here he is suggesting that an independent Scotland should act as a stage towards the establishment of socialism at an international level. In our opinion this strategic vision is an attempt to revive the stagist perspectives of classical Social Democracy.

Older readers may have noticed that Gregor's understanding of a "transitional method" has nothing in common, other than its name, with an understanding of this concept as developed by the Communist International. That method was designed so as to mobilise workers behind a series of "transitional demands" that would lead to the conquest of state power by the working class. Properly speaking a transitional programme can only be fully operative at a time when the rule of capital is threatened and the crisis endemic to the bourgeois mode of production becomes open and manifest. The purpose of a transitional programme in such circumstances, for the Comintern and later for the Fourth Internationalist movement, was to act as replacement for the older discredited notion of a minimum programme achievable under the rule of the bourgeoisie (an independent Scottish state as advocated by the SSP is just such a minimum programme). The key idea was that by raising a series of demands, both political and economic, the revolutionary party could win the leadership of the working classes and other oppressed groups and move forward to the seizure of state power.

Such an approach is far from viable in today's very different circumstances when the rule of capital is not threatened by open crisis. But a transitional method of politics which seeks to mobilise workers on the basis of class politics is valid even in periods as seemingly placid as that of today. Curiously Alex Callinicos came close to grasping this in his short discussion of Trotsky's famous document of 1938 only to abandon this conception in his more recent *Anti-Capitalist Man-*

ifesto in which he portrays transitional politics as little more than a pious wish list of desirable reforms. This is a consequence of the SWP's campaigning style which as Gregor has rightly noted relegates the slow patient work of building a base in the workplaces and unions, in a word the construction of a rank and file movement, to a poor second best. In practice, if not in theory, this is a result of the SWP's effective abandonment of the working class as the subject/object of social change.

In general therefore we would characterise the SWP as a rightward moving centrist formation. One might also, if one were being harsh, describe the SSP as a rightward moving centrist party – however, the SSP has two advantages that the SWP lacks. One is a democratic structure that means, if you think the party's position is opportunist, a more principled position can be fought for. The other is a genuine implantation in the working class that makes the argument worth having in the first place. We have no doubt that, for Marxists in Scotland, the SSP is the place to be, and if the *SW Platform* had a sensible perspective they should see it as being their primary site for political struggle. This would concretise Cliff's metaphor about the small cog and the big cog (of course he meant gears, but engineering was never his strongest point).

This brings us to the question of how to operate in the distinct circumstances of Scotland. It hardly needs to be said that the idea of the *SW Platform* operating as an autonomous section of the IST, setting its own priorities and thinking through Scottish conditions, is appealing but absolutely utopian. After what happened to the American ISO, does anyone seriously think the London CC is going to raise the battle cry of more autonomy for its international affiliates? The member groups of the IST do of course have absolute formal independence and on paper are united only by a shared body of theory – in fact the international tendency has no structures and has never taken any formal decision except to excommunicate the American heretics. But here's how things work in practice. The Irish SWP has its "policy-making" conference in April or May. However, major shifts in perspective almost invariably take place in November after the British SWP conference. The fraternal observers from the IST return to the colonies bearing the latest wisdom. Then the Political Committee in Dublin announces a turn, invites the comrades to unanimously acclaim the turn, and heresy hunts anybody who asks an awkward question. There is no reason to suppose that a formally autonomous Scottish section would be any different.

Essentially the *SW Platform* is running an unsustainable holding operation. It could be a dynamic part of the SSP, but that would require

its members to display a grasp of principled politics. It could be, as some SSP members suspect, a Trojan horse for a Scottish launch of Respect the Populist Coalition, which would be a massive step backwards politically even if successful, and more likely an embarrassing flop. And if the Platform continues in its present half-in half-out mode, further disintegration and political decay are inevitable. Even though we don't agree with Gregor's own

political trajectory, his abandonment of this no-win situation in favour of becoming a loyal citizen of the SSP does at least demonstrate some political realism. What would be better would be some sort of perspective of fighting the increasing national-reformist pressures in the SSP rather than surrendering to them, and making the SSP a genuine weapon for the strategic task of building a class struggle left wing in the labour movement. ■

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