SOCIALISM AND THE SCOTTISH REFERENDUM BY Phil Sharpe

The answer to the question ‘Is there a Scottish Road to Socialism?’ depended on the result of the referendum on Scottish independence. If the result was yes we would then have to begin serious discussion about the relationship of Scotland to socialism. However, the result was no, and so it would seem that the question had been resolved in favour of the attempt to realise socialism within the UK state. But the issue is more complex than issues being decided by referendums. This is because the referendum has indicated the popularity of the aspiration for Scottish independence. This means that regardless of the decision that has been taken the influence of Scottish nationalism may become an important factor for deciding the political character of the struggle for socialism in Scotland. Hence a No vote could actually mean that the question of Scottish independence was not resolved and the attention of the people of Scotland would still be about how to realise national self-determination. (However the large majority for a No vote seems to have decided the issue of self-determination for a considerable period of time) In contrast a yes vote would suggest that the focus of concern would be about the ability of the Scottish parliament to promote the aspirations of a fairer and more just society. This situation would suggest that economic questions would become central and the major issue would be about whether the Parliament could deliver a welfare state and prosperity. The result of this situation could have been the re-emergence of socialism as a major and popular mass force. It would be a matter of practical concern to try and re-invent the character of Scottish socialism.

Jack Conrad has argued that Scottish socialism is inherently unprincipled because it is based on the conception of socialism in one country. (1) He rejects as left nationalist the perspective that Scotland can establish society that is socialist in character and can lead the struggle for international social transformation: “After regaining independence, Scotland will cut a messianic path to socialism. Marvelling, the people of other, lesser countries, will gain courage and seek to emulate Scotland’s “earthshattering lead”(2) If the actual struggle for socialism in Scotland was to be motivated by ideologies of nationalism and socialism in one country this criticism may be true. But in fact this type of socialism has limited popular appeal when compared to the influence of nationalism and the continued importance of the Labour party and reformism. At present people are prepared to support the SNP and allow it the opportunity to govern Scotland. In this context nationalist inspired socialism has limited popular appeal and seems to express a fringe movement that is based on past traditions rather than expressing the character of modern Scotland. Furthermore, it seems to be the ideologues of nationalism that are able to deliver a Scotland based on social justice rather than the dogmatic adherents of socialism. However, this is the crucial point the very justification of the SNP crumbles if they cannot deliver on their promises about the welfare state. In this context Scottish socialism could re-emerge and it would re-invent itself for the challenges of the world of globalisation.

In other words it is entirely possible that Scottish socialism in this situation of economic uncertainty could be a variant of nationalistic socialism, as described by Jack Conrad. This scenario is credible because of the recent tradition of this type of doctrine. However it is also possible that the response to the situation of economic and political crisis could be the development of internationalist politics as the basis of the advocacy of socialism. The crucial aspect would be the character of the programme being argued for by the various proponents of socialism. We can expect the remnants of the Scottish Socialist Party to argue for socialism in one country, but it is entirely possible as the result of the failure of nationalism that new forces will emerge that are distinctly internationalist. The very crisis of the perspectives of nationalism will generate the prospect of new tendencies of proletarian internationalism. At the moment the Scottish working class are reacting to the failure to create a British based road to socialism in favour of the alternative of nationalism. They believe that nationalism has not been tested in terms of a situation of effective political independence. In order to obtain the support of these workers the forces of nationalism have had to promise the renewal of the welfare state in the aftermath of the onslaught of neo-liberalism. But the demands of the global economy mean that these promises cannot be realised. The result of these failures could be the emergence of a party of intransigent class struggle. It will be the task of Marxism to argue in favour of internationalism and against adaptation to nationalistic socialism. Crucial to this task is the issue of how the Scottish workers republic is being advocated. It is entirely possible that this demand can be outlined in terms of the formation of a siege economy and the isolation of Scotland from the world situation. This defence of autarky and limited links with the outside world would become the basis of the defence of socialism in one country. Alternatively, the promise of extensive trading links could also become the justification of a contemporary version of socialism in one country.

Consequently, the crucial aspect of the internationalist definition of the Scottish workers republic refers to the attitude of the state towards the role of international class struggle. Would the Scottish workers republic consider that its formation was the prelude to support for the advance of world revolution? In this context would the Scottish workers republic consider that one of its major tasks was the promotion of the struggle for socialism in the British state, and attempt to renew the unity of the working class of the former UK state? Furthermore, would the Scottish workers republic attempt to strive to create a unified European state that was brought together by the common aim of realising socialism? In other words could the programme of the Scottish workers republic be based upon intransigent principles that are reminiscent of the founding doctrines of Marxism, or could the result of the struggle for Scottish socialism be the amalgamation of nationalism and socialism? Jack Conrad can only envisage the latter result because of the prevailing contemporary influences of nationalistic socialism. His argument is abstracted from the likely developments that would follow as a result of the failures of the economic and social programme of Scottish nationalism. He does not allow for the possibility that the very reaction to the limitations of the nationalist perspective could be the generation of intransigent forms of internationalism. In this context the very conception of Scottish nationalism would be re-invented and the internationalist approach of John Maclean would be re-discovered. In this situation the only alternative to the failures of Scottish nationalism would be re-absorption of Scotland into the UK which would be unthinkable because this would mean the re-imposition of the dictate of the British Parliament. Instead of this unlikely scenario we would have the possible emergence of a new form of socialism that has not yet been apparent since the days of Maclean. The very internationalist aspect of this type of socialism is defined by whether it advocates the class struggle perspective. Instead of the present de facto alliance of nationalism and socialism what is more probable would be the generation of a type of socialism that rejected any suggestion of alliances with nationalism. Thus nationalism would be recognised as the expression of the interests of global capitalism and the only principled alternative would be understood as that of international socialism. In this context class struggle would take the form of the opposition between nationalism - and its support for global capital – with the Scottish form of international socialism that was based on the role of the working class.

If we consider that the project of Scottish nationalism is likely to fail why did the DSA support the Yes vote? The answer is that the principled character of how we should vote is not determined by economic prospects exclusively. Hence George Galloway may be right to suggest that the economic results of a separate Scotland could be dire but he is wrong to therefore reject support for a yes vote. The point is that the possible economic results of the realisation of Scottish independence do not undermine the fact that a considerable part of the Scottish population is in favour of separation from the UK state. It would seem a denial of democracy to be opposed to the aspirations of nearly half of the population of Scotland. Indeed we would aim to improve the demand for national self-determination in terms of the perspective of the formation of a democratic republic based on the role of a constituent assembly subject to recall of deputies and rejection of the status of the UK monarch. It is entirely possible that the aspirations of the supporters of national self-determination will be disappointed in terms of the failure to re-invent the welfare state. As Lenin was aware the realisation of political self-determination does not overcome the limitations imposed by the economic system of finance capital and imperialism. (3) But the point is that the contradictions of the economic situation do not mean that independence is an illusion. Instead it can establish the connection between democracy and socialism in terms of the understanding that self-determination should be extended to the realm of the economic. The point is that national self-determination intensifies the contradiction between democracy and capitalism: “National struggle, national insurrection, and national secession are fully “achievable” and are met with in practice under imperialism. They are even more pronounced, for imperialism does not halt the development of capitalism and the growth of democratic tendencies among the mass of the population. On the contrary, it accentuates the antagonism between their democratic aspirations and the anti-democratic tendency of the trusts.”(4)

In other words an important contradiction between national self-determination and the domination of monopoly capital concerns the role of democracy. The successful national struggle enhances the desire for democracy but the domination of capital undermines this aspiration. In Scotland this contradiction may take the form of the possible failure to regenerate the welfare state. But the demand for democracy remains popular and genuine. Hence it is the task of Marxists to argue that the ultimate realisation of democracy requires the development of socialism. Furthermore, this socialism cannot be nationally limited and instead is connected to the prospect of international expansion. In contrast a vote in favour of remaining in the UK state will undermine the possibilities of the development of the connection between democracy and the struggle for socialism. The immediate result will be demoralisation, bitterness and a sense of helplessness. This situation will mean that the politics of fear have triumphed over the politics of hope – however distorted – and the victory of the no vote will lead to the end of the promise that a yes vote seem to express. However, it will be the task of socialism, whatever the result of the referendum, to try to promote a sense of hope in terms of the advocacy of a principled programme of revolutionary change. Marxism should be alert to the prospects of any situation and attempt to uphold the political independence of the working class in any situation. This is why we rejected the view that either a yes vote or no vote was inherently pro-socialist. Instead of this dogmatism we had to assess which result was most favourable for the advance of democracy. In this sense the battle for socialism could make the most progress. This is why we advocated a Yes vote.

We are against the pessimistic view that a yes vote would have meant the end of the unity of the working class of the existing UK state. Unity of workers is a possibility that transcends national boundaries and is connected to existing levels of mass struggle. Indeed the dominant ideology behind the No vote has been the politics of fear and the appeal to support the establishment. In contrast the Yes Vote campaign was connected to the promise of what was possible with genuine democracy. Its ideology is based on the democratic deficit of the electoral system of Westminster elections and maintains that the views of the Scottish people can be more adequately represented with an independent Parliament. However we reject the optimistic view that the austerity policy can be defeated by separation. Only militant working class action can defeat austerity. But an independent Scotland will mean the views of the Scottish people can acquire some form of genuine representation that has been absent because of the limitations of the present electoral system. In contrast a majority No vote could result in greater apathy and passive acceptance of the domination of the ruling class. For all of the above reasons we advocate a Yes vote.

The result of the referendum of September 18th 2014 is an emphatic rejection of the aspiration for Scottish independence. In percentage terms 45% supported the Yes vote and 55% voted No. Glasgow was the only major city that voted in favour of independence. This surprising result indicated the success of the politics of fear of the British establishment. Only Gordon Brown advocated a No vote in passionate and constructive terms. The other representatives of the No vote were content to outline the dire consequences of Scottish independence, and many working people were worried about the value of their pensions and other benefits in a Scotland separated from the UK. In other words the domination of bourgeois ideology was evident in the size of the No vote. Marxists do not have the consolation that a proportion of the No vote represented some sense of class unity with the working class in the rest of the UK. Instead the No vote was characterised by deferential attitudes, fear of the unknown, and loyalty to the leadership of the Labour Party. In contrast proletarian Glasgow voted 53% in favour of a Yes vote. In other words the politics of class unity was not present in this referendum campaign. Marxists have to admit that class unity has become a myth that had some element of truth in the past and yet has become unreal in the present. Hence the politics of opposing austerity was also not present in this referendum campaign. The supporters of the No vote never raised the necessity of popular UK opposition to austerity as a reason for voting No. Instead their message was about the apparently detrimental impact for capitalism if people voted yes. The only effective pressure group in this campaign was that of big business, which was divided into supporters of the yes or no vote. Hence the trade unions failed to have any significant impact on the campaign and the collective voice of the working class was effectively never articulated. Thus the ultimate choice was between nationalism and its promise of a better Scotland or the politics of fear of the British establishment. The latter triumphant campaign was successful. The result is a setback for democracy and the aspiration to establish greater control over society by the realisation of independence.

However despite the misgivings of the above we have to accept the democratic character of the result of the referendum being against independence. For Marxism this means that we have to strengthen the arguments in favour of advocating socialism within the UK, and in this context indicate that the struggle for socialism within the UK is part of the international revolution within the European Union. The referendum campaign has indicated that the concept of the unity of the UK working class has become a myth that has replaced the class solidarity of the past. De-industrialisation because of the offensive of Neo-liberalism has undermined this class unity, the politics of class, and the heritage of socialist culture has been replaced by deference towards global capitalism and the British state. The alternatives in the referendum campaign were between Scottish bourgeois nationalism and the traditions of British finance capital. The distinctive voice of socialism was absent from the various debates. Instead socialism became an appendage of Scottish nationalism or the British establishment. Hence the referendum result indicates the importance of regenerating socialist culture within the UK. The conception of Scottish socialism is a myth and so is the legacy of socialism within the UK. One of our most important tasks is to try and transform the anger about the democratic deficit in Scotland into support for a mighty campaign against the austerity policy. The alternative could be the creation of a culture of demoralisation and bitterness within Scotland.

How do we explain the majority vote for independence in Glasgow? A significant section of the working class decided to support the politics of hope and reject the alternative of safety and accommodation to fear. This indicates that the urban centre of the Scottish working class was in favour of an uncertain future when compared to the limitations of what already exists. The conception of a sentimental Scotland and a fairer society was more attractive than the limitations of a Scottish Parliament dictated to by Westminster. These confident sentiments about the future can be utilised by Marxists in order to justify the arguments for socialism. Support for socialism represents confidence about an uncertain future and is in this sense the politics of adventure and hope. Marxism can argue that the attempt to obtain Scottish independence has failed but this situation is not cause for demoralisation. Instead the popular energy that was devoted to the cause of Scotland can be transferred to the aim of socialism and working class emancipation. But in order for this to occur the supporters of socialism will have to establish a dialogue with the Scottish working class, and so be able to establish the credibility of this standpoint for the present generation. Scottish nationalism became popular because its adherents embarked on a popular campaign to make their views popular. They realised that the success of their approach was dependent on making their viewpoint part of the ‘common sense of the people’. Since the collapse of Scottish socialism it has existed in an isolated condition and has become dependent on nationalism for its validity. A small section of Marxists tried to outline principled reasons for a No vote. Instead of these polarities between pro Scottish Nationalism, and British nationalism, it is time to re-invent Scottish socialism and to provide constructive reasons for the struggle for socialism within the UK. This means providing the reasons for opposing austerity and becoming part of a British wide struggle to overthrow the Coalition government. In this context the aspirations for Scottish independence become part of the class struggle of the UK workers. Furthermore, the resignation of Alex Salmond indicates a growing crisis for Scottish nationalism because of the convincing failure to achieve a yes vote in the referendum. This strategic failure of the Nationalist forces could result in the re-emergence of socialism. But this will only occur if the socialist forces provide plausible reasons for their standpoint. The re-hash of stale ideas will not be satisfactory.

David Cameron has suggested that devolution within the UK should be the practical result of the recent referendum. But what does this mean: the right of rural areas to dictate to urban centres about policy and taxation levels? We would suggest that the only progressive form of devolution is on which enables local councils to oppose expenditure cuts and to improve services. In other words we favour the formation of local communes that enable the real transfer of economic and political power to the localities. The only alternative to this possibility is the continuation of the coalition policy of austerity in this new devolved form. However it is very doubtful that the Coalition government will enable the localities to have effective economic and political power. Instead devolution will be a façade that enables strict centralisation to continue.

It is also necessary to note that the recent referendum campaign indicated the continued degeneration of the Labour Party. The leaders of the Labour Party have refused to support opposition to austerity and have instead tacitly promoted deflation, but they also have recently acted as the puppets of the Coalition government when it came to campaigning for the No vote. Darling contributed to the politics of fear and made dire predictions about the value of the Scottish pound. Hence the Labour Party was shown to be part of the establishment and opposed to the democratic aspirations for a better and fairer Scotland. However the actual result of their intervention was that a considerable part of the Labour vote supported the nationalist argument and rejected the establishment politics of the Labour party. This situation means that there must be a promising basis for the re-birth of Scottish socialism in terms of opposing the limitations of Labourism. But in order for this possibility to occur it is not sufficient to be critical of the Labour party because negative politics cannot be inadequate. What is more appropriate and principled is to re-invent the politics of class struggle. This was the crucial feature absent from the referendum campaign. The question of class was dissolved into national identity, or the alternatives of considering oneself primarily Scottish or British. Hence the internationalist alternative of class was not part of the debate. Nobody tried to introduce class into the discussion. George Galloway only introduced confusion with his extreme pessimism about the economic prospects of an independent Scotland, and he failed to make the argument in favour of a socialist UK. Indeed Marxists made little attempt to introduce socialism into the debate. Instead the division was between Scottish nationalism and British nationalism. This situation must be challenged in the future by convincing arguments in favour of international class struggle and the importance of replacing capitalism with socialism. However this development must not be limited to socialism because the result of the vote on the referendum is that the class struggle retains its UK dimensions. For the present the prospects of the Scottish road to socialism have been settled by the referendum vote. However we cannot rest content with the dominant influence of conservative ideology and instead must establish more convincing arguments in favour of the struggle for socialism within the UK and the EU.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Jack Conrad: In False Colours, Weekly Worker, NO 1025, September 11th 2014 p6-7

(2) ibid p6

(3)Vladimir Lenin: A Caricature of Marxism and Imperialist Economism in Collected Works Volume 23, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1964 p28-76

(4) ibid p50-51