

TRADE UNIONISTS FOR INDEPENDENCE

Derek Durkin, Trade Unionist for Independence, 11.6.13

Derek introduced himself as a trade union official employed by the Lothian Health branch of Unison. However, he placed his emphasis on his work as a postie for 27 years, 20 of which he had been an activist in the CWU no. 2 branch.

TUFI had first been formed by non-party and ex-party (Labour, SNP, SSP) activists in Edinburgh, in response to the prospect of the Independence Referendum. They had felt that a different vision of Scotland was necessary for trade unionists compared to that offered provided by SNP backers, Brian Souter and Tom Farmer.

Derek had first become politically involved in support for the UCS Work-in in 1972. However, most of the years since then had seen a downward spiral in trade union rights, under both Tories and Labour. Despite the recent 13 years of Labour, the anti-trade union laws remained in place, with only one token concession, which allowed the victimised GCHQ workers to join a union – although they were still not allowed to strike. Unions were now hamstrung by lengthy and costly balloting procedures to get industrial action. They often had to employ expensive lawyers to defend even these ballots in court.

Depending on Labour and the trade union officials had made no difference. The official anti-trade union law campaign was originally led by Arthur Scargill, and more recently, by Bob Crow. However, both of these officials have been treated as pariahs by the rest of the trade union bureaucracy; so there has been no real wider official support.

Scottish independence provides us with a new opportunity to get trade union rights. However, this will not happen automatically. When Alex Salmond had been asked by Cat Boyd (trade union activist and RIC member), at the Jimmy Reid Foundation lecture, what the SNP government's attitude would be to anti-trade union laws, he claimed that there was no hostility to trade unions at Holyrood!

Clearly, the SNP government could not be depended on. However, their decision to support NATO had created a political vacuum. Many ordinary SNP members opposed the party's pro-NATO position. Organisations like RIC and Labour for Independence showed that there could well be a post-2014 electoral realignment. TUFI is currently campaigning within the trade unions to necessary to make the case for trade union rights and to win support for independence.

The overwhelming majority of union officials currently support Labour, but they know that open support for the Better Together campaign would not be popular amongst members. So far, only ASLEF has given support to the official 'Yes' campaign. The STUC had dodged the issue of independence by raising hypothetical questions for the SNP government which can not be answered, instead of taking the lead on issues of benefit to trade unionists (which would expose their lack of influence over Labour). Unison officials were trying to prevent pro-independence motions from being put forward.

On Wednesday, July 10th, at 7.00 pm, TUFI is organising a public meeting in Edinburgh in the Augustine United Church. Dennis Canavan ('Yes' National Advisory Board) and Robin MacAlpine (Jimmy Reid Foundation) are going to speak, and two women trade unionists will

make up the full platform. It is hoped to attract undecided trade unionists and even those who are opposed to independence.

The referendum will be won amongst the working class. This means targeting housing schemes and workplaces. However, it is not just winning the 'Yes' vote that is important, but preparing for the trade union rights fightback.

One argument you sometimes hear from opponents of independence, is that it will break-up working class solidarity. Ironically, this argument usually comes from exactly the same people who oppose any solidarity action for workers in Ireland, Greece, Spain or Portugal. Unlike these people, TUFU believes strongly in internationalism and solidarity.

Day 1 of an independent Scotland won't bring about socialism, but it could lay the longer term basis for this.

Discussion

A discussion followed in which Allan, Bill, Ian and Luisa made contributions.

Bill who had once been active on Perth Trades Council, but had worked in England for many years, before recently returning to Scotland, asked about the strength of remaining trades councils, and the attitude of the STUC and trade union officials to independence.

Derek pointed out that these organisations had lost a lot of their strength, although Edinburgh TUC had organised a series of discussions around the issue of independence. The only senior trade union official who supports independence is Bob Crow, General Secretary of the RMT, although the Scottish region of the RMT has not yet given its backing to this, and will discuss its position later this month. Billy Hayes, General Secretary of the CWU is anti-independence.

Luisa pointed out the catastrophic loss of trade union rights that had occurred in Portugal since the 2008 crisis. There are now 200,000 blacklisted workers. Workers who took industrial action faced the sack.

Derek replied that many trade union rights had been already been lost in the UK, and that employers could victimise workers here too. When he had been involved in the CWU, this union was responsible for 68% of all unofficial action, whilst his own no. 2 branch had been responsible for 75% of that action. The only time they were defeated was when the action was led by the officials!

Later, the rank and file came to 'deal' with the officials, by which 2 officials would come up to publicly dissociate the CWU from any action (to prevent sequestration of funds), whilst the members went ahead with their action anyhow! One thing, though, was that they always ignored the legal limit (6 maximum) on picketing, by holding open-air branch meetings at the same site.

Allan argued that Labour were continuing their gallop to the Right, following Johann Lamont's earlier attack on universal benefits. Ed Balls had caved into the Tories over welfare counter-reforms and given George Osborne a green light to make further cuts, which Balls had said, in effect, that Labour would accept. Alistair Darling received a standing ovation at the Scottish Tory conference. Labour are in coalition with the Tories in 6 Scottish local councils. 'Better Together' looks like the beginnings of a more permanent Tory/Labour austerity coalition, if they can get their way in September 2014. Such a political line-up already exists in Greece and Italy.

However, the SNP's recent creation of a 'Trade Unionists for a Yes' campaign also seems to be an attempt to marginalise TUFU, with its agenda of seeking trade union rights. The SNP business backers do not want any such commitments.

Derek agreed that the SNP official 'Yes' campaign has played a decidedly dubious role, when it attempted to marginalise TUFU at the STUC conference by creating TU4Yes to draw away potential support. However, there had been some more recent attempts to make overtures to TUFU to provide speakers at 'Yes' events.

Ian asked to what extent is it possible to get the message directly into workplaces.

Derek said that they were pressing union branches to take a three level approach depending on the possible level of support – i) organising a debate, ii) organising a debate with a TUFU speaker, iii) organising a debate with a TUFU speaker and motion of support for independence. CWU no 2 branch supported independence. They hoped to use this to get direct access to each workplace. They were also backing a TUFU candidate for Scottish CWU Secretary to try and extend their support.