

# TRADE UNIONISTS AND INDEPENDENCE, 17.3.14

Gary Fraser, Trade Unionists for Independence

Gary is a member of Trade Unionists for Independence, the East Lothian 'Yes' campaign and UNISON Midlothian branch.

He highlighted the questions posed by Gregor Gall in his *Scotland the Brave?* Does support for independence mean you are a nationalist and does it mean the abandonment of class politics? Gary was going to argue that it doesn't.

However, before going on to show this, Gary wanted to pay tribute to Bob Crow and Tony Benn. Bob Crow had been a real class fighter dedicated to fighting for his members. Tony Benn had been an inspirational socialist.

Gary works part of the week for Midlothian Council and part of the week at Edinburgh University doing research into a group of workers in the public sector.

Gary argued that workers in the public sector have worked under the threat of job losses since Tory/Lib Dem Coalition came to power in 2010.

Local authorities across Scotland face financial shortfalls in their budget which are being delayed until after the referendum. Gary brought this up, because, he made the point that if Scotland were to vote 'No', this would be taken as a signal by the government to impose more cuts and intensify their austerity drive.

The referendum, Gary argued, provided an opportunity on how to rethink local government in Scotland. Back in 2001, Tony Benn had talked of the 'corruption of power', but also the 'corruption of powerlessness'. Any effective democracy has been removed from the institutions of the UK state, leading many to feel powerless. A 'Yes' vote represents an increase in people's aspirations; a 'No' vote reflects this feeling of powerlessness and lack of self-esteem. Furthermore, a 'Yes' vote could also widen the gulf between the SNP, which has taken on board much of the British neo-liberal agenda, and those who see independence as a possibility to create a better society.

The official trade union movement has been very quiet. At best, it has been ambiguous over the issue of Scottish independence.

Yet an independent Scotland would be one that is free of the Tories. The Tories have used the power of the UK state to transform Scotland in an economic direction opposed to the desires of the people of Scotland. They have no mandate in Scotland.

This is the major reason why Gary supports independence. He does not see it as a nationalist issue, but a democratic issue. Scottish national identity is civic not an ethnic.

If Scotland voted 'Yes' it will get a government it voted for. There is no great difference between the social attitudes of people in Scotland and of England. But there is a considerable difference in the political culture which in Scotland is left of centre.

The issue of class is important. Gary considers himself to be a Marxist but a Marxist of sorts. George Galloway has said there is no real difference between a bus driver in Bradford and one in Kilmarnock. However, that reasoning extends to bus drivers anywhere in the world. This is true. But Gary argued, that whilst there is certainly a conflict between capital and

labour, there is also a conflict between capital and democracy. Scottish independence is about extending democracy.

Gary also noted that trade unions can take action across national boundaries. Gregor Gall in Scotland the Brave? emphasised the importance of oppositional consciousness as the important factor, compared to the size and extent of formal trade union organisation.

The key features of the post-1945 social democratic settlement, the NHS and universal benefits are under threat from the UK state, not from the 'Yes' campaign.

Gary also noted that there are very real material reasons for the current lack of trade union fight back. One example he gave is the issue of debt. If you take a partnership of two graduates, they start out in life together by owing £30,000 to pay off loans, then they have to take out a mortgage, which means are immediately £200,000 in debt. Many workers are in low paid or temporary jobs. They are often not members of trade unions.

There is now a much wider battle for democracy against the power of global capital. Traditionally, many on the left have seen larger states as being more effective in winning concessions. But you could also argue that in smaller states, such as Scotland there is a closer relationship between civic society and Scotland.

Gary finished his speech by saying that the arguments put forward by no-leftists, all end up back at the cul-de-sac of voting Labour. Gary warned against this and effectively argued that Labour could no longer be re-claimed for the left.

Independence provides us with a new opportunity. Getting political power can change things. The changes we want will not be brought about by the SNP, wedded as it is to neo-liberalism. The Left must not get seduced by having a position on the official Yes' top table.

Gary concluded by arguing that if we want to see the types of policies advocated by RIC and by TUFU that there is a serious need to have a strategic discussion about the future of the left.

### **Discussion**

**Andy** said that we had a wider problem than the Tories. There were many in RIC who accepted social democratic politics. Robin McAlpine and Common Weal have been to the forefront of pushing such politics, hoping to alter the political course of either the SNP or Labour. Robin sees RIC as part of this plan. However, Robin is opposed to ending the anti-trade union laws in Scotland, believing the days of conflict politics are over!

**Stuart** asked why do the trade unions take the stance they do?

**Pat** had spoken at an Edinburgh PCS meeting in favour of a 'Yes' vote, arguing against a Labour MSP, who favours a 'No' vote. However, a 'Yes' campaigner argued for taking a neutral position, rather than dividing the union over the issue.

STUC events have been very low key. They too don't seem to want to be too committed to one side or another, leaving them in a position to take advantage of either a 'No' or a 'Yes' vote.

**Willie** said that most unions were based on a relationship with an employer, rather than a relationship with the state. Willie had been on UNITE's Regional Committee and its National Finance & General Purposes Committee. They had conducted a survey after the SNP 2011

election victory. They had found that 45% of the union's members had voted SNP. This was one reason why they had not taken a position over the independence referendum. They did not want a split membership, and they wanted to leave their future options open.

However, this doesn't debar trade unionists from promoting debates within the unions. There is also the possibility of organising factory gate and canteen meetings. This had happened in the past, when Willie had worked at Parsons Peebles.

We also had to look at the possibilities for wider Left regroupment. What would happen to the left of the SNP and Labour Party after a 'Yes' vote? What would the revolutionary Left do? And would the new opportunities attract those not currently in any party?

**Ian** asked if the STUC would be ready to face the situation when power is concentrated in Holyrood?

**Allan** took up Andy's theme, He pointed out there had been no successful social democratic or official communist one-party state road to socialism. All countries where these roads had been attempted had retreated into neo-liberalism. This was because the reforms which social democracy could bring when the economy was in an upturn, could not be extended when the economy faced a crisis. And, the global economy is likely to face a multi-faceted crisis for many a year. Former social democrats and official communists are to the forefront of taking apart welfare reforms, since they believe you have to revive capitalism before there can be any improvements.

What had always been missing in social democratic and official communist projects was the development of meaningful democracy and independent class organisation, which could act as a countervailing force to that of the corporations and the state. Instead power became concentrated in a self-serving bureaucracy, with very different interests.

Gary had talked about the importance of democracy. However, the SNP government sees its mandate coming from the devolved institutions of the UK state, not the people of Scotland. Thus, after any 'Yes' vote on September 18<sup>th</sup>, it was going to take Labour, Lib-Dem and Tory MSPs into its negotiating team with the UK government. Their starting point is 'Independence-Lite' with its acceptance of NATO, the City of London and the monarchy, so where will they end up?!

Jim Sillars and Tariq Ali had already raised the issue of the need for a National Convention immediately after September 18<sup>th</sup>. If the fruits of any victory are not going to be snatched away from us, we have to see a 'Yes' vote as a democratic mandate for a complete break from the UK state. This means moving towards a Constitutional Convention, which empowers, not the existing UK state devolved MSP's, but the people of Scotland.

**Annie** suggested that there should be debate with Common Weal. Salmond was walking a tightrope, trying to appeal to both Left and Right. The time when the SNP could be challenged was the 2016 election.

**Pat** asked, 'What is RIC?' We offer a real alternative. A Common Weal speaker had already addressed an Edinburgh RIC meeting. He was surprised to find himself challenged. RIC is offering different ways of organising, not only bringing together much of the left, but also involving those who had not been involved in politics before.

**Gary** praised 'Common Weal'. However, it was merely a think tank. It was good to have a Left think tank, when most were on the Right. However, its limitations lay in its desire to push the SNP or Labour to the Left. Think-tanks don't involve the mass of the people.

Gary wasn't sure what the STUC would do after independence. 50,000 public sector jobs have already gone without a fightback. Members would also be divided, whatever the result,

The SNP's 'Yes' campaign reminded Gary of Obama's 'Yes We Can' campaign. There are gaping holes in the SNP's analysis. The Left should fill that gap.

**Jane** talked of the Popular Education Forum, which had organised weekend schools and local forums where political issues could be discussed. Network of political activists need to be brought together with a similar educational project in mind to promote discussions on independence.

**Andy** said we need a coalition after independence. However, we needed to show our own relevance. This meant RIC needed to organise bigger actions to win the right to be listened to in future.

**Kenny** pointed out that Bob Crow's activist trade unionism had increased the RMT's membership.

**Willy** said that if you were prepared to really take on the bosses you could win. There had just been a victory in the Edinburgh Colleges dispute. Led by Left trade unionists.

Willy has been to the Peoples Assembly meeting in Glasgow. It was dominated by the top table, and had an ageing composition, but included many trade union activists.