

## **The Scottish Socialist Party Continues to Amaze: A Report on the 2004 Annual Conference in Edinburgh**

By Ernest Tate and Jess MacKenzie

The sixth annual conference of the Scottish Socialist Party – with about 500 delegates in attendance -- took place in Edinburgh, March 27-28<sup>th</sup>. The main discussions were about preparing the party for the June, 2004, European elections and a campaign against the proposed E.U constitution, anti-racism work, an initiative to organize a Scottish Independence Convention, and the constructing of a secular education system. A major report on trade-union work was presented about the growing revolt in union ranks against New Labour. There was also discussion about developing the party's position on Northern Ireland, but none of the motions on this issue achieved the support of the conference to pass.

We won't report on everything that happened – that would require a book -- but we will point to what we think were the highlights, to try to provide a glimpse of what went on there. For example, there was a very long and stimulating discussion about “tolerance” zones for prostitution in urban areas, an issue raised by a Scottish National Party's private member's Bill scheduled to be debated soon in Parliament; the Party's MSPs will be expected to take a position on this issue. Due to the complexity of the issue, the whole matter was referred to the Woman's Network in the Party who will organize a special Party conference to continue the discussion.

Some Party campaigns had a minimum of discussion: for example, its anti-war work around the occupation of Iraq; its anti-racist work and its activity defending asylum seekers. Probably its most important campaign is its struggle to force the New Labour-Liberal Democratic government to abandon the regressive council tax. The party has received some press coverage of its protest demonstrations outside municipal halls all around Scotland, which culminated in a mass mobilization outside Holyrood, Edinburgh, on April 24<sup>th</sup>. Many commentators in the media were of the opinion that the government would have to change the legislation soon because there has been such a ground-swell of opposition to it among ordinary people. Tony Blair has indicated he will change the legislation for England, which will make the position of New Labour in Scotland untenable. There was also little discussion of the Party's campaign for free

school meals; the Party played a very important role in getting reduced costs for school meals established in Glasgow and other areas.

We attended our first annual Convention two years ago, just as the Party was gearing up to increase its representation in the 2002 elections. We were looking forward to getting first hand information on how well the party had done since then. It has been amazingly successful for a small relatively new organization, a little over five years old. It has 3500 members, up over 500 since the last conference. The SSP is a “multi-tendency” party, comprised of most of the left groups in Scotland, most of who organize themselves around their specific viewpoints which constitute “platforms.” During the event, the “platforms” organized meetings in the evenings which were open to all delegates.

The SSP is for “red-blooded socialism, rooted in the working class,” stated Catriona Grant, who chaired the first day’s sessions. It calls for an independent socialist Scotland. It’s a combat socialist party, committed to the overturn of capitalism. Popular support has increased – in some industrial areas they are only a percentage point or so behind that of the official opposition, the Scottish National Party(SNP). It has elected five new members in addition to re-electing Tommy Sheridan, the national leader, along with two municipal councillors.

The Party has added to these successes in the union movement with its “Make the Break” campaign, which it launched in 1999, a political struggle inside the unions to challenge union financial support for Tony Blair’s New Labour. Richie Venton, the Party’s Industrial organizer told the delegates, “a rolling thunder of discontent is growing in the unions. We are no longer swimming against the stream, and the RMT has added huge authority to our arguments.”

“At this stage”, he said, “among the mass of trade unionists, the predominant trend is towards straight-forward disaffiliation from New Labour. They are more decisive and clear-cut than many of the more active core of the unions. This is especially prevalent in unions which have been in sharp conflict with the government, like the FBU. Whilst a hugely positive step forward, disaffiliation from Labour, if left in isolation, could leave the unions in political limbo; would probably often mean the tops of the union carry on unofficial collaboration with New Labour and could reinforce a certain anti-political party strain within trade union ranks – born of the vile experiences

at the hand of New Labour.” Working class conditions continue to deteriorate in Scotland. Many delegates referred to new data which showed average longevity of the population in some areas has fallen to below 63 years, lower than Russia.

Venton cautioned against expecting mass over-night affiliation to the SSP. It’s not an immediate prospect, he said, “but that must in no way act as a recipe for passivity...we help shape the future, not just speculate.”

The Rail, Maritime and Transport union in Scotland have affiliated 8000 members, an action that led Blair’s New Labour to expel the entire RMT. (This union is famous for being the first, over one hundred years ago, to move behind the Labour Party when it was founded.) In February, in defiance of their National leadership, 4000 postal workers in Edinburgh, Fife, Central Scotland and the Borders affiliated, and later this year, the Fire Brigades Union(FBU), which is still battling to get a contract, will debate its affiliations. All these unions are helping finance the SSP’s campaign in the European elections.

Tommy Sheridan opened the conference by paying tribute to the work of the party since the previous conference and warmly welcomed the new delegates from the RMT, and CWU and he urged SSP members in the Firefighter’s and public service unions to step up their drive to “make the break” with New Labour.

A special delegation of striking nursery-nurses (day-care workers) was given a rousing welcome, backed up by a financial collection from the delegates as the hat was passed around. In appreciation, the nursery workers, organized and staffed a crèche for the event.

It is worth digressing slightly here to tell you about our first hand experienced of how the party “walks the talk” when it comes to trade union struggles. One day, we participated in a mobilization of over a thousand nursery workers – all women -- in front of Glasgow City Hall in support of a motion moved in the Council that day by the new SSP councilor, Keith Baldarassa. These women – among the poorest paid in Scotland -- had been on strike for five weeks for a national agreement, in defiance of New Labour, the first national strike by a union in Scotland since the Miner’s strike in the eighties. The SSP moved quickly to support the strike and has continuously raised motions and questions in Parliament about the callous

attitude of New Labour towards these low-paid workers. Over a couple of hours, we helped the SSP give out copies of its Union Bulletins. Most of the women we talked to were very positive about the party and especially appreciated the work of Tommy Sheridan and SSP – MSP, Carolyn Leckie for their support in Parliament and in the media.

On Saturday, Alan McCombes introduced the Party's "Draft Manifesto for the European Elections." This was a big issue before the delegates. There was lots of discussion on the floor and in the corridors about the implications of electing even one member in the proportional representation system and who would be on the Party's slate. Scotland has eight seats in Brussels. Everyone recognizes that having only one representatives in Brussels would make it easier for the Party to deepen its connections with other anti-capitalist forces on the European continent and to help it to organize resistance to the European multi-national corporation's drive to force down working peoples' living standards in order to make themselves "more competitive" with other imperialist world powers.

McCombes compared the energetic and vibrant SSP conference to that of the Charles Kennedy's Liberal-Democrats meeting in Dundee that was taking place that week. Even though there was little – if any -- coverage of the SSP event by the big TV media, television news showed a very low turn out for the Liberal-Democrat affair, which was regarded by reporters as one of the most boring on record. McCombes had some fun with the "Lib-dems". No wonder they are confused and their leader "likes a bevy", he said. (Newspapers were full of reports of how leading Liberal-Democrats were warning Kennedy about his long absences and poor performance due to booze.) To maintain their position in the governing coalition, Kennedy had, to the consternation of his members, abandoned the party's position of opposition to GM crops in Scotland while still opposing GM crops south of the border and gave his support to maintaining the council tax in Scotland while opposing it in Westminster. McCombs speculated there was a possibility the SSP could bypass the crisis- ridden Liberal-Democrats in the European election contest.

"The SSP rejects the Union Jack –flag-waving anti-Europeanism of the xenophobic right. Socialism has always been an international philosophy", states the draft manifesto. In today's world, "international socialism can no longer be derided as a utopian fantasy. The starry eyed dreamers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are those who hide behind national walls and live in permanent

quarantine from the rest of the world.” Our aim, “is to build socialism from below – a socialism based on decentralization, diversity and voluntary cooperation between nations”, pointing out that “there is nothing intrinsically internationalist about a United Europe or internationalist about the United Kingdom.” The philosophy underlying the E.U. is right wing, the manifesto says.

The SSP, in contrast to the SNP, which is the official opposition in Scotland, is opposed to Britain adopting the euro as its currency. It says, “Scotland would effectively become an economic prisoner, held under house arrest by the bankers of Frankfurt..” It “means submitting to yet another ‘one-size-fits-all’ monetary regime”.

Such SNP policies have shaken the confidence of many of its members. Some have joined, or are in the process of joining the SSP. It also has been in crises and as a result of its failures in the last election when it lost eight seats. Under pressure from the SSP, they recently abandoned their support for the Council tax, (a form of poll tax), an issue which is front and centre of the SSP’s everyday activity. According to The Times of London, a recent report to the SNP’s executive revealed membership has dropped two-thirds in the past year, to 6000, the lowest in a generation. At the convention, Tommy Sheridan welcomed a new group of four ex-SNP members into the party, one of whom came as an observer but left as an SSP member. One was a member of the SNP’s trade union group and another, a former SNP-MSP, who the delegates voted onto the SSP’s slate of candidates for the European elections.

The SSP’s position on independence was the subject of three motions. The Party has been in discussion over the past period with other pro-independence forces in Scotland about organizing an Independence Convention. The SNP and the Green Party have now signed on, Alan McCombes told the delegates, and it will be launched later this year.

The issue of Scottish independence was debated fully at the previous convention we attended at which time the party’s position was overwhelmingly reaffirmed. But the matter was raised again for this convention.

There was some resentment among the delegates to this kind of guerilla war that does not offer anything new in the way of argument. This found

expression in a motion from the Scottish Republican Platform that called for the Party to incorporate its position on independence into the Party's constitution. "The SSP was founded as a pro-independence party. The democratic demand for Scottish independence is a 'triple pillar' of SSP policy," it said, pointing out that "for a small but vociferous minority of SSP activists, this remains a matter to be continually challenged..." The delegates rejected this idea however, recognizing that it would be wrong to seek an organizational solution to the confusion about this question in some of the left groups – mainly those with their bases in London.

One group, the "Committee for a Workers' International", commonly known in Britain as the "Militant tendency", distributed an open letter from their London leadership to the conference, denouncing the Party's position on the national question, warning the delegates of a "shift towards opportunism" when the Scottish Socialist Voice, the Party's weekly paper, in the spirit of open and democratic discussion, allowed ex-SNP members to express their opinions, which were mainly left criticisms of the SNP.

A motion influenced by the International Socialists "platform" took a similar position on the national question. It supported "the right of Scottish people to self-determination", however, it believed the Party's position on independence "should be based on whether the goal of Independence and the means of achieving it, will strengthen or weaken the political, ideological and industrial position of the working class – not only in Scotland, but in the U.K. and internationally." What's common to the position of all these groups, it seemed to us, is that they wish to place constraints on the Scottish working-class' democratic demands, asking it to wait until such time as there is a rise in the class struggle in England and Europe. This motion was defeated.

A major issue in Scottish society is the question of religious anti-catholic sectarianism which finds its expression in many forms, and which can be seen often, for example, in the eruption of violence and rioting by hooligans during soccer matches between the Rangers and Celtic teams. Discussion took place around three motions and their respective amendments, which dealt with the difficult issues of building a secular educational system, and the issue of religious schools. The recent reactionary actions of the French government in banning Muslim women for the wearing of the head-scarves in schools, and the confusion in the French left on this issue, was mentioned several times.

Everyone recognized that even though the Scottish government maintains there is “public” or secular system in place, it is in all reality a system dominated by Protestantism, the main religion in Scotland. The discussion was impassioned, at times, but open and comradely.

A motion was finally adopted which stated: “religion is a private, not a state matter. The state shall not restrict an individual’s right to freedom of conscience, of worship or of religious observance. The Church and state are totally separate entities. The state shall not fund or subsidize any religious institutions or organizations; the state shall not sponsor any act of religious worship or observance.”

An amendment was also accepted that called for the Party to launch a national debate in the next year on the building of a secular educational system that would involve parents and pupils, and all communities and teachers.

Two Kurdish asylum-seekers, Serder Bazini and Fariborz Gravindi, who had just come off a hunger strike to protest being deported, were introduced from the platform. They looked extremely weak and emaciated and had come to the conference with their supporters to thank the party for its work on their behalf. They received a standing ovation and Serder moved a motion of solidarity with Kurdistan. It passed overwhelmingly.

The party leadership recognizes the limit to what can be discussed in two days. Yet it was remarkable how democratic the event was, but the pressure to keep to the agenda, meant there was insufficient time for reflection to allow people to change their minds, allowing delegates to leave with the same opinions they came with.

It was a conference for the branches, however, not just in words, but in actual practice. And it seemed very democratic to us. The movers of motions were given time to introduce them, as were the seconders. Amendments were also introduced and seconded. After debate, both the movers of the motion and the amendments were given time to sum up. And while this was going on, the delegates were voting by secret ballot to elect their leadership. There was no organizational wrangling. The SSP leaders, who often introduced the major reports, played very little role from the floor.

This was a sharp contrast to our experience in the labour movement in Canada. We've been to many union and NDP meetings over the years and often – quite often -- even after having spoken from the platform, the leaders will eat up the delegate's time at the floor mikes. Rank and file delegates have been pushed aside so an MP can speak. In addition, often the agenda is taken up with videos and special events and special invited speakers, the mayor or some provincial leaders, who use up a lot time of the convention with the willing cooperation of the organizers, who say they are making the event “entertaining”. There was none of that there. It was also interesting to see the role played by the newly affiliated union delegates. We had expected to see them sitting on the sidelines, watching, voyeur like, as the various “platforms” engaged in debate. We've seen that happen in some meetings in Canada. But no, these workers seemed very experienced politically and were fully engaged in what was going on, many of them making passionate interventions, frequently effecting policy in a serious way, probably the result of their long struggle in the unions. This was clearly their Party.

The Scottish Socialist Party was born in the last decade of the last century when many ideologues of the ruling classes said the struggle for socialism had come to an end. We are still early in the new century and the SSP gives us a glimpse of how it is possible for socialists in an advanced capitalist country to organize themselves in a new and democratic way. We have heard there are similar formations developing in other countries, and this is truly inspiring. Of course, it would be absurd to think we can mechanically reproduce in Canada what the Scottish socialists have achieved, but we can certainly learn a lot from their experience. It might be a good idea if, in the spirit of internationalism, more people visited Scotland to see the SSP. The European elections might be a good time and perhaps we can look to attending their next conference.