

INTERVIEW

A new socialist alliance launched in Scotland: The view from a RISE

Saturday 9 January 2016, by [DAVIDSON Neil](#), [SMITH Ashley](#) (Date first published: 6 January 2016).

During the run-up to Scotland's 2014 referendum on whether to secede from the United Kingdom, the Scottish left formed the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) to support a "yes" vote on a radical left basis. While the independence referendum lost narrowly, the RIC tapped into a deep social radicalization to the left of the dominant party in Scotland, the Scottish National Party (SNP), galvanizing workers, youth and social movement activists on an anti-imperialist, anti-neoliberal and anti-oppression platform within the broader struggle.

Afterward, many of the socialist organizations inside the RIC began discussions about launching a new socialist alliance in Scotland. They came together on August 29 for the launch conference of a new formation to be called RISE—which stands for four founding principles: Respect, Independence, Socialism and Environmentalism. The alliance held its first democratic conference on December 5, when members voted on a platform, political positions and organizational structure.

Neil Davidson is a member of revolutionary socialism in the 21st century (rs21)/International Socialism Scotland (ISS) and the author of numerous books, including most recently *We Cannot Escape History: States and Revolutions*. Shortly after the December 5 conference, Davidson talked to Ashley Smith about RISE's project and prospects.

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Ashley Smith - HOW WAS the founding conference?

Neil Davidson - IT WAS a very positive event. It was an open conference so anyone who was a member of RISE could attend. A good chunk of the actual membership came—around 300 people, which is maybe half of it at the moment. Basically we planted our flag as a new left-wing alliance with clear socialist positions that takes environmentalism seriously.

There was very little heated debate. The only real controversy came when one comrade suggested from the floor that we shouldn't endorse open borders, and that was a problematic concept. That idea was widely criticized by other speakers and quickly dispatched so we do have a position of supporting open borders for refugees and migrants.

While the conference was a step forward, we still have some debates and discussions to hash out. There are different underlying conceptions of what RISE should be—whether it's the basis of a new party or simply an alliance: The latter position is certainly the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) view at the moment.

Regardless, we intend to stand candidates in the next Scottish elections in May. Part of the Scottish Parliament is elected on a “first-past-the-post” basis, and part on a “list” system, based on levels of voting support for the parties and alliances that are standing. We will try to get elected on the latter basis, but in order to do so, we need to get between 5 percent and 8 percent of the vote. That will be a challenge. Its not impossible, but it will be difficult.

WHAT WERE some of the positions adopted at the conference?

WE AGREED to a very good practical program of reforms that would quickly make things better for large numbers of people. Here are a few examples.

We adopted a policy of building 500,000 new council houses to address the real lack of affordable housing for working class people, and a policy of abolishing the anti-trade union laws that make it more difficult for workers to organize effectively.

We agreed to abolish the recently established national police organization, Police Scotland, which is both shambolic and oppressive in all sorts of ways, including conducting massive stop-and-search operations against young people and illegal surveillance. We also took a position to abolish private schools with removing their existing charitable status as a first step.

We are also proposing the complete nationalization of the energy companies with a view to phasing out oil extraction as rapidly as possible. We agreed to a new system to purchase land and redistribute it, which is a big issue for tenants in the Scottish Highlands in particular. We are calling for drug legalization.

These policies are important for us to establish to show that we don’t want independence for its own sake, but as a means to an end—to advance the cause of socialism, the ending of oppression and the threat of environmental catastrophe. We’re not nationalists.

This is important as there is a strong tendency for some SNP supporters to denounce us and the Scottish Greens for “splitting the independence vote”—a variant on the old “labor must wait” strategy that has been so detrimental to working-class interests in previous struggles for self-determination. Nevertheless, we obviously work with the SNP (and Green) activists where we have shared goals—over land reform, nuclear weapons, anti-war work, in defense of trade union rights, and so on.

HOW IS RISE organized?

WE ARE experimenting with forms of democracy. RISE is organized in what we call “circles,” which can be based either on a community or workplace basis—I’m setting one up at Glasgow University where I work, for example. The idea is that circles should have a maximum of around 40 members. Beyond that, we’d expect a new circle to be set up. Within the broad parameters of Conference policy, circles organize their own activity, leaflets, online presence, etc.

At least half of all elected positions (chair, treasurer, etc.) have to be occupied by women. Between annual conferences, we have a National Assembly that meets once a month to decide overall policy direction: it consists of two reps from each circle. Finally, we have what are called Action Teams, elected at conference, which meet every fortnight to implement specific policies or areas (media, women, international work).

We try to proceed by achieving consensus, but obviously things are decided by a majority vote if that’s impossible. Essentially, we’re trying to be as accountable as possible. Any members of the Scottish Parliament we get elected will be expected to take no more than an average worker’s wage

in salary.

We'll see how all this works, but there is a very strong desire on part of members to get away from the top-down structures typical of the existing revolutionary left, where a Central Committee either decides everything or is able to exercise a commanding influence of decisions through its control of patronage, internal communications, conference arrangements, etc.

HAS RISE been able to regroup the Scottish left? Has everyone joined in?

NO. BASICALLY, there are three major forces or groups outside of RISE. One is Tommy Sheridan and the remains of Solidarity, which split from the Scottish Socialist Party back in 2006. Most of the big players in this organization—the Socialist Party (SP) and the British Socialist Worker's Party (SWP)—have now pulled out of this, partly in an entirely justifiable response to Sheridan's call for an SNP vote at the general election in May.

Sheridan's main operation these days is called "Hope Not Fear." It doesn't have membership in any sense, and in some ways, it's his personal show. And it's now heavily supported by some dubious nationalist elements. Very few people on the left trust Sheridan politically any longer.

The SP and the SWP both function in a problematic way in larger groupings. They meet beforehand, arrive at decisions, and then push them regardless of the discussion that takes place in the formations they participate in. In other words, they treat their own organizations as the priority, not the broader group.

They're obviously entitled to organize themselves in whatever way they see fit, but we don't want RISE to function this way. We don't want it to be blocks of people voting based on pre-prepared positions. That doesn't mean that people can't individually join. In fact, individual members of the SWP have joined in Edinburgh and Glasgow. But we don't really want organizations coming and voting in bloc in a way that would impede real democratic debate and discussion.

The SP and the SWP had been involved in the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), which has stood candidates in the past. It's not yet clear whether TUSC will stand again in May. Sheridan will stand himself and possibly stick other names from Solidarity down in the ballot.

Naturally, we want to avoid a situation where there are three different left-wing candidates on the ballot, but it is not within RISE's power to stop Solidarity and TUSC—which are essentially shells—from splitting the left vote. All we can do is raise our profile to the point where it is clear that all the healthy and dynamic sections of the left in Scotland are now grouped in our alliance.

WHAT IS the profile and prospects for RISE?

WE'VE WON quite a high profile. Journalists will mention RISE as the Scottish SYRIZA or the Scottish Podemos. Clearly we are identified as being part of that group of organizations that emerged with the last couple of years. We've also made a splash at the big demonstrations in solidarity with the refugees or against the bombing of Syria. Our task is to continue to project ourselves in all the key arenas of activism.

But we are really just getting started on that front as well as in the upcoming Scottish elections. We will only have about 12 weeks of campaigning after the winter holidays. We may not be able to get people elected in this first electoral test.

So we have to have a long-term view of how we build RISE on the activist and electoral fronts. We are at the beginning of building it as the alternative for the left in Scotland.

HOW ACTIVE has RISE been outside the electoral arena in the social and trade union movements?

WE ARE not just an electoral alliance. We've made that clear from the beginning by adopting the Podemos slogan of "one foot in the Parliament, a thousand feet on the street." We have been involved in all of the big demonstrations, and some of them we called ourselves—especially on the issue of war, but also issues of fracking and support of refugees. We also support direct action and try to stop weapons moving, planes flying and so on. We've also set up a trade union group to agitate on that front.

After the holidays, we are going to have to focus on the elections. But we have to implement some of the lessons we learned from the Radical Independence Campaign in how we run our campaign. We have to carry through the electoral work in an activist manner. We have to go door-to-door in the working class housing estates—projects as you call them—and speak to people face to face, and try to win them over again.

That's how we did so well in the independence vote. We went to areas no one had been near for decades. It helped people re-engage with politics. As a result, voting levels in the general election in Scotland were higher than in England and Wales at 71 percent. That's still lower than the record levels in the referendum, which was 85 percent.

We have to get back to that—to relearn some of the things we learned in the referendum campaign. In particular, we also have to spend far more time trying to win influence in actual workplaces, trying to reach working-class people as trade unionists, rather than focusing solely in communities. That was probably the biggest weakness of the Yes campaign in the referendum.

WHAT IMPACT has Jeremy Corbyn's election as leader of the British Labour Party had on Scottish politics and RISE?

IT'S HAD an impact, but nowhere near the impact it has had in England and Wales. There, you had a lot of young people join the Labour Party with real enthusiasm and hope for change. It's very similar to the experience we had in Scotland with the independence referendum. It was encouraging that people wanted a left-wing politics.

Corbyn has not found the same audience in Scotland. He's spoken to big audiences, but mainly brought back older Labour Party members who had left it over the Iraq War and gave a boost to the existing Labour left. Young people, by and large, are joining the Scottish National Party, the Greens or RISE. I think the Labour Party has really lost the youth radicalization here.

Corbyn's concessions to the Labour Party establishment—like, for example, his decision not to enforce a block vote of MPs against the war in Syria—has also disappointed them. Actually, he's come under a lot of criticism in Scotland, and not just from the hard left.

For example, there's a mainstream daily newspaper in Scotland called The National—the only one which supports independence—that has come out hard against the war in Syria, for open borders and so on. It has columnists from RISE, the Greens and the SNP. It was scathing toward Corbyn for his decision not to enforce the whip and compel MPs to vote against war.

Nevertheless, Corbyn has done some things to overcome some of the ridiculously sectarian positions that the Labour Party adopted toward the Scottish National Party for supposedly stealing voters. He even did a big meeting with SNP leader and First Minister Nicola Sturgeon against the Tory's anti-union bill recently. But I don't think the Labour Party is going to experience a major revival here.

HOW HAVE people in Scotland and the political parties reacted to the drive to war? What was the reaction to the vote in early December in British parliament to authorize military force against ISIS?

THE MAJORITY of people are opposed to the war, to a greater extent than in England. Fifty-seven Scottish MPs (out of 59) voted against the war. There have been demonstrations.

People have the feeling that Scotland's been dragged into yet another of the British state's wars, which we don't want, and our politicians don't support. As a result, the left can more easily make all sorts of arguments and get a big hearing than in England, where the political class supports the bombing.

Our antiwar coalition, Stop the War (StW), has a slightly separate existence in Scotland than it has in England. In England, it's compromising itself very much by its refusal to let Syrian revolutionaries speak and by its refusal to criticize Bashar al-Assad.

We have to say more than just repeating, "The main enemy is at home." That's of course true, but the main enemy isn't the only enemy. We have to oppose all the other international powers like Russia as well as the regional ones intervening in Syria.

In England, Stop the War has accepted all sorts of compromises with people who are frankly Stalinists—people who think that Putin and Assad, and Qaddafi before them, are figures we should support because they are allegedly opposed to American and British imperialism.

Nevertheless, RISE took a decision at our conference to support Stop the War and its mobilizations. I think that was the right thing to do, but at the same time, we also conduct a debate within it on the less principled positions that StW has taken.

IN THE aftermath of SYRIZA's capitulation to austerity, many on the left have been debating broad parties. What lessons have radicals in RISE drawn from this experience?

THERE HAS been a lot of discussion about SYRIZA, especially with Greek comrades in Scotland who are also members of that party. But I think it's so far away from where we are—even the idea of being in government—that this is clearly not going to be an immediate problem for us.

I think we need to rethink the experience of left governments or workers' governments in the current context, and think about how that would work in the future. In some ways, what SYRIZA has experienced is simply a later iteration of the experiences of earlier left governments that we are quite familiar with from the 1970s and '80s, but in a more extreme form.

You have to have some kind of plan to cope with this, which, as revolutionaries have long recognized, ultimately involves the question of state power. But as I said, we've got some time to do this, because clearly we're not going to be in office any time soon.

Obviously, things can happen that could change our situation dramatically like another economic crisis that could change our electoral fortunes. But for now, we've got the luxury, if you like, of being able to establish policy positions and seek alliances on concrete questions. We haven't come up with a solution to "what would we do if we were in power tomorrow." That's a debate—something that the left has to think about and prepare for.

My personal view is that reformism—either of the old Social Democratic type or of the new formations—is going to be no more successful at bringing about socialism than it has been in the past.

The problem is that simply saying “build the revolutionary party” as an alternative hasn’t worked either—not because genuine revolutionary parties have failed to achieve socialism but because, nearly 50 years since 1968, none have ever reached a sufficient size to mount a serious challenge to the state. This can’t simply be because of “unfavorable conditions,” unless we’re saying that parties can only be built in conditions of ascending class struggle.

This is clearly the most difficult question facing revolutionaries, and it would be ridiculous of me to offer some pat answer to an issue of this magnitude. Clearly, some collective effort is going to be required, but the first step is to recognize that there is a problem and that we can’t just “keep on keeping on” in the hope that things will somehow turn out differently.

SO HOW do revolutionaries work inside RISE?

THERE IS a bedrock of revolutionaries within RISE—the group I’m in (rs21/ISS), the Republican Socialist Alliance, the comrades who were in the International Socialist Group, and many unaffiliated comrades who became involved in politics through the Radical Independence Campaign and who see themselves as revolutionaries. We need to work collaboratively with them inside RISE, keeping alive a Marxist analysis for a new generation on the Scottish left who are quite new to politics.

Theoretical discussion during the Yes campaign was at quite a low level, partly because everyone was so concentrated on the practical question of independence and the national question. Environmentalism and issues like LGBTI have had quite a lot of discussion since then, but fundamental questions of the state, power and class formation and so on haven’t been discussed as much. There are a strategic set of questions that the left has to make available to people.

Partly this involves communicating the history of our movement. Those of us who have been in revolutionary organizations assume that everyone knows about the Russian Revolution and other revolutionary risings. In the past, even the reformists we debated knew something about these issues: it was part of a shared culture. That’s no longer true.

All those distinctions which we inherited from the Comintern—“reformist,” “centrist,” “revolutionary,” “ultra-left”—fewer people think of themselves in these ways, and achieving any sort of clarity about strategy can only be done on the basis of prolonged discussion and joint activity. One function of revolutionaries is therefore still to be “the memory of the class” as well as to introduce people to the Marxist method and tradition.

Having said that, we also have to push for the most strategically sensible left-wing positions as possible within an alliance where the majority are not revolutionaries. As far as rs21/ISS is concerned, while we will maintain ourselves as a relatively loosely organized group, we intend, in alliance with others on the revolutionary left, to try and win clearly defined political positions in RISE as a whole, rather than building ourselves at its expense.

P.S.

* “The view from a RISE in Scotland”. Socialist Worker (USA). January 6, 2016:
<http://socialistworker.org/2016/01/06/the-view-from-a-rise-in-scotland>

* Transcription by Ben Lassiter.