

Voices of Scotland: Labour Still Relies on the Organised Working Class

If we are to build the Scottish Labour vote and keep the party to the left, we must focus on politics in the trade unions

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As many acknowledge, we have a once in a lifetime opportunity this Thursday to elect a left-led Labour government. The thought of waking up on Friday morning with Boris Johnson and his hard-right cabal celebrating victory is too much to contemplate.

But why is Scottish Labour doing so poorly in the polls?

Scottish Communists at our recent congress acknowledged the lies and distortions Jeremy Corbyn has had to contend with over the last few years, never mind the backlash a Corbyn transformational government would face from the class enemy should they actually win.

From social media, and discussions with trade union and community activists, it can be seen that many working-class people in Scotland still feel betrayed by Labour, especially by the Better Together blunder when Labour joined with the Tories in the independence referendum.

Despite the change in the Labour Party leadership, the term Red Tory still gets used. A vote for the SNP and an independent Scotland is still seen as an escape from the Tories and a step towards socialism, despite the SNP record at Holyrood and in local authorities.

The position Labour finds itself in in Scotland after long-term dominance has been caused by decades of collaboration by the previous right-wing leaderships. It lost the position of leadership earned through the struggles of the 1970s when the broad labour movement, under left influence and leadership, spoke for our class.

During this period extraparliamentary struggle was the key — with major Scottish and British-wide disputes gaining solidarity across these islands and beyond.

It is important to remember these lessons when we face the possibility of another independence referendum. In the 1970s there was a unity of class and political organisation that carried forward the Scottish tradition of fighting for a just society.

Communists recognised then, as now, that the class enemy organises at British state level. This is where it wields its economic and political power.

Unfortunately this reality has been lost on many in working-class areas with a proud tradition of militancy such as Glasgow, Fife, Dundee, Clydebank, and the Vale of Leven. They

now see the nationalism of the SNP as providing an avenue towards a socialist Scotland.

It is continually said, and often with some arrogance, that we just need to get independence first, then we can build a socialist society, a socialist Scotland.

Yet the reality is that 10 years of SNP rule have seen an unparalleled destruction of local services with the loss of 40,000 jobs as they meekly pass on Tory cuts. Local democracy has been eroded. There has been a consistent move to central control.

The toll that has been taken on the education system, especially further education, on health, especially mental health, is shocking. Levels of homelessness and drug deaths shame us all.

At a general election hustings in West Dunbartonshire, a local authority where the SNP council tried to cut trade union facility time, the SNP candidate was asked why trade unions did not get a mention in the SNP manifesto? We were told there would be a mini manifesto on trade union rights coming out “hopefully” in the next few days. Less than a week to the general election. How serious is that!

Compare this with Labour’s policy commitments, drafted by the Institute of Employment Rights, which includes full rights from day one of employment.

It is easy to be supportive of organised workers in such solid working-class areas but the SNP candidate had no answer when it was put to him that his parliamentary leader, a millionaire former investment banker and businessman, would not be sharing his rhetoric.

One line for the industrial belt. Another for the shires. The SNP has never sought to mobilise the collective strength of the working class against the ruling class.

Compare that to the left’s position that a Scottish Parliament must be a workers’ parliament with real economic powers to intervene. If we are to challenge the stranglehold of big business, the Scottish Parliament needs the powers to do so: the ability to negotiate public ownership, state aid, public procurement and trade union rights.

Such delegation of powers, in Scotland, Wales and regional assemblies in England, is what is required to mobilise the collective strength of our class and in doing so build wider alliances, always seeking to bring workers and their communities into struggle through a mass movement of resistance, arguing for a left and progressive alternative.

Too often many on the left ignore the fact that the Labour Party is different from European social democratic parties. This is because of its organic link with the trade union movement. It is a vital and important link. In 2016 it helped make possible a Corbyn victory. But its progressive potential depends on the level of political mobilisation.

If today Corbyn’s position on Nato and the EU has been undermined, it reflects that position and our joint failure to mobilise for such progressive policies within this wider labour movement, one that unites six million working people.

The needs of the hour are therefore: vote Labour on Thursday and then build mass extraparliamentary struggle, whoever wins.

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