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Scotland

ISG statement on the crisis in the SSP

- News from around the world -

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The following statement on the acute internal crisis which has broken out in the SSP was issued by the ISG, the British section of the Fourth International.

The Scottish Socialist Party - long a beacon of hope for those seeking to build broad alternatives to the rightward march of social democracy - is in the grip of an acute internal crisis.

On the one side of a very sharp divide is its most prominent member, and former convenor (effectively party leader) Tommy Sheridan. He has the support of MSP Rosemary Byrne, the SWP and CWI platforms as well as a section of the membership.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/sspmph1.jpg>]

On the other side are those around long-time SSP central leader Alan McCombes. This includes MSPs Frances Curran, Rosie Kane and Carolyn Leckie and a majority of the recently disbanded International Socialist Movement platform. It also includes the bulk of the SSP youth organisation, Scottish Socialist Youth.

Although tensions have existed since the SSP made its electoral breakthrough in 2003 - winning six MSPs, the current crisis broke out at an emergency Executive Committee (EC) meeting on November 9 2004. It was convened to discuss the expectation that the Sunday scandal rag, the News of the World, was planning to publish scurrilous allegations about Sheridan's private life in its forthcoming edition.

Tommy Sheridan insisted that if this happened he would take the News of the World to Court. This, apparently, was strongly opposed as potentially damaging, or even disastrous, for the SSP and for Sheridan himself, and he was urged to reconsider.

He refused and the meeting voted unanimously (including the platforms) that he should be asked to resign in order to limit the upheaval of a court case, which would be more severe if he remained national convenor of the SSP.

Whether his resignation would in fact provide much protection for the SSP was another matter. Going to the courts was a reckless strategy and was likely to have implications for the SSP whether Sheridan was national convenor or not.

In any case there was an alternative, and that was to tell the News of the World to mind its own business, and stop telling lies. What happens amongst consenting adults is their own business and no one else's.

Sheridan resigned, however, the following day, quoting family issues. The consequences of this were always going to be dramatic, given his centrality to the SSP. The News of the World did indeed publish allegations about him the following Sunday, claiming that he had had a lengthy extra-marital affair.

Three weeks later on November 27 the decisions of the EC including Sheridan's resignation was put to a full meeting of the SSP's delegate body the National Council (NC) by National Secretary Allan Green. His report was and endorsed with 93 for and 10 against. Sheridan himself voted for it.

According to Green (SSV 269) the way the NC also endorsed the decision to keep the EC minutes confidential.

Eighteen months later, in May 2006, with relationships further deteriorated, the issue exploded again. The court action was under way and News of the World lawyers were asking for the minutes of the November 2004 EC and any other documents relating to the meeting to be handed over as evidence.

The EC discussed this and agreed unanimously - including the SWP and CWI platforms - that the SSP had the right to keep its minutes confidential and they should not be surrendered to the court. The EC also renewed its call for Sheridan to drop the case.

Allan McCombes, who held the minutes, was promptly ordered to hand them over or be jailed. He refused and was sentenced to 12 days in jail and ordered to appear again. At the same time the SSP offices in Glasgow and Edinburgh were searched by the Sheriff's officers, with crippling financial implications for the SSP. Alan McCombes's house was also searched.

On May 28, an emergency meeting of the NC was called to consider what was now a major crisis. The only proposal from the EC to the meeting was to maintain the refusal to hand over the minutes. It was an untenable position. Alan McCombes would stay in jail, and it could lead to long prison sentences for individuals and financial bankruptcy for the SSP.

Tommy Sheridan arrived at the NC - in a highly charged atmosphere - with an Open Letter from himself, which he distributed simultaneously to the media. Its practical proposal was that the minutes be handed to the court, in a sealed envelope, in order to release Alan McCombes from prison - the release of the minutes to the News of the World could still be challenged in court.

Releasing the minutes was now unavoidable, but Sheridan's proposal was embedded in a huge, politically unappealing, diatribe against the EC majority.

It described the EC majority variously as "an unsavoury cabal"; "akin to the dark days of Stalinism"; "McCarthyite" and "effectively acting for the state"; It was designed to show that it was not his decision to go to the courts which caused the crisis but the actions of his opponents since.

It attacks the SSPs policy of 50-50 women's representation by saying "we are a class based socialist party. Not a gender obsessed discussion group".

To raise the temperature even more the Sunday Herald carried a story that morning that the proceedings of the November 2004 EC meeting had been revealed to the court and the media by an unnamed member of the SSP leadership. An emergency resolution was adopted calling for the immediate resignation anyone responsible for this or who had knowledge of it.

The Sheridan Open Letter was a bid for a new majority and it was successful, at least at that NC. The EC resolution was defeated and a resolution reflecting the Sheridan letter was carried. The entire strategy which the EC had been pursuing (keep out of the courts) had been overturned and the NC gave full support to Tommy Sheridan in his case against the News of the World.

Events at the NC have brought about a sharp realignment of forces within the SSP, not least given the decisions of the SW and CWI platforms to throw their weight behind the Sheridan initiative. Sheridan has called for a new leadership to be elected on the basis of what he is putting forward. His letter concludes: "The battle to reclaim the SSP to class politics begins today".

Recently a group from the NC minority have launched a new platform in the SSP called the SSP United Left. In our opinion this represents the best opportunity on offer to rebuild the SSP on principled lines.

We urged our comrades within the SSP to support this initiative and work constructively within it. Unfortunately three of our comrades took a different view and put their names to an Open Letter to the SSP United Left which was distributed at a meeting of the SSP NC meeting on June 25. This contained criticism of the SSP United Left statement which we find unacceptable.

Interventions are being made into this situation by the SWP and the CWI, most crudely the CWI. Peter Taaffe claims that he and Phil Stott, CWI leading member in the SSP, met with Tommy Sheridan in advance of the NC and that the Open Letter and its general approach was produced on his advice.

The position put forward in Socialist Worker is that the choice on offer is between Tommy Sheridan's model of a broad based party and Allan McCombes's model of a narrow inward looking one. This is rubbish. The idea that Allan McCombes wants a narrow party of that kind flies in the face of everything he has done and said for the last 10 years and his record of building the SSP. There may be implications involved in this debate as to the character of the SSP, its structure and accountability, and how it should be built - but they do not take these lines.

It is crucial that the SSP survives as a united organisation out of this crisis since its demise would be a blow to the left and the wider movement on a European scale. The NC meeting on June 25th rightly took the decision to bring the conference of the SSP forward to the autumn of this year. It is important that this conference build on the strengths and traditions of the SSP and does not try to divert it into a difference course. It is also important that elects a leadership which is representative of all strands of opinion within the SSP.

Statement by ISG Political Committee 29.6.06