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Scotland

# Milestone conference for Scottish Socialists

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**It was a great relief, on arriving at the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) conference in Glasgow on October 7, to participate in an event where the mood was so buoyant and confident. The SSP remains remarkably intact given what it has been through over the last two years - being dragged through the court by Tommy Sheridan's decision to sue the News of the World for defamation after admitting that some of the allegations it made were true. In spite of Sheridan's walk-out at the end of August, the SSP has retained 80 per cent of the membership, including the whole of the party's youth organisation, the SSY. It has also continued to produce its paper Scottish Socialist Voice on a weekly basis and maintain its offices.**

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/mcombesssp-2.jpg>]

Around 600 members, including both the SWP and CWI [1] platforms, have followed Sheridan to found Solidarity. The SSP had retained the bulk of the members in the central belt between Glasgow and Edinburgh - the most populous part of Scotland. It has been most weakened in southern Scotland and in the Highlands and Islands.

In fact the 2006 conference had already taken place earlier in the year, before the crisis re-erupted. This was the 2007 conference, brought forward by common consent soon after the special National Council meeting on May 28 (which met whilst Alan McCoombes was in prison for refusing to hand the minutes to the court) at which Tommy Sheridan issued his open letter that effectively split the SSP.

Sheridan, however, walked out in advance of the conference, presumably because he had done his sums and concluded that he would be unlikely to win a majority at it. This meant that, instead of being the final showdown with Sheridan ending in all probability in huge bust-up, this was a conference designed to put the SSP back on the road towards the elections for the Scottish Parliament and local government in May next year.

Some 350 members were in attendance, of whom 230 were delegates. The Sheridan events and the split were dealt with in the first session. The resolution adopted endorsed the way the issue had been dealt with, condemned the breakaway and invited anyone who had followed the split to rejoin. The resolution continued: "Conference reaffirms our founding aims of building a broad, inclusive, united socialist party, based on class struggle politics, which simultaneously stands up against inequality and discrimination on grounds of race, gender, sexual orientation disability or age".

John Milligan of the RMT attempted to sour the tone of conference by making a vitriolic speech blaming the leadership of the SSP for Sheridan's split. He also said that the RMT was withdrawing its resolutions from the conference and would be consulting its members about whether they should remain affiliated. Those who did not have other sources of information would certainly have thought that he had the authority of the union for all of his speech, which he did not at the time, although sadly the Scottish regional council did decide in a close vote to disaffiliate, and the RMT leadership has endorsed the decision.

Those who responded in the debate, in particular trade-union organiser Richie Venton summing up on the motion, remained calm and dignified in defending the line of the outgoing Executive. In this debate and subsequently, a number also made the point about how much the SSP values the trade union affiliations it has won and will seek to maintain.

Colin Fox gave a confident report as National Convenor, emphasising that there could not now be a single person in

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the whole of Scotland who had not heard of the SSP. In his written report to conference he had said: "Tommy Sheridan's decision to pursue his court action, against the advice of us all, will go down in history as one of the biggest political follies of our time".

Perhaps the best flavour of the trauma the SSP had been through was reflected in the written report of Barbara Scott, the minutes secretary: "Well....what a roller-coaster ride of half a year this has been for the Minutes Secretary. Never again will taking the minutes be considered a dull and boring job. Who would have thought that I would be catapulted to infamy and daily appearances in the national press because of note-taking!

"I might add I've been accused of fabricating minutes; getting everything wrong; being invisible; in fact anyone would think I was some sort of evil genius. But no, I was just doing the minutes, same as ever, doing my best to preserve accurate records of our party's history".

A second motion was passed which urged SSP members to avoid the use of the courts in such situation and avoid the use of the capitalist media when making allegation against other SSP members, and was aimed at the tape recording of Sheridan that had just been released by George McNeilage.

The mover condemned both the recording of the tape in the way it had been used. The resolution said: "SSP members should not resort to the non-party media when making allegations against other SSP members. Such allegations should be brought initially before the appropriate party body at the level concerned with the right to appeal to a higher level"

After breaking to attend a demonstration in support of migrants and refugees, the conference went on have a day and a half of policy debate on a full range of issues from the war and the international situation, defending the public sector, the Gaelic language, prostitution, childcare, the environment and global warming, trade unions and campaigning priorities. The conference reaffirmed SSP policy for an independent Socialist Scotland.

The conference was extremely open in that everyone who wanted to speak in a discussion was taken Ë† though this did mean that a few resolutions were not reached at all. Important political differences remain inside the SSP after the split, but these were debated out in a comradely fashion. There were times when the level of the political debate seemed frustrating - for example with the predominance of complacent two-staters in the Palestine discussion - but other times when it was very impressive -for example in the debate on prostitution.

Conference elected a new Executive on which there are a large number of new faces - in particular a significant number who have gained political experience through their leadership of the SSY. A number of those who have been central to the SSP since its inception, e.g. outgoing National Secretary Allan Green, had decided to stand down at this point before the Sheridan crisis. Others may well have been affected by the toll of the last two years.

While it is always a gamble for more experienced activists to stand back and let others take the reins, without being fully sure whether this team is ready for the responsibility, without such wagers the future of organisations cannot be assured. It is not as if the outgoing leadership comrades who did not stand again will not still be active in the party at different levels and available to put forward their ideas if they are asked.

The next big test for the SSP is the elections for the Scottish Parliament next May. It will not be easy to maintain serious representation in the Parliament, but with a big effort nor is it. As Colin Fox noted in his written report: "Many commentators have already written the SSP off for the 2007 elections but the latest System Three Three poll put us back up at 6 per cent and within touching distance of keeping our MSPs".

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The task of the left in England is to give them all the support we can muster.

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[1] Committe for a Workers International, the international co-ordination associated with the Socialist Party in England and Wales