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Introduction

1 British politics in 2021 is still dominated by the fallout from the referendums on Scotland’s constitutional status in 2014 and on the UK’s membership of the European Union (EU) in 2016. Much has been written about them, their immediate consequences and their potential for having a permanent impact on British politics. One aspect of these referendums which has received little attention is the stances of the far left. This article will therefore attempt to determine what the positions of the far left were regarding Scottish independence and Brexit and how the far left related to other political forces which it traditionally opposed, but which had similar positions on these particular issues. To do so, the positions of the main parties of the far left will be examined in detail, as will their campaigns and activities in 2014 and 2016.

2 The far left is a very varied phenomenon, comprising numerous parties and movements. They do, however, share a certain number of fundamental characteristics. These include a commitment to building a revolutionary party capable of leading the working class in the class struggle; the importance of mounting extra-parliamentary campaigns and having a strong presence in places of work; a belief in the necessity of a revolutionary break with the existing political and economic order; and the aim of a radically different society based on the collective ownership of the means of production. These characteristics result from attempts to put into practice the ideas of Marx (the centrality of the class struggle), Lenin (the need for a disciplined, centralised revolutionary party), and for some parties, Trotsky (the aim of world revolution). The parties and movements composing the far left have changed over time, with some becoming marginal, even by the standards of the far left, and others disappearing completely. Furthermore, some organisations have had a semi-clandestine existence in
the Labour Party. This study will be based on the four most active organisations to the left of Labour in the period in question – the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the Socialist Party (SP), the Communist Party of Britain (CPB), and the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP). As little has been written about their recent history, extensive use will be made of primary sources, that is documents produced by these parties, including newspaper articles, pamphlets, leaflets and posters.

The far left and the two referendums

In recent years, the SWP has been the most visible organisation of the far left, its placards being regularly present in demonstrations and sellers of its weekly newspaper Socialist Worker being a frequent sight in towns and cities throughout Britain. Its origins can be traced back to the Socialist Review Group, which was created in 1950. It later became the International Socialists in 1962 before taking its current name in 1977. For many years, the SWP and its predecessors were dominated by Tony Cliffe, who developed the theory of State Capitalism to describe the Soviet Union and its allies in Eastern Europe following the Second World War. This theory differentiated the SWP from its rivals and led to the adoption of the distinctive slogan “Neither Washington Nor Moscow”. The SWP, in its various guises, has constantly advocated the creation of socialism from below, that is the emancipation of the working class by itself. It has consequently been active in rank and file movements, such as the shop stewards movement in the 1970s. It has also played a central role in social movements including Rock Against Racism, the Anti-Nazi League, Love Music Hate Racism, Unite Against Fascism, the Right to Work Campaign, and the Stop the War Coalition, which mobilised hundreds of thousands of people against the 2003 war in Iraq.

Despite the importance it gave to building its own organisation, the SWP has sometimes closely cooperated with other forces. In the late 1990s and early 2000s it was heavily involved in the creation of the Socialist Alliance; in the mid-2000s it was part of George Galloway’s Respect – The Unity Coalition; and more recently it was for a short time active in the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition. It stood candidates in various elections with these groupings, but they rarely received more than 2% of the votes cast. Since 2010, it has been weakened by splits and scandals. The most damaging concerned the handling of accusations of sexual assault made against National Secretary Martin Smith in 2013 and resulted in hundreds of members resigning from the party.

The SWP was in favour of independence for Scotland and campaigned for a Yes vote in the referendum. It linked its stand to its aim of weakening the position of Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, destroying the British state, and advancing towards socialism. The SWP supported leaving the EU and put forward the importance of breaking with “Fortress Europe” and adopting a more open and welcoming approach to migrants. It became involved in #Lexit – the Left Leave Campaign, which emphasised the necessity of promoting solidarity between workers of different countries and breaking with the big business-dominated EU.

The Socialist Party is the second largest party to the left of Labour. Its main forerunner was the Militant group, which published the newspaper of the same name from 1964 and practised entryism in the Labour Party. The strategy of entryism resulted from its analysis of the economic conditions of the time. Convinced that, when a major economic crisis occurred, which it deemed to be inevitable under capitalism, workers
would turn to their traditional party, particularly if Labour was committed to fighting to defend the interests of the working class. This vision was especially associated with Ted Grant, one of Militant’s leading thinkers. Militant’s heyday came in the 1980s, when it controlled Liverpool city council (leading to open conflict with Margaret Thatcher’s government) had three members elected as MPs in 1987 (David Nellist, Terry Fields and Pat Wall), had a number of full-time organisers throughout the country and claimed to have 8,000 supporters. Furthermore, in the late 1980s it led the All-Britain Anti-Poll Tax Federation, clashing with the government and encouraging people to break the law by not paying the new Community Charge.

However, its situation in Labour was precarious. Leading figures such as Peter Taaffe and Derek Hatton, the de facto leader of Liverpool city council, were expelled from 1983 onwards. Moreover, Labour leader Neil Kinnock isolated Militant when he gave an impassioned speech against it at the party’s 1985 conference. As a result of the expulsion from Labour of many of its supporters, Militant decided in the early 1990s that its position was no longer tenable, leading to the creation of Militant Labour and in 1997 the Socialist Party (SP). The organisation’s weekly newspaper was renamed *The Socialist*. Although defining itself as a revolutionary party, the SP strongly believed in contesting elections, sometimes using the name Socialist Alternative, and other times as part of groupings such as the Socialist Alliance or the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition. It temporarily stopped standing while Jeremy Corbyn was the leader of Labour Party as it was in broad agreement with the party’s policies at this time.

The SP was in favour of Scottish independence, adopting and promoting the positions of its sister organisation, the Socialist Party Scotland (SPS). The SP and the SPS linked support for a Yes vote with opposition to the policies of the Scottish National Party government and the need for a socialist alternative. The SP was in favour of leaving the EU and was the driving force behind the TUSC campaign for withdrawal. The SP stated that voting Leave would “shatter” the Conservatives, while TUSC stressed that its opposition to the EU was based on socialist principles.

The CPB was created in 1988 as the result of a split in the official Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). Members and supporters maintained control over the daily *Morning Star* newspaper, which they continued to publish, and after the CPGB changed its name to Democratic Left in 1991, the CPB became the main representative of British communism. The CPB has a presence in the trade union movement, has tried to develop a close relationship with the left wing of the Labour Party and has worked in broad organisations such as the Stop the War Coalition and the People’s Assembly Against Austerity. It has stood candidates in elections, receiving small numbers of votes, but stopped when the Labour Party was under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. The CPB was in favour of Scotland’s right to self-determination but against independence. It believed that Scottish independence would divide the British working class and the trade union movement and presented a vision of a federal Britain. The CPB was against British membership of the EU, emphasising that it entailed a loss of sovereignty for the British people. It participated in the Lexit campaign with the SP.

The Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) was created in 1998 and was dominated by leading figures of Scottish Militant Labour, although it brought together members of other far left parties, as well as former members of the Labour Party. The main public face of the SSP was Tommy Sheridan. A former member of Militant and Scottish Militant Labour, Sheridan had become a household name following his prominent role in protests.
against the Community Charge/Poll Tax. He had been elected as a local councillor in Glasgow and was elected to the Scottish Parliament in 1999. He was reelected in 2003 along with five other members of the SSP. The SSP campaigned for an independent Scotland and defended socialist policies. It appeared to have made a major breakthrough and to have become a significant player in Scottish politics. However, Sheridan became embroiled in a sex scandal and a dispute with the News of the World newspaper, splitting and discrediting the SSP. During the referendum campaign in Scotland, the SSP called on its supporters to vote for Scottish independence. In 2016, it was the only significant party to the left of the Labour Party to advocate remaining in the EU. Nevertheless, it was highly critical of the EU, which it accused of representing the interests of large capitalist companies and of imposing neo-liberal policies on member states, and put forward its aim of working with other European left-wing parties to change it from within.

Although there was not unanimity among the main four parties of the British far left, two trends appear from an examination of their positions. All except the CPB came out in favour of Scottish independence, and all but the SSP favoured British withdrawal from the EU. As will be seen below, divisions over Scottish independence were not new on the far left, but differences over leaving the EU were more unusual.

Elements of continuity with the past

The CPB’s preference for a No vote can be situated in a long-standing tradition in British communism which went back several decades. In its first programme, which was published in 1989, it advocated “the creation of Scottish and Welsh parliaments with effective executive and legislative powers” and stated that the labour movement should spearhead the fight for national parliaments so as not to divide the British working class. The same year, the CPGB adopted its final programme, the Manifesto for New Times, and briefly sketched out a vision of the future based on “some form of federalism which enhances national rights and regional devolution”. Earlier Communist programmes made similar commitments. In 1977, the CPGB stressed the importance of devolution and the creation of national parliaments in Scotland and Wales, but added that “the big political and economic issues which face the British people as a whole arise from the class nature of our society and require the unity of the working people of Scotland, Wales and England for their solution”. This position was also present in the programme adopted in 1968, while the first ever programme of the CPGB from 1951 simply stated that “[T]here must be full recognition of the national claims of the Scottish and Welsh peoples, to be settled according to the wishes of these peoples”. Unsurprisingly, the CPGB had supported devolution in the 1979 referendum, as did the CPB in 1997.

The SWP changed its position during the late 1970s. In 1977, its congress supported the Scottish people’s right to self-determination, but adopted the principle of abstaining if a referendum took place. A majority of delegates believed that revolutionary socialists could not take sides as only radical social, economic and political change would make a significant difference to the lives of people in Scotland. However, a sizeable minority supported other positions. In 1979, the SWP gave critical support to devolution but expressed a preference for the creation of a “Scottish Workers’ Republic”. However, the demand for Scottish independence was never a priority for the SWP. The SP’s predecessors Militant and Militant Labour were in favour of self-determination, but
they were against independence. They preferred the objective of a socialist federation of the nations of Britain which would maintain the unity of the British working class. In 1979 and 1997, they advocated a Yes vote in favour of devolution but emphasised that they wanted a parliament with powers to adopt socialist policies (e.g. the nationalisation of key industries). It was only in the 2000s that the SP swung in favour of independence as a result of the changing political conditions in Scotland. The SSP, which had emerged out of Militant/Militant Labour, had constantly defended independence from its foundation in 1998.

The positions of the SWP, the SP and the SSP can be seen as part of a strong tradition of left-wing support for Scottish independence. This has been expressed by figures as diverse as the intellectual Tom Nairn, the poet and activist Hugh MacDiarmid and the revolutionary socialist activist John MacLean. Far left advocates of Scottish independence have also referenced the works of Lenin, who supported self-determination for oppressed nations, but subordinated this to the class struggle and the interests of the working class.

Regarding Europe, there was a long history of opposition to the UK’s membership of European institutions. Even before the UK had joined the EU, the CPGB was hostile to its joining. In its 1968 programme, it stated that the British independence would be undermined and its trade limited to European countries. Consequently, along with the SWP and Militant, it campaigned in favour of withdrawal during the 1975 referendum. It restated its position in its 1977 programme:

[W]hen the big monopolies, backed by successive governments, pushed for and achieved Britain's entry into the Common Market, this not only imposed serious limitations on the country's sovereignty, but resulted in a big trade deficit with the Market, higher prices, and further economic difficulties for Britain. [...] Withdrawal from the Common Market and an end to its economic and political restrictions would enable Britain to determine its economic strategy and develop its trade on a world scale.

The CPB adopted the same analysis in its 1989 programme and continued to advocate leaving the EU, as did the SWP and Militant/Militant Labour/SP. Following on from various attempts to create a realignment of the far left in the late 1990s and early 2000s, alliances of far left parties were created to contest the elections to the European Parliament in 2009 and 2014. In 2009, No2EU-Yes to Democracy was formed and included the SP, the CPB, and various smaller groupings. In 2014, the SP and the CPB also took part in No2EU - Yes to workers' rights.

The SSP’s opposition to withdrawal from the EU may seem surprising given the stance of the other parties mentioned above. There are, however, precedents of left-wing support for the EU. Much of the left-wing of the Labour Party abandoned its previous Euroscepticism in the mid to late 1980s. EU social legislation was increasingly seen as providing possible protection against the consequences of Margaret Thatcher’s neoliberal policies. A rethinking of traditional policies was also taking place in the CPGB. Contributors to its iconoclastic monthly review *Marxism Today* questioned the CPGB’s traditional hostility, concluding that withdrawal from the EU was neither feasible nor desirable and that closer cooperation with the European left was necessary to change the EU. This more positive approach was officially adopted by the CPGB in 1989, when its last programme abandoned withdrawal and sketched out a vision of a new role for the UK and the British left within the EU. Although the SSP’s criticism of the EU was
more trenchant than that of Marxism Today and the CPGB, it constantly spelled out the need for cooperation with other European anti-capitalist parties.32

18 Most of the positions defended by the four parties in 2014 and 2016 clearly have a long history. However, these positions were shared by political opponents, some of whom were sworn enemies of the far left. For example, the Labour Party was hostile to independence for Scotland, while the Scottish National Party supported it. Nigel Farage’s United Kingdom Independence Party and the right wing of the Conservative Party were in favour of leaving the EU, while Labour wished to remain part of it. How did the far left relate to parties and groupings which adopted similar stances?

Singularities of the far left

19 With the partial exception of the SSP, the four parties refused to become involved in joint activities or campaigns with political adversaries in either referendum. Instead, they organised their own activities, either individually or with allies. This involved publishing articles in their newspapers, printing leaflets and pamphlets, organising public meetings and rallies, and having a presence on social media. Regarding the Scottish independence referendum, the SPS and members of the SWP participated in the Hope Over Fear tour with Tommy Sheridan’s Solidarity party, organising public meetings throughout Scotland.33 They also produced their own propaganda material. As well as carrying out its own activities, the SSP took part in the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC), along with the Greens, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Scottish National Party Socialists (a left-wing grouping in the nationalist party), and various small groups.34 Nevertheless, for pragmatic reasons, it participated in Yes Scotland with the Scottish National Party. Leaders of the SSP believed that participation in Yes Scotland would bring greater public visibility to their party, prove once and for all that the Scottish National Party was not the only party in favour of independence, and allow the SSP to influence the demands of the main campaign in favour of independence.35 Communists, who were opposed to independence, were active in the Working Together campaign. The latter brought together trade unionists and independent socialists.36 As for the EU membership referendum, the SWP and the CPB launched #Lexit – the Left Leave Campaign, which published leaflets and put on public meetings throughout Great Britain. The SP was involved in the TUSC campaign for “The Socialist Case Against the EU”. The SSP mounted its own campaign and produced its own material to present its preferences for remaining in the EU.

20 The various campaigns in favour of Scottish independence linked independence and socialism, while the CPB opposed independence in the name of maintaining the unity of the British labour movement. The campaigns against membership of the EU made it abundantly clear that they were on the left (the very name #Lexit – the Left Leave Campaign signaled this, as did the name of TUSC’s campaign – The Socialist Case Against the EU). The SSP’s activities in favour of remaining in the EU were based on the idea that it was proposing a left-wing defence of membership.37 There was thus no ambiguity about the overall political orientation of the far left’s positions.

21 The arguments used by the four parties to defend their positions were very different from those of their adversaries. They broached themes that were traditionally associated with the left and the far left. The SP/SPS, the SWP and SSP supported Scottish independence partly because it would allow Scotland to prevent Trident
nuclear weapons from being kept there.\textsuperscript{38} They also believed that if Scotland left the UK, the British state would be weakened, making it adapt its foreign policy accordingly. This would make foreign interventions such as the war in Iraq much less likely.\textsuperscript{39} The SWP and the SP frequently suggested that if the UK left the EU, it would be able to break with European immigration rules and allow more non-European migrants into the country for humanitarian reasons.\textsuperscript{40} Although the CPB sometimes mentioned sovereignty, it was linked to the more left-wing notion of popular power. This was the case in the slogan “Leave the EU! Power and sovereignty to the people!”\textsuperscript{22}

The parties which supported Scottish independence and Brexit stressed that the latter were not ends in themselves but corresponded to stages in the struggle for socialism. They thus linked the two referendums to the broader political context. The parties that advocated Scottish independence and leaving the EU clearly wanted to weaken David Cameron and his Conservative government. By inflicting political defeats on Cameron, they hoped to make him resign and to strengthen anti-Conservative forces.\textsuperscript{41} Furthermore, for them, leaving the UK or the EU would not allow all of Scotland’s or the UK’s problems to be solved, but it would be significant steps on the road to socialism. For the SWP, the SP and the CPB, outside the EU, it would be possible to abandon the neo-liberal and austerity policies that they accused the EU of imposing on its members. Moreover, it would be possible to adopt economic measures such as the nationalisation of key industries that were frowned upon by the EU. According to the analyses of the SWP, the SP/SPS and the SSP, an independent Scotland would be able to take similar measures and to choose its own priorities such as increasing the financing of the National Health Service.\textsuperscript{42}

Class was also at the heart of the analyses of the four parties. This was particularly the case as far as the Scottish independence referendum was concerned.\textsuperscript{43} The CPB was afraid that independence for Scotland would create divisions among the British working class.\textsuperscript{44} The SP/SPS, the SWP and the SSP noted that national feeling was strongest among the working class, but expressed fear of the impact of nationalism. In their eyes, a sentiment of national unity could dampen down class divisions and antagonisms, undermining the struggle of the working class to overcome its oppression and exploitation by the ruling class and its attempts to emancipate itself. The three parties thus tried to distance themselves from Scottish nationalism and its main political representative, the Scottish National Party.\textsuperscript{45} Although the SSP was part of the Yes Scotland alliance, it did not hesitate to criticise the Scottish Nationalists before and during the referendum campaign.\textsuperscript{46} The CPB, the SP and the SWP were also suspicious of nationalism during the Brexit referendum campaign and refused to use the familiar tropes of English/British nationalism, such as nostalgia for the Second War or hostility to Germany,\textsuperscript{47} unlike other forces who were hostile to the UK’s membership of the EU.\textsuperscript{48} In both campaigns, the parties of the far left defined themselves as internationalist rather than nationalist. This was expressed in their desire to welcome more non-European migrants and to create links with oppressed peoples throughout the world.\textsuperscript{49}

In the campaigns they mounted, the themes they broached, and the arguments they used, the four far left parties were markedly different from other political forces which defended Scottish independence and withdrawal from the EU. Although the far left came to the same conclusions as Scottish nationalists and the hard right, the reasoning behind their positions was very distinctive.
Conclusion

The far left was actively involved in the referendums of 2014 and 2016. However, the various parties were unwilling to pool their resources. Long-standing differences of analysis and strategy as well as rivalry between the organisations prevented the emergence of united campaigns, although joint activity involving some of the parties did occur. Disunity contributed to making the far left a relatively marginal figure, as did limited funds and a lack of access to the mainstream media. The latter only occasionally mentioned the far left’s pro-Brexit campaigns, for example, and when it did, it tended to refer to them disparagingly. As a result of its electoral success in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the SSP did, however, have a greater presence in the media. Overall, there are few signs of the far left having a significant impact on either of the referendums. The SSP has continued to campaign for Scottish independence, supporting calls for a second referendum. It participated in RISE – Scotland’s Left Alliance before concentrating again on its own activities. The SWP and the SP/SPS have also backed demands for a second referendum. Most of the far left greeted the result of the Brexit referendum positively. However, its attempts to transform the result into a revolt against the Conservatives have been unsuccessful.

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NOTES


2. By the 2010s, entryism in the Labour Party had all but disappeared.

3. A significant amount of academic work had been carried out on the far left and its various components. Two of the more recent examples are Evan Smith and Matthew Worley (eds), Against the grain. The British far left from 1956, Manchester, MUP, 2014, and Evan Smith and Matthew Worley (eds), Waiting for the revolution. The British far left from 1956, Manchester, MUP, 2017. However, there have been no serious studies of its attitude to Scottish independence, while the only detailed article about its approach to the European Union is Jeremy Tranmer, “Nationalism, internationalism and anti-capitalism: left-wing opposition to the European Union”, Observatoire de la société britannique, 25, 2020, <https://journals.openedition.org/osb/4759> consulted 10 December 2021.


5. According to Cliffe, under Stalin a new bureaucracy had taken control in the Soviet Union. This had resulted in the restoration of capitalist relations, with the state functioning like an employer in capitalist societies and exploiting workers. Consequently, Stalin was thought to have broken with the ideals of workers’ power which had been behind the Russian Revolution.

6. The SWP’s position was summed up in Keir McKechnie’s pamphlet Scotland: Yes to independence, No to nationalism, Glasgow, SWP, 2012. See also the front page of the 9 September 2014 edition of Socialist Worker with its headline “Vote Yes in Scotland” (https://socialistworker.co.uk/images1412/image/2014/2420/sw2420article.jpg consulted 15 December 2021) and the poster produced by the paper during the campaign with the slogan “VOTE YES for independence, Sack the Tories, Fight for Socialism” (https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/4163355 consulted 15 December 2021).

7. See the front page headline of the 24 May 2016 edition of Socialist Worker – “Say no to Fortress Europe – Vote Leave 23 June” (https://socialistworker.co.uk/issue/862 consulted 15 December 2021).

8. This was expressed by the slogan “For workers’ internationalism! Against the big business EU” used on Lexit posters (https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-seven-sisters-london-uk-3rd-june-2016-posters-for-lexit-left-leave-105049798.html consulted 15 December 2021).

9. Entryism entailed secretly joining an organisation in order to recruit some of its members and exert influence over it. For example, Militant was founded by members of the Revolutionary
Socialist League who hid their true affiliation. They claimed to be members of the Labour Party who simply supported and gathered around the newspaper Militant.


15. One of the CPB’s slogans that was used on banners was “Leave the EU! Power and sovereignty to the people!” (https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1246/whatever-happened-to-the-lexits-lads/ consulted 20 September 2021).


17. It published two pamphlets setting out its analyses – Colin Fox, The Case for an Independent Socialist Scotland, Glasgow, SSP, 2013; Colin Fox, For a Modern Democratic Republic (Glasgow, SSP, 2014).


27. Henceforth, the term EU will be used to refer to the Common Market, the European Economic
Community, the European Community and the European Union.
30. See for example, Martin Jacques, “Coming in from the Cold. Europe and Nation”, *Marxism
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38. “Why we are voting Yes in the Scottish referendum”, *Socialist Worker*, 9 September 2014,
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41. For example, “Vote Yes in Scotland. Get him out”, *Socialist Worker*, 9 September 2014, https://
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51. For a recent presentation of the SWP’s positions and their political and theoretical roots, see Bob Fotheringham, Dave Sherry and Colm Bryce (eds), Breaking up the British State. Scotland, Independence and Socialism (London, Bookmarks Publications, 2021).

ABSTRACTS

The far left comprises a large number of parties and movements, but the most significant are the Socialist Workers Party, the Socialist Party, the Communist Party of Britain, and the Scottish Socialist Party. In the referendums of 2014 and 2016, most of them supported Scottish independence and the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union. These stances corresponded both to long-held positions and adaptation to the changing political situation in Scotland. The parties developed distinctive arguments and campaigns, which differentiated them from their adversaries at the other end of the political spectrum.


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Keywords: far left, labour movement, Scottish independence referendum, Brexit, nationalism, internationalism

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