

# The SSP: lessons and prospects

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IN THE 2003 elections to the Scottish Parliament, the SSP's lists got 7.7% of the vote across Scotland, and six members elected. We had 15% of the vote in Glasgow. The SSP's vote has increased fairly steadily over the years, and SSP membership has risen from 400 when it was launched in 1998 to about three thousand today.

The SSP has acquired sufficient profile in the working class that the Scottish committee and several Scottish branches of the rail union RMT have affiliated to the SSP, with at least passive consent from the RMT membership.

Does all this prove that the SSP has found a "model" for building a socialist party – broad, avoiding a clear choice on debates like reform and revolution, but rejecting any united-front approach to social democracy – which is the new way forward for Marxists in the world after 1991? We think not.

The SSP's experience does prove the merits of building a party with a relatively broad, civilised, and open regime. The SSP is not ideally democratic. It carries very limited debate in its press, much more limited than the AWL or the French LCR.

Still, the SSP does give house room to at least five minority groups (pro-SWP, pro-SP, Solidarity Tendency, "Workers' Unity Platform", and "Scottish Republican Socialist Platform"). It is qualitatively more open than the other relatively big organisations of the British far left over the last 30 years, the SWP, the Socialist Party/ Militant, and the now defunct WRP.

The SSP's road, however, is not a highway leading straight from here all the way to a mass workers' party and revolution. It has severe limitations. Moreover, it is not a "model" which can be adopted and implemented at will by any group of socialists in another country frustrated by their current conditions.

The SSP's initiators and leaders come from what was the Militant Tendency in the Labour Party and is today, in England and Wales, the Socialist Party.

Up to the early 1980s, the Militant Tendency was a long-standing but dim presence on the activist left in Britain. It toiled in the constituency Labour Parties, which were much livelier than now but far from red-hot, pushing general resolutions for "the nationalisation of the top 200 monopolies", selling papers, recruiting activists, remaining snooty about anything radical on the streets.

By a strange quirk of history, it had had control of the official Labour Party youth movement since 1970. It ran it staidly, creating the first youth movement in Labour's history not to clash with the bureaucracy. Nevertheless, bit by bit, by cautious but roughly Marxist propaganda, it assembled a body of young activists.

Its staidness probably helped in some ways, giving it stability, and enabling it to build up a strong network in the trade unions when the more dynamic SWP and WRP were dispersing theirs through erratic zigzags.

In 1982-3 Militant had a sudden stroke of luck. 1979-82 had seen the biggest upsurge of the Labour Left for decades. The Rank and File Mobilising Committee which united the left in that period was initiated not by Militant but by *Socialist Organiser*, a forerunner of *Solidarity*. Militant was part of the left, but a fairly passive part.

The Labour leadership decided to start a drive to intimidate the broader Labour Left by purging Militant. It botched it. Militant emerged with scarcely anyone expelled and its fame and credit much enhanced by vast media coverage describing it as the dynamo of the left.

By the mid-1980s Militant plausibly claimed 8000 activists – activists, not just the paper members who make up most of the SSP's three thousand. It was certainly much larger, and stronger in working-class and trade-union roots, than any far-left group for many decades, and in a different league from today's largest far-left group, the SWP.

It became strong enough to win commanding influence on Liverpool's Labour Council – and in some of the city's trade unions – in 1984. For maybe the first time ever in British history, avowed Marxists were in a position of decisive influence in large-scale class struggle.

That was also the year of the miners' strike. By confronting the Tory government's cuts in funding for local government services head-on, and mobilising a local Liverpool general strike – which was possible – Militant could have opened a second front alongside the miners, and helped them win.

Instead, they bottled it. They made a deal with the government to get a bit more cash and postpone the crunch to the next year, 1985. Derek Hatton, then the leading Militant councillor in Liverpool, recounted later what he had been told at the time by Tory MP Teddy Taylor: "You do realise," he said, "that we had to tell Patrick [Jenkin, the relevant Tory minister] to give you the money. At this stage we want Scargill. He's our priority. But we'll come for you later."

And so the Tories did. By late 1985 the Militant-led Liverpool Labour council was simultaneously making cuts and being hounded by the Labour Party leadership.

Over the next five years or so, Militant lost almost all the positions it had gained in the Labour Party, almost without a fight. The Labour Party Young Socialists was shut down in 1988.

Bewildered and demoralised, Militant found a way to start climbing out of the hole it was now in through the struggle against the poll tax (a flat-rate tax to finance local government introduced by the Tories which proved very unpopular and unworkable, and which they eventually had to abandon).

The poll tax was introduced in Scotland, in April 1989, a year before it was introduced in England. Slight differences in the poll tax law between Scotland and England also made the poll tax struggle in Scotland larger and more spectacular than in England.

Through its work in the Labour Party Militant had built a relatively strong group of activists in Glasgow. In early 1986, even after the Liverpool debacle, it could get 1300 people to a local rally in Glasgow. Much of that base remained. Tommy Sheridan of Militant became the acknowledged leader of the poll tax struggle.

Impressed by the Scottish success, but still unsure what to do, Militant decided in 1991 to set up a separate party organisation in Scotland – "Scottish Militant Labour" (SML) – while in England and Wales Militant remained, on paper, only a "tendency" or "body of opinion" in the Labour Party.

In February 1993 it would cut loose in England and Wales to launch “Militant Labour”, renamed “Socialist Party” in 1997.

At first Militant replaced its old perspective of the Marxists ineluctably rising to win the majority of the Labour Party by a new one of itself, now outside the Labour Party, becoming a new mass workers’ party directly.

In fact its numbers declined. In late 1995 it thought it might be able to rescue the perspective by linking up with the miners’ leader Arthur Scargill, who had declared he would quit the Labour Party and form a new party after Tony Blair removed Labour’ s “Clause Four”, committing it to public ownership.

Scargill spurned Militant and formed a Socialist Labour Party under his own tight personal control. Militant cast round for new alternatives and hit on the idea of forming broad “Socialist Alliances”.

In most places these never got very far. (The “Socialist Alliance” of 2000-1, uniting most of the left activist groups in England and Wales, would have little more continuity with the 1996 “Socialist Alliances” than the name). But, thanks to Scottish Militant Labour’ s relative local strength, the Scottish Socialist Alliance performed passably in elections. It was also strong enough to dominate the far left in Scotland.

Increasingly frustrated by the decline of Militant Labour across Britain, in 1998 SML decided to cut loose and transform the SSA into a Scottish Socialist Party with its own newspaper, offices, and paid organisers.

It was not that SML were being carried forward on a wave of success. In their proposal to launch the new party, they wrote: “The active forces of socialism in Scotland have been reduced to a fraction of what they were ten or fifteen years ago”.

Nor had they suddenly discovered a new conception of what a Marxist party should be. All the theorising on that score has come after the event.

No: they thought (rightly) that the SSP was the way to consolidate and increase their electoral successes. It offered some possibility of progress. The other way available, that of the hunkered-down Militant Labour, offered nothing but decline.

The introduction of the proportional-representation Scottish Parliament in 1999 helped the SSP, with Tommy Sheridan winning a seat. He had been a local councillor in Glasgow, elected on first-past-the-post, since 1992.

Gradually extending its electoral reach, and running well-calculated non-electoral campaigns on issues like school meals and council tax, the SSP has been able to grow steadily.

Workers in Scotland are on average more militant than elsewhere in Britain – a total of 263 strike-days per 1000 workers in the years 1998-2002, as against 90 for England – but with strike figures so low overall it is unlikely this makes a qualitative difference. A multi-tendency socialist party with a decent electoral profile could be built in England – or, much better, across Britain – even if more slowly than in Scotland. That is certainly a more rational orientation for the English and Welsh left than the shameful “Respect” coalition with George Galloway.

But what does it take? First, through some decades of work in the labour movement, assemble a cohesive body of dedicated, experienced, and educated activists. Win a dominant position in the activist left. Gain mass credit by leading a battle which mobilises and organises people in their working-class communities, street by street, over some years, and ends in victory. Win an electoral foothold and work hard, over a decade and more, to extend it.

It takes a lot more than a simple desire to be “broad”. In promoting the SSP as a “model” for other countries, the SSP leadership are, paradoxically, underrating their own previous work over the years.

And the SSP has seen not only electoral and numerical growth, but also political bio-degrading. The SSP’ s paper *Scottish Socialist Voice* carries hardly any serious debate or educational material. The SSP has no theoretical journal. Its leading faction, the ISM (ex-SML), has one, but it is very thin.

With its call for an “independent socialist Scotland”, the SSP has increasingly veered into nationalism. Last year it started arguing for a cross-class “independence convention” to be held jointly with the middle-class Scottish National Party.

The old Militant had contorted theories about Stalinism, but it did stand unequivocally with the workers against bureaucratic regimes like Cuba’ s. The SSP leaders today hail Cuba as a model of socialism in a small country for Scotland to learn from.

The accumulated Marxist or quasi-Marxist “capital” from their days in Militant which the SSP leaders are now living off was large enough that the SSP still stands qualitatively higher than Respect. But it is being melted away politically all the time.

What happens when the SSP gets strong enough, for example, to control a local council? Will it do better than its Militant predecessors in Liverpool did in 1984-5? On all present indications, it won’ t.

The SSP story will become at best a miniature replay of the story of the Workers’ Party in Brazil, unless a struggle by Marxists within the SSP redresses it politically.

The SSP’ s potential is limited in another direction, too. It has almost no systematic trade-union work. This lack reflects both its electoralist bent, and a difficulty caused by its nationalism. When almost all the trade unions, and most of the biggest trade-union struggles, are Britain-wide, how can a Scotland-only party intervene systematically?

If a British union elects a left-wing, sceptical-of-Labour leadership for reasons having nothing to do with the SSP – as the RMT did – then the SSP can benefit. But waiting for the activity of trade unionists mostly in England and Wales to produce more groupings like that around Bob Crow in the RMT, and then to get them elected to top positions, is not an active strategy for socialists in Scotland.

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