

Scottish Socialist



Party

build united, democratic Shop Stewards' Network



The Scottish Socialist Party welcomes the formation of the National Shop Stewards Network, an initiative from the RMT at UK level in 2006, which could make a very positive contribution to workers' struggles.

As the one party which since our formation in 1998 has consistently taken the side of the working class and their unions against the employers and their savage attacks, the SSP is committed to uniting with fellow-trade unionists in the battles for workplace rights, decent jobs, wages and conditions, and the broader struggle against cuts, privatisation and capitalist exploitation.

This country suffers some of the worst wages and conditions of the advanced nations, and yet also one of the lowest levels of trade union struggle. Since the defeat of the heroic mining communities in the 1984-5 strike, confidence amongst whole sections of trade unionists has been sapped.

The brutally calculated assault of the Tory anti-union laws has added to the problems of fighting back - a factor exacerbated by the unwillingness of many national/regional trade union leaders to defy and confront these anti-union laws.

It also has to be recognised that this corrosive loss of combativity has seeped down to the level of shop stewards/ reps, reflected by the virtual halving of their numbers compared to the 1970s.

However, strike figures on their own are not the complete picture. Ballots for strike action vastly exceed actual outbreaks of such action. In 2006 there were 1,341 strike ballots, with 1,250 of them returning YES votes - but only 158 of these resulted in actual stoppages. This sometimes is a reflection of the weakness of leaders who concede too much before battle commences - but also often a signal of the potential collective power of organised trade unionism, whereby the mere

threat of a strike is enough to force bosses into retreat.

It is also incontrovertible that trade unionised workplaces and workers enjoy far better conditions than those still lacking a union - for example on average, unionised workers are on 17% higher wages, and in the public sector the wage advantage is 22.5%.

And recent years have witnessed at least the first shoots of recovery in struggle and confidence - in particular in the public sector - in part because it is far more densely unionised (58.8% compared to 16.6% in the private sector), but also because that is the front line of New Labour government attacks.

Unions such as PCS and RMT, led by fighting socialists, have grown in membership through determined struggle, producing as a result many new stewards/ reps, who in turn are being trained by the union.

The simple lesson of these experiences - and others such as the many localised council workers' strikes - is that militant action in defence of workers' conditions boosts morale and confidence, whereas the 'service union' model of selling cheaper insurance schemes, holidays, credit cards, etc is a recipe for the demobilisation of members, the loss of collective consciousness, and the decline of union strength



**JOIN the SSP - Suite 308, 93 Hope St, Glasgow G2 6LD
ring 0141 221 7470 - text 07899 732 068
email: ssp.glasgow@btconnect.com**

Scottish Socialist Party - *Scottish workers' voice*

in the face of belligerent employers and the anti-union New Labour government.

SHOP STEWARDS MOVEMENTS

Shop stewards and union reps have a specific role and history in the struggles of the working class, ebbing and flowing with time and conditions. For instance, the huge eruption of the shop stewards' movement in the early 1900s/World War One reflected the growing discontent of workers with their conditions and the blatant collaboration of most top union officials with the state/government/employers - especially in the war years. From the 1950s onwards the vast economic expansion of post-War capitalism healed many of the divisions and weakness of the unions, in contrast to the unemployment-scarred 1930s. Union organisation grew - but so too did the tendency for union bureaucracies to encrust at the top and collaborate with the employers and state.

The semi-official, semi-independent role of shop stewards committees played a key role in many of the battles of this era, including the big movements of the 1970s and early 1980s.

Alongside the rash of strikes often initiated or led by stewards' organisations, elements of workers' control in certain industries pre-

valled. For example, the shopfloor unions in the car industry had for a time a degree of say over the speed of the production line. In the print industry, the unions effectively controlled 'hiring and firing', with new workers taken from the union pools of unemployed, card-carrying members. Various forms of 'closed shops' whittled down the ability of the bosses to dictate terms and conditions.

Repeated attempts were made to undermine these elements of workers' control in a capitalist economy, culminating in the calculated confrontation with car workers and printers under Thatcher's government. Scabs' charters replaced closed shops; the print unions were severely hammered; the miners consciously targeted for revenge and defeat in 1984-5, alongside the introduction of rafts of the most savage anti-union laws in Europe.

All to weaken the unions at 'shopfloor' level, with the bludgeon of threatened sequestration of union assets deployed to terrorise national union leaders into submission - which the vast majority of them did without a fight.

The result has been increased inequality between wages and profit, labour and capital, workers and employers.

LABOUR BETRAYS WORKERS

This series of setbacks for the working class has been added to by their political dis-enfranchisement, as Labour has transformed into a nakedly capitalist party, with no pretence of combining their worship of the market with representing working class people. Increasingly workers have awoken to the realisation that New Labour are the New Tories. New Labour's betrayal of the working class has added to the confusion.

Whilst the biggest initial reaction is to abstain from politics and from voting in elections, a conscious minority of workers have seen the need to combine their efforts through the unions with the organisation of a political voice and vehicle for socialist change. That is what unlies the formation of the SSP in 1998, our

growth in the workplaces, unions and communities, our peak vote of 130,000 in 2003, and our continued track record of uniting with every group of workers in struggle, (despite more recent setbacks for the SSP).



MODEST REVIVAL OF STRUGGLE

The employers have not had it all their own way. National struggles on the issue of pensions have won some significant protection for big sections of the public sector (whereas when union leaders did nothing to mobilise members, pension rights have been slaughtered). Members of PCS, RMT and some other unions have forced concessions out of the employers through strike action.

Workers in several sectors have shown a growing readiness to fight back after years of retreat and the dictatorship of capital. Most recently, postal workers in the CWU displayed tremendous tenacity in the teeth of cuts to jobs, pay, working conditions and the very service they deliver. Their struggle however has been hampered and hindered by the hesitancy of top union leaders who are far too tied to New Labour and far too timid in prosecuting the struggle against millionaire Royal Mail bosses and the Blair/Brown government that is egging on these bosses to crush the union and privatise the juicy bits of the industry.

Scottish Socialist Party - *Scottish workers' voice*

Several groups of local government workers in Scotland have taken action against pay cuts arising from Equal Pay legislation being implemented on the cheap by both Labour and SNP councils. In the process of these battles many new activists and union stewards have been forged - but the weaknesses of the Scottish UNISON leadership have also been revealed.

This is a reminder that socialists in the unions need to conduct the dual tasks of building rank-and-file fighting forces (including stewards) AND challenge for the national leaderships of the unions - to help give direction and confidence to the membership, rather than throw up constant obstacles to those who do go into battle.

So any moves to strengthen networks of stewards, reps and other union activists is to be heartily welcomed. It is not a substitute for building a political party of the working class - a conscious, socialist party that seeks to link the everyday conditions, grievances and demands of workers with the bigger goal of eliminating the capitalist parent of inequality, poverty, exploitation and erosion of workplace and civil rights; of fighting to build a mass party rooted in the workplaces and communities that struggles for a socialist future.

WELCOME THE NSSN

The National Shop Stewards Network, as launched in London in October 2006 and at the further conference in July 2007, is no substitute for a working class, united socialist party, such as the SSP aspires to build. However, the NSSN is an idea with the potential of helping to unite and embolden trade union activists across and within the various trade unions, and should be given support by every socialist and trade union fighter.

The NSSN will take a time to build into a huge force, because of the relatively low level of struggle and the series of previous setbacks suffered by workers in recent decades. **But that should not be an excuse for inaction.**

- The NSSN could and should help to pool the experiences of activists from different industries and unions, thereby helping to boost their effectiveness in organising members, recruiting non-members, enhancing the prospects of victory in disputes that arise.
- The NSSN could and should encourage liaison between activists in each of their own unions, to help forge a leadership that puts members' interests before their loyalty to Labour.
- Above all the NSSN at national and regional levels could and should act as a support network for workers in dispute - raising funds for strikers,

adding pressure on employers, publicising the strikers' cases, organising speaking tours in workplaces and union branches. Unity is our strength, and the NSSN could and should help forge that unity during disputes and in the preparatory stages when workers would gain greater courage if they knew they did not stand alone.

- All these steps would help democratise the unions in a very practical way, by engaging more members in the affairs of their union and raising their awareness of wider struggles.

OPEN DEMOCRACY - UNITY IN ACTION

To serve these purposes, the NSSN cannot and should not be the property of any one faction on the left.

Political parties (apart from fascists) have every right to organise in the unions - and the SSP unashamedly organises SSP trade union groups, to assist fellow workers and to develop and put across our policies in the workplaces and unions. We do not hide the fact that we aim to build a mass socialist party rooted in the unions and workplaces in the years ahead - because socialism has to be rooted in the organisation and control of the working class if it is to be democratic and socialist. **But the NSSN is not a political party, nor should it be a front for one small faction or party; it needs to be built as a united front of union activists from all or no political party. That is why it's transparent democracy is so important.**

The SSP has serious problems with the way the Scottish meeting has been organised. It has not been an exercise in inclusiveness. We were never consulted let alone involved for months prior to this meeting by those who took it upon themselves to act as its organisers. Neither were other left groups or parties such as the CPB or Labour's Campaign for Socialism.

Most importantly of all, we think that as the union which initiated the NSSN at UK level, the RMT should not only have been consulted, but should have been the main initiators and 'hosts' of a broader ad hoc organising committee which included any willing trade unions plus ALL the parties of the left in Scotland.

Unfortunately, that did not happen - which we fear has seriously reduced the numbers of trade unionists that are taking part in the Dec 1st event. If ALL on the left in Scotland, spearheaded by even a handful of Scottish unions (especially the RMT) and union branches, had been involved in building for this event from day one, it would have vastly increased the number of unions circulated with NSSN material and would have multiplied levels of participation several times over.

Scottish Socialist Party - *Scottish workers' voice*

We need to learn from this recent, unsatisfactory experience. The NSSN in Scotland should be built for in a proper, all-embracing coalition of trade unionists and socialists, with a more representative meeting/conference early in 2008.

Any **Steering Committee** established - whether a temporary one now with the remit of building a 2008 conference, or a committee elected at a bigger, broader future conference - should reflect not only different unions that are willing to be involved, but also include the different shades of the left in Scotland. No one party or faction should dominate it - that would undermine the whole project.

As a constructive suggestion for ensuring width and inclusiveness, we would propose that no more than 30%, or maybe one-third, of any NSSN Steering Committee should be allowed from members of any particular political party - either by consensus, or if necessary by a constitutional clause.

Of course we need people from as many different unions as possible, and anyone should be encouraged to take part in NSSN meetings and conferences. But if the Network is going to be seen to be unifying and inclusive, any Committee needs to be seen to be pluralist, not the property of any faction or party.

SSP FIGHTS FOR:

- £8 minimum wage for all workers and trainees over 16 - based on two-thirds male median wages - end age wage discrimination
- equal pay for women workers - without a penny off the pay of any worker



- a 35-hour maximum working week across the board, without any loss of earnings - as a step towards a 4-day week
- abolition of all anti-trade union laws - for a positive charter of workers' rights, including the right to strike, to take solidarity strike action, to be in a union - without fear of victimisation
- for workers' control of health and safety through elected H&S reps
- a minimum of 1 years' maternity leave on full pay - with the job protected for return, and the choice of returning part-time or full-time without loss of benefits. At least 1 month's paternity leave on full pay - and the option of exchanging part of the maternity/paternity leave
- scrap all prescription charges - stop taxing sickness
- free school meals for all children in state schools - nursery, primary and secondary
- scrap the Council Tax - for the Scottish Service Tax, based on income, on ability to pay, raising more funds for jobs and services, and making 8 out of 10 Scots better off
- tax the rich and the big Corporations - no to the tax havens of New Labour AND the SNP
- reverse all PPP/PFI and privatisations
- public ownership of all services, transport, construction, banks, energy, telecomms, big industries, North Sea Oil - under democratic control and management
- an independent socialist Scotland that stands for people not profit, the millions not the millionaires.

We appeal to trade unionists to unite through the NSSN - but to also fight to break the link between the unions and New Labour.

Pouring affiliated union members' money into New Labour is like giving petrol money to an arsonist to torch your home! Why should the unions fund the party of cuts, profiteering, privatisation, anti-union laws and war? Make the break from Brown's New Tories - as an individual and as a union.

Join the SSP - the one party in Scotland which since our formation in 1998 has stood on the side of the working class and trade unionism, for people not profit, for a socialist Scotland that produces for need not greed.

Join the SSP - the party of public ownership, solidarity and socialism

name phone.....
 address.....
 email

send to: SSP, Suite 308, 93 Hope St, Glasgow G2 6LD

text 07899 732068

email: ssp.glasgow@btconnect.com

www.scottishsocialistparty.org

sspNSSN1stDec2007