

The Rights of Nations to Self-determination: Scotland, Wales, Ireland, the Basque Country, Catalonia and Spain

Socialist Fight has been asked, what is our position on the Scottish Referendum due on 18 September 2014? And on the national question in Spain, Britain and Ireland? Ireland and Spain are very different; Ireland remains a semi-colonial country and Spain is an Imperialist country. Both Catalonia and the Basque country are economically very advanced parts of Spain, Ireland, particularly the south, was an economically exploited part of the British Empire, forcibly maintained in economic backwardness for the benefit of Whig and Tory landlords during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The north of Ireland was allowed to develop economically in the linen and shipbuilding industries as part of the markets controlled by the British Empire because of its majority Loyalist population. John Bull used the difference to divide and rule and imposed the Orange state in 1920 to continue and deepen that tactic. Marxists demand full political and economic separation of the whole of Ireland from Britain and national unity, which must involve the defeat of reactionary Loyalism and the destruction of the Orange state.

It would be economically and politically disastrous for the Spanish working class if Catalonia and the Basque country totally separated; there are clear reactionary forces in the political ascendancy in Catalonia right now. There is a better situation politically in the Basque country with more leftist implantation in the national movement but reaction is clearly very much to the fore in that land also. Recognising the right to self-determination and that these are historic nations does not oblige us to advocate full separation. We should advocate the Hispanic Socialist Federation (including Portugal). Full separation would leave these nations as pawns of other Imperialist powers (the right wing nationalists in both the Basque Country and Catalonia make no bones about that) and would tend to weaken class solidarity with workers in Castile, Andalucía, Galicia, etc. On the other hand not recognising the right to self-determination would appear to workers like supporting the repressive central apparatus of the reactionary central Madrid state against them.

The Basque country of northern Spain and southern France has a stronger claim to separation, or at least far more autonomy, given its history of severe repression under the dictator Franco and the continuing struggles of its liberation movement ETA and the numbers of political prisoners held in Spain and France.

In that sense it is more like Ireland than Scotland or Catalonia. But it is not an economically oppressed nation like Ireland was and now obviously still is with the onset of the recession and austerity to pay the debts of foreign and native bankers. Both demands for separation therefore have an overtone of a rebellion against subsidising the poorer and more oppressed regions of Spain and keeping more of their wealth for 'themselves'. This is a con game, in reality the ruling classes in Catalonia and the Basque Country wish to ally with the US and other European Imperialists the better to exploit their own working class and poor. And similar profit motives rule in the Scottish and Welsh bourgeoisie's desire for independence.

We would liken the situation in Spain to Scotland within the UK. As a nation it has the right to self-determination but we should oppose total separation and counterpose a Socialist Federation of Britain – excluding the north of Ireland which is legitimately part of the Irish nation. There is a British nation; there can never be a 'British Isles' nation because of the history of national oppression in Ireland and its reflection in the consciousness of the Irish working class and poor farmers. This is a fate not shared in the same degree at all by either Scotland or Wales, despite the obvious

discrimination imposed on Scotland by the Thatcher administration, via the Poll tax (first try it out on the Scots). Historically these unions (Wales in 1536 and Scotland in 1707) were voluntary acts of the ruling elites in the main, despite some opposition in Wales and considerably more in Scotland.

Wales had been ruled by England without opposition since the defeat of Owain Glyndŵr's uprising (1400 – 1415). The union was a consequence of the victory of the Lancastrian, Henry VII, in the Wars of the Roses (1455-87). Wales had been divided into the northern Principality which was Lancastrian and the southern border Marches which were more dominated by England and were Yorkists. Henry VIII, a descendant of both houses, passed the act of union in 1536 as part of the battle against papal and therefore feudal landlord and ecclesiastical control of the region and in England (dissolution of the Monasteries 1536-41, etc.)

The Scottish union in 1707 was from a very different and later historical period. It was facilitated by the failure of the colonial ambitions of Scotland in the Darien Scheme. This colonial adventure in Central America bankrupted a whole section of the Scottish ruling class and demonstrated that Scotland on its own was incapable of becoming a colonial power. The union was very unpopular with the ordinary people; riots broke out and there was almost universal condemnation of the loss of sovereignty.

Daniel Defoe, who was hired to spy for the English, claimed that "A Scots rabble is the worst of its kind," but admitted that, "for every Scot in favour there is 99 against". Robert Burns referred to the union thus: "We're bought and sold for English Gold,/ Sic a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation."

The Union may have been forced on the majority in Scotland but the opposition was diverse. There was a growing influence of the Jacobites who wanted to return to feudal times and values – as the reactionary Walter Scott later rided in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805):

Old times were changed, old manners gone, /A stranger filled the Stuarts' throne; /The bigots of the iron time/ had called his harmless art a crime. /A wandering harper, scorned and poor, /He begged his bread from door to door; /And tuned, to please a peasant's ear, /The harp, a King had loved to hear.

Economic necessity and security dictates forced the hands of both the English and Scottish ruling classes. The result benefitted Scotland greatly. The later support for Bonnie Prince Charlie in 1746 came from the Catholic Highlanders, from the lowland Catholic gentry, Scottish Episcopalians and from the nonjuring Anglicans in England and Wales who refused on principle to take the oath of allegiance to William and Mary. These latter formed the ideological basis of the British Tories, the very name of which is taken from the outlawed supporters of James II in Ireland. [2]

Economically both nations benefitted greatly from their connection with the Empire; the south of Ireland suffered the opposite fate, disastrously declining in the nineteenth century as seen particularly in the decline of Dublin from the second city of the Empire in 1801 when the Act of Union became law to appalling poverty-stricken Dublin of the 1913 Lockout. The industrial devastation imposed on Scotland and Wales via the defeat of the miners' strike etc was similarly endured in the North East, Yorkshire, South Wales, Kent etc. We do not want to weaken that class solidarity by full separation as opposed to a Socialist Federation. We will therefore call for a "no" vote in the referendum in 2014 and argue for a Socialist Federation.

The solution advocated by Trotsky for Spain does seem to us to be the correct Marxist position and does take into account all the factors at play in 1931. We would say that the essential class structures remain the same in Spain today, despite the enormous numerical and economic advance of the working class. The recession will bring these questions to the fore once more, and in the immediate future, we are sure.

Finally a large part of our opposition to total Scottish separation is based on an assessment of the dangers of the rise of English nationalism. We are totally opposed to an English parliament for this reason. England is at the heart of an Imperialist nation, English nationalism is a very nasty beast indeed if taken to its logical conclusion as the fascist groups like the BNP and the EDL do. It is constrained within a British parliament, despite the West Lothian question. [1] In trade union matters leaders from the 'Celtic fringe'. Ireland, Wales and Scotland, tend to be more militant leaders of trade unions. Scottish-based union branches and regional bodies frequently give a lead to the whole British working class.

This is part of Trotsky's message on Spain: Leon Trotsky: The national question in Catalonia, July 13, 1931 Once more on the subject of the timely questions of the Spanish revolution.

1) To permit petty-bourgeois nationalism to disguise itself under the banner of Communism means, at the same time, to deliver a treacherous blow to the proletarian vanguard and to destroy the progressive significance of petty- bourgeois nationalism.

2) What does the program of separatism mean? – the economic and political dismemberment of Spain, or in other words, the transformation of the Iberian Peninsula into a sort of Balkan Peninsula, with independent states divided by customs barriers, and with independent armies conducting independent Hispanic wars. Of course, the sage Maurín will say that he does not want this. But programs have their own logic, something Maurín doesn't have.

3) Are the workers and peasants of the various parties of Spain interested in the economic dismemberment of Spain? Not at all. That is why to identify the decisive struggle for the right to self-determination with propaganda for separatism means to accomplish a fatal task. Our program is for Hispanic federation with the indispensable maintenance of economic unity. We have no intention of imposing this program upon the oppressed nationalities of Spain with the aid of the arms of the bourgeoisie. In this sense, we are sincerely for the right to self-determination. If Catalonia separates, the Communist minority of Catalonia, as well as of Spain, will have to conduct a struggle for federation.

4) In the Balkans, the old pre-war Social Democracy already put forward the slogan of the democratic Balkan federation as the way out of the madhouse created by the separated states. Today, the Communist slogan in the Balkans is the Balkan Soviet Federation (by the way, the Comintern adopted the slogan of the Balkan Soviet Federation, but at the same time it rejected this slogan for Europe!). How can we, under these conditions, adopt the slogan of the Balkanization of the Spanish peninsula? Isn't it monstrous?

The full document can be found here: <http://socialistfight.com/2013/04/24/leon-trotsky-the-national-question-in-catalonia/>

Notes

[1] The West Lothian question refers to the debate in the United Kingdom over why members of parliament from outside of England – from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales – can vote on matters that affect England only.

[2] Tories, from the Irish word *tóraidhe* meaning "the pursued", i.e. outlaws.

