A Fine Step Forward: The Scottish Socialist Youth's First Conference

Jennifer Debs reports for Heckle.scot on the first conference of Scottish Socialist Youth.

The morning of Sunday 28th January saw a number of us gathered in Glasgow's Civic House, thankful to have the walls of the old printworks between us and the dreadful weather. Members, for the most part, of the Scottish Socialist Youth (SSY), we were there for the organisation's 2024 national conference – the first such that the SSY has ever had.

As the SSY is a fairly new organisation, I will give a sketch of the group's development before discussing the conference. Born in 2021 of the familiar process by which the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) disappoints, frustrates, exhausts and then emits eager young members, the SSY stems from a disaffected student branch of the SSP which decided to go it alone. Stirling University was ground-zero, and it still remains the SSY's main centre, boasting the majority of members.

In the last year however, the SSY has been striking out in new directions and expanding, with the greatest success in Glasgow so far. There are growing links with comrades in Dundee and Edinburgh, and working groups in Falkirk, Fife and East Lothian, which look promising for the year ahead.

This growth is a result of the SSY's campaigning work in the course of 2023, on issues like drug deaths, public transport, republicanism, Palestine solidarity and Scottish independence. This has brought the SSY beyond Stirling more and more, and has been winning it supporters and new members from across Scotland. I am one of them, and I am not alone in being

attracted to the SSY by the fact that it is an autonomous youth organisation with a broad variety of ideas and perspectives, not beholden to any political party or sect, nor to the leaden decree of some wizened leading comrade who has been in control for roughly thirty years. What a fresh breeze in comparison to the usual sort of lefty youth wing!

This increasing national scope is what spurred the conference in January. The key theme of the day's political content was that of campaigning beyond parliamentary activity. We are soon headed for a general election of course, but with the outlook so grim and the left being as puny and irrelevant as it is, the prospects for a meaningful intervention are pretty much nil. So, it's crucial that a group like the SSY directs its limited resources in directions that will actually make a difference, and which will help to cohere a stronger and more vibrant socialist movement at a national level.

In that spirit, there were contributions by guest speakers from Living Rent, This is Rigged, and Palestine Action, who each in their own way elabourated on the role of youth in organisational activity and direct action, whether in challenging the encroaching creep of bureaucracy that plagues every union, in building community solidarity amid climate chaos and austerity, or in breaking up the war-machines of imperialism.

To see these groups brought together on a single platform was an encouraging sight, and it is hoped that the SSY will not only continue to connect militants from such varied ends of the movement, but also that it will lend an active and useful hand to their struggles. Tenants' unionism, environmentalism, anti-imperialism, and more – the SSY must aim to be the kind of socialist group that can integrate these perspectives and organisational "spheres" and give a unified expression to all of them.

But this cannot be done in a dogmatic or opportunistic way, by entryism and ultimatums, by take-overs and smash-and-grab recruitment tactics. Instead, the SSY needs to be honest and helpful in its relations with other campaigns, rendering concrete, disinterested assistance to them, and, by being a genuine friend to the cause, demonstrating the utility of our socialist analysis, politics and practice. This will do a great deal more good than turning up with newspapers, wagging an all-knowing Marxist finger, and wishing other campaigns could just see that capitalism is the main problem already, simply because we say so.

This puts me in mind of the role that a good socialist group *should*, and indeed must, play as a co-ordinating centre for all the struggles, democratic and economic, domestic and global, in which the working class has an interest. A place where the working class in all its variety of identity can find a political home, because the group stands tall as an authentic tribune of the people, capable of championing everything from the fight for increased wages to the civil rights of transgender people.

There is an old conception that the memory of the working class is its party – that is to say, that a revolutionary organisation can serve as the "historical memory" of the proletariat, a living store-house of lessons and knowledge taken from the experience of the class struggle in its widest sense, and therefore a guide that can prepare and organise the

working class for future battles. The task of becoming a group like this is one that confronts every socialist organisation, whether it is conscious of it or not, whether it calls itself vanguardist or anarchist, whether it tries and fails or just reneges on the responsibility immediately.

To build a truly revolutionary organisation, to achieve and maintain principled unity, to carry forward and generalise all the struggles of the people – all of this is certainly a very difficult task, and there is absolutely no guarantee the SSY will succeed where most have failed. But we're still new and fresh, and up for trying. At the very least, by bringing together different social movements to discuss and share ideas as it did at the conference, the SSY is off to a good start.

As to the democratic content of the conference, this consisted in votes on a battery of motions for SSY policy, and in the presentation of candidates for the national committee elections. The motions spanned a variety of causes, including policy on the de-commercialisation of housing, advocating for rural and island areas of Scotland, universalist urban planning, diversity and inclusion within the SSY, and the preservation of small music venues. These motions give a good view into the diverse interests that animate the SSY's membership, and it is exciting to see that there is a sense within the organisation that it has a lot of potential to tackle many different social issues.

Unfortunately, one area where the conference could be criticised is around the national committee elections. Of all the positions, only the national chairperson was contested, the rest just seeing an incumbent up for re-election. This is never an ideal situation to be in, but for the moment it is also an understandable one, given the SSY is only really beginning to grow and establish new branches. However, for the good of the democratic health of the organisation, it is very important that the SSY encourages more members to stand for positions in the future. From what I have seen so far, I am

hopeful that this will be done.

All these matters finished and the conference concluded, we repaired to the pub for the obligatory post-event pints, and there’s not much that you need to know about that. In any case, I drank a toast to the SSY, and so should you!

Look out for us in 2024!

Photos courtesy of the Scottish Socialist Youth.