A Long March for Wales

One of the positive developments in British politics over the last few years has been the rising support for Welsh Independence which according to polls now stands at a record high among the general population. This has also led to a rise in organisations supporting Welsh Independence, including Yes Cymru (a broad based mass campaign for independence), Undod (which means 'Solidarity' and is a new bilingual broad socialist organisation), and the Welsh Underground Network (previously Valleys Underground and explicitly a Marxist organisation). Contacts between Scottish and Welsh activists are growing and in this interview with a Welsh Underground Network activist, Paul Inglis of ecosocialist.scot discusses the new politics of Wales. [This article was previously published on the Bella Caledonia website and is republished with their kind permission.]

A Long March for Wales

It was a drab Autumn evening when my friend Joe picked up the phone for our interview. As we spoke he was sitting in a tent near Gloucester, enduring the rain and wind with a good portion of his clothes soaked, but happy to chat politics with a fellow socialist for a while. The weather would have been a nightmare if this were just a weekend camping trip, but by this point Joe was quite used to this sort of thing – he had been on the road since August. His route: An 876-mile trek from Lands' End in Cornwall to John o' Groats here in Scotland – a long camping trip indeed, and one scarcely improved by typical British rain! And the reason for the journey? A rather unusual one, because Joe's goal isn't to raise money for charity, but for the activities of a Welsh Marxist organisation.

The name of this group, for which Joe is exerting his limbs and braving the elements, is the Welsh Underground Network (WUN). They are relatively new on the political scene in Wales, having formed just before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The WUN, as previously mentioned, is a Marxist organisation, with the ultimate aim of an independent Welsh socialist republic. But in order to achieve this, they take a different tack from your usual paper-selling, protest-chasing leftie group. The WUN firmly believe that you cannot have lofty political ideals without building an actual power base in communities, without putting in work on the ground to make your neighbourhood, village or town a more united and better place to live in. Joe summed up this ethos for me in a couple of sentences: “You have to start from home, and you actually have to start. Online activism is good to a degree, but real change comes from getting things done and interacting with people.”

“Serving the People”

To this end, the WUN’s political work consciously takes a form that might be familiar to those who know of the Black Panther Party of the 1960’s and their strategy of building power in communities by “serving the people”. The Network’s activity so far has involved things like local litter pickups, free food events in towns like Merthyr Tydfil, Wrexham, Blackwood, Mountain Ash and Caerphilly, clearing out the Fernhill allotments for restored community use, and helping the Foundation for Jewish Heritage clear out and tidy the site of Merthyr Synagogue, the oldest synagogue in Wales, so that it can be renovated. Joe explained that the WUN do not believe in more “official” forms of political organising like canvassing and doorknocking for elections. They think that socialists must have a more active and meaningful presence in everyday working class life, not just coming round every few years with a yarn about policies and then disappearing until next time. That kind of presence, politics that has deep roots in

neighbourhood and class, did once exist in Wales, as Joe pointed out: The old miners' unions had their own libraries, hospitals, clubs and concert halls, and were a focal point in Welsh working class life. As is well known, that intertwining of politics and the everyday has been severely eroded since the 1980's, but Joe and his comrades look to rebuild it- They feel that only by doing this can the working class actually have the strength and energy to take an active, fighting part in the battle for both independence and socialism. Of course, the pandemic has hindered the ability of the WUN to do more than they already have, but they are excited to expand their community programmes even further now that the prospects are opening up for more public political work. Starting from Merthyr Tydfil, the WUN has recently set up a new branch in Wrexham, and are looking to gain more across Wales in the next few months, building towards a national organisation.

It's for this "serve the people" work that Joe, chairman of the WUN, is walking across the island of Britain to raise money. Referred to by the WUN as the "Long March", a nod to the Chinese Red Army's epic year-long march across China that is only slightly tongue-in-cheek, Joe's trek aims to supply the basis for more free food events, more litter-picks, and all the equipment needed for these. He was explicit that the money from this fundraiser will not be going towards leaflets or banners- It is for helping people directly, not for propagandising. The reason the fundraiser has taken on the specific form of a walk underlines the WUN's emphasis on socialists getting out and actually doing things. Joe was eager to dispel the stereotype of "socialists, particularly in the West, being permanently online activists doing nothing but spending all day arguing with each other over semantics while the world burns." Robust physical activity is certainly one way to fight the cliché of the "three-times-a-week book club and nothing else" leftie. In addition, Joe was enthusiastic about the potential of a journey like this for communicating the WUN's ideas and for making links with activists throughout

England and Scotland: “It gives us a chance to talk to people across the UK and say that, while we are for national independence, we are still internationalists and want to communicate that solidarity.”

Now, while this particular Long March might not be as high-stakes as the original, it has nevertheless been beset by an enemy even more determined than the Kuomintang: British weather. This has been Joe’s main challenge so far. From heatstroke-inducing late Summer sun in Cornwall to all the leaks and soaked clothes that rain brings, Joe has been experiencing nature’s climatic variety first hand, and soon he will be meeting with the chill of Scotland in late Autumn and early Winter. These obstacles however, and the random aches and bruises of nomadic life, are being borne by Joe with courage and good humour, an example of the sort of socialist fighting spirit that is often parodied and mythologised, but which is inspiring to see in genuine motion. Of course, the path isn’t just filled with struggle. Joe has also found great kindness in the areas he has walked, with free meals and places to stay being offered him again and again.

Socialist Ideals

Moving from the immediate topic of the march, I asked Joe about his own socialist ideals. It’s the case that the Panther-style organising discussed earlier isn’t the only way in which the WUN calls on the legacy of the 60’s. Indeed, the group takes up the language and the ideas of the old black revolutionaries in talking of the WUN’s own “ten-point programme” for an independent Wales based on working class unity and socialist principles. At the heart of the beliefs of the Panthers and the WUN is a demand for self-determination in its broadest sense. With that in mind, I wanted to know why Joe, as a socialist, believes in Welsh independence.

For Joe, as for many of us, James Connolly’s famous remarks on Irish independence are a guiding light, so it was no surprise

that he began by referencing them. They bear quoting in full:

“If you remove the English Army tomorrow and hoist the green flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organization of the Socialist Republic your efforts will be in vain. England will still rule you. She would rule you through her capitalists, through her landlords, through her financiers, through the whole array of commercial and individualist institutions she has planted in this country and watered with the tears of our mothers and the blood of our martyrs.”

Those lines underpin the classic contention of socialists involved in independence movements the world over, past and present, who have argued that there can be no real change unless there is socialist change. Nevertheless, Connolly *did* still fight for Irish independence, and the WUN and their counterparts here in Scotland do the same. For Joe, it’s a point familiar to us Scots that leads him to support independence – the barrier the British state poses to progressive change in Wales. The democratic deficit that is so often the meat of political issues here also exists in Wales, in a similarly potent form. Joe pointed to the limited remit of the Senedd, and the fact that Welsh institutions are largely run from Westminster. He also spoke about how Wales has voted for social democratic government for over a century, as long as Labour has been in existence, and how it has only really had an impact in a national election twice. I’m sure that disappointing feeling, of not getting what your country actually votes for, will resonate with readers here in Scotland.

Community Power

On the other hand, Joe doesn’t have any illusions that Welsh-run institutions would *necessarily* be more progressive than English-run ones. Given his quoting of Connolly, it would be a surprise if he did. It’s just that, with the current direction of English politics, he doesn’t see a path for socialism in

Wales that can be followed while the British state still has a grip over the political life of the country. His scepticism about a progressive future for Wales within the United Kingdom is especially pertinent given the recent crushing failure of Corbynism and the return to British statist reformism it signified. It's a scepticism that is sure to be shared by many across these islands as the gulfs between the distinct political worlds of the home nations widen more with every passing month.

As our call drew to a close, I wanted to know what Joe would say to anyone reading this article who would like to set up their own community-power type organisation. Joe was immediately enthusiastic: "Absolutely do it! Don't think that you need a million people to start it. You don't." He continued, explaining that when the WUN started out it was just him for the first couple of weeks, doing a litter-pick in the local area and posting about it on the group's social media. From there, with people seeing the posts and asking to join, the group was able to expand its work and further grow in size. In Joe's opinion, people tend to overestimate the effort that goes into starting an organisation, when in actual fact the real struggle comes with *maintaining* an organisation. "If you want to start it, go out and do something, and even if you fail it is okay because you can pick yourself up and start again." For him, consistency and dedication are the important things, even if they take a while to bear fruit.

I finished by asking Joe how readers in Scotland could show support. Given our shared fight for self-determination and the fact that at time of writing it won't be long before he enters the country, I was excited to bring news of Joe's march to a Scottish audience. Naturally, he pointed to the WUN's fundraiser as a key way of lending a hand, emphasising that even the smallest amounts would go a long way towards helping the group's work in neighbourhoods across Wales. In addition to this, Joe once again expressed his desire to make links

with activists in Scotland, asking that any interested readers reach out and get in contact with him and the WUN via their social media. If you can keep him supplied, give him a place to stay, or just want a chat with a comrade from Wales, give him a shout! Beyond all that, Joe simply wants more people to do what the WUN are doing. If they can encourage more people to get organised and have a go in their own communities, it'll be a victory for the working class.

You can donate to the WUN crowdfunder at: https://www.gofundme.com/f/wun-walks-britain?utm_source=customer&utm_medium=copy_link_all&utm_campaign=p_cp%20share-sheet&fbclid=IwAR0NBfXKyR2ZeytW7jvsSO1lVtvR0Y_hWWlKBbTiiwBDpIor_h-6KOT3s_Y

Get in contact with Joe and keep up to date with the Long March at: https://twitter.com/cawsabara

And get in contact with the Welsh Underground Network at:

https://twitter.com/WelshUGN

https://www.facebook.com/WelshUGN

https://welshundergroundnetwork.com/



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Footnote: ecosocialist.scot stands in the tradition of the Fourth International in Britain which for a long time been one of the few left wing British organisations consistently supporting both Scottish and Welsh independence. You can read about our position on ***Scottish Independence*** *here: https://www.ecosocialist.scot/?page_id=52, and in order to learn more about the marxist position on Welsh Nationalism and nationalism in general, we would particularly recommend a compendium of writings called* ***'Whispers of a Forgotten Nation'*** *by* ***Ceri Evans****, which can be found here: https://valleysunderground.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/whispers_of_a_forgotten_nation_-_the_wri-2.pdf Ceri Evans was a Welsh writer and academic, a longstanding member of the Fourth International, who sadly died in 2002.*