

SCOTTISH LEFT REVIEW

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SHONA ROBISON'S WARNING • NEW VISIONS FOR COLLEGES AND CARE
REVOLUTIONARY ROJHELAT • SCOTTISH ANTI-FACISM FROM JARAMA TO THE GAZA FLOTILLA

GLIMPSES OF HOPE



BETTER TO DIE ON YOUR FEET THAN
LIVE FOR EVER ON YOUR KNEES Paolino Pasinetti
(La Pastonaria)



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EDITORIAL: A MODEST PROPOSAL

297 years ago, Jonathan Swift, whose *Gulliver's Travels* put big people in their place, penned an essay called 'A Modest Proposal'. It made the dark suggestion that since so many poor families were unable to feed their children, poor families' children might be fed to the rich instead. Amidst a grim crisis of poverty and ill health, Swift satirised ruling class hostility and incredulity towards any attempt to improve welfare through increasing taxes on their luxury.

Swift's satire mentions policies that might address the imbalance of wealth: taxing absentee capitalists, investing in domestic industry, refusing to "sell our country and consciences for nothing". Yet he presents these as measures lying far outside the Overton window of his day: "let no one talk to me of these and the like expedients till he has at least some glimpse of hope, that there will ever be some hearty and sincere attempt to put them into practice." It often feels like we are in a similarly hopeless age when the rich ride roughshod over the rest, and governments comply with the dogmatic assertion of a divine right to non-intervention.

That is why my ears pricked when I heard John Swinney describe his food price cap pledge.

The food price cap proposal is in the grand scheme of things quite a modest proposal. It's about identifying 20-50 food lines that would enable an individual, a family, to buy a nutritious shop. That addresses, in some way, the challenges that people face. If people can't get access to nutritional food, then we will have a public health problem that will arise, and it will be the Government that's got to try to address it.

Swinney's explanation was an answer to a question from *The National* editor Laura Webster about right wing media presentations of the price cap policy as communist or Soviet. I do not know how deeply John Swinney knows the work of Jonathan Swift, but there was more than a dash of satire in his reply: "if you were to go out on the street and ask people, 'do you think John Swinney is a communist?' you would not get many takers for the proposition".

Indeed, the policy reminds us of both how moderate and modest are the efforts of the new government to change Scotland, and how fiercely the shopkeepers will resist any government intervention. (A few days after the election, Rachel Reeves announced a copcat plan, before u-turning in fear when the supermarkets started snarling.) It looks likely that Swinney's government will cap the price of beans with one hand, while making some serious cuts with the other. The cost of living has just overtaken the NHS as the single biggest concern for Scots, and people who are angry that they cannot afford to live are being offered a promise that government will not ignore them, but Swinney's mild market intervention is hardly an expedient that will give hope to the one-in-five parents whose work earns them poverty.

The hopelessness that many feel is likely to grow into greater disillusionment and rage. Some will seek to blame migrants and benefit claimants, which Starmer's Labour government has made part of its pitch but which the SNP has steadfastly resisted the pressure to do. Yet modesty and morality are not material solutions. Radical social and economic intervention requires using all the powers of government and setting its powers against those who sell the country for their luxury and gain. Otherwise the right will keep forcing the target down, to demonise the poorest and most precarious and promote grim interventions that feed the rich.

So, are there any glimpses of hope in the policy direction of the nation? In her interview with the editor, former Cabinet Secretary for Finance Shona Robison points out that redistributive policies like the child payment keep families happier and healthier, yet she urges her party not to overestimate the Scottish Parliament's powers and raise expectations that it cannot deliver on. Meanwhile, Jukka Seppälä urges the wider independence movement not to oversell the vision of Scotland as a Nordic-style nation, when states like Finland fall far short of the utopia that some nationalists imagine. Even within the limits of our power, however, the left has opportunities to drive policy towards a better place. Peter Hunter and Dan Holland describe what a better future looks like for care workers and for colleges. And Kendra Briken and Dustin Hafki describe a host of organisations both raising and realising people's hopes for justice at work.

If the danger of hopelessness is rising hate, our second section confronts the reactionary right and documents the risky work of anti-fascist action. Nicole Treanor argues that while Reform's success was underwhelming compared with their English victory, their mainstreaming is an existential risk to egalitarian elements of Scottish identity. Kirsty Highet explains how Women Against the Far Right are using both united front and mutual support strategies to confront far-right activists who are weaponizing women against migrants.

On the 90th anniversary of the Spanish Civil War, Mike Arnott describes the lorry trips, logistical challenges, and enduring legacy of the Scots who fought and died in Jarama and elsewhere, while Nik Gorecki marks another 90th anniversary describing the popular front approach of the Left Book Club, whose branches are a bulwark against the rising fascist tide.

The international struggle continues. Cal Rosie pays tribute to the Scottish contingent of the Global Sumud Flotilla who set off in April to confront the grotesque face of Zionism. They met with abuse and violence that led even European allies of Israel to balk, though not to break off their channels of complicity. Israel, after all, needs all the support it can get. Phil Chetwynd explains how badly the Israeli economy is faring as a result of its genocidal war.

Israel's berserk attack on Iran alongside its US allies has only harmed it more. Yet the damage done to Israel's standing by the Iranian response does not make the Islamic Republic any less oppressive for those who are struggling for socialism and liberty within Iran. Sohrab Rezvani describes the efforts of the left in Rojhelat, the Kurdish region of Iran, to take advantage of its strategically significant position and build a civil and military path to revolution in the region.

The Scottish struggle abroad and at home is immortalised in the statue of La Pasionara that was erected in 1980 on the banks of the Clyde, and provides the model for Cat Goss's cover. Our last section is given over to two legends who shaped the 1980s Scottish Left and continue to inspire it today. Henry Stead reviews *Stand and Deliver*, a new play about the women who led the Lee Jeans sit-in in Greenock in 1981, and proved to the labour movement the power of occupations and fish suppers. And I share some wisdom from the great Dick Gaughan, whose songs are a timeless soundtrack of struggles in the past and those to come.

THE LIMITS OF HOLYROOD

In her first in-depth interview after the election, **Shona Robison** speaks to Cailean Gallagher about the SNP's aspirations, ambitions and risk of over-commitment in the newly elected parliament.

"Light of the day, shine in" wrote Edwin Morgan for the opening ceremony of the Parliament building. He was delighted by the "commerce between brightness and shadow", with its 1,000-square-meter glass wall that lets the light stream in, while strategically positioned leaf-shaped towers shade the chamber from direct sunlight. As one of nine MSPs who served continuously from 1999 to 2026, Shona Robison knows our parliament better than most: its light and shade, its powers and limits.

We spoke four days after voters elected a bigger pro-independence parliamentary majority than ever, and gave the Tories and Reform fewer seats combined than the Tories alone had before. What is the former Finance Secretary's greatest hope for this new parliament? Not one policy or bill, she said, but an aspiration that parties step beyond their own self-interest and ditch the fractiousness of the last session. "You have the SNP, and all these other parties, pretty much in the same place, and it's whether they want to do things differently." That, Robison hopes, would allow us to advance the frontiers of "radical public health policies and the transformation of public services", and to address "big meaty issues": the future of social care, the declining rate of population growth, energy investment, and council tax reform.

Power Ascribed, Power Denied

Robison outlined the SNP's vision for all these areas which, she said, is "grounded in the centre-left". But reform on any of these fronts is limited both by the powers of the parliament and by the way its powers are presented by the other parties. While an optimistic vision of consensus has been part of Scottish political imagination at least since 2007, another tendency of Scottish politics has been to blur the edges of devolution and cast doubt on the limits of what parliament can and cannot do.

A parliamentarian no longer, sitting at home with two cats in the background and Dundee sunshine streaming in, Robison returned more than once in our discussion to a frustration that seems to have been sharpened and clarified since she left office:

There is something I've thought about a fair bit recently, that quite often the media and opposition parties talk about the government in Scotland as if it has all the powers of an independent nation. Why are you not doing this and why are you not doing that? And, you know, bluntly, if it could be done within the powers that we have, it would have already been done. But you come up against the blockages there [in parliament] and of an increasingly hostile UK government when it comes to trying to get things done.

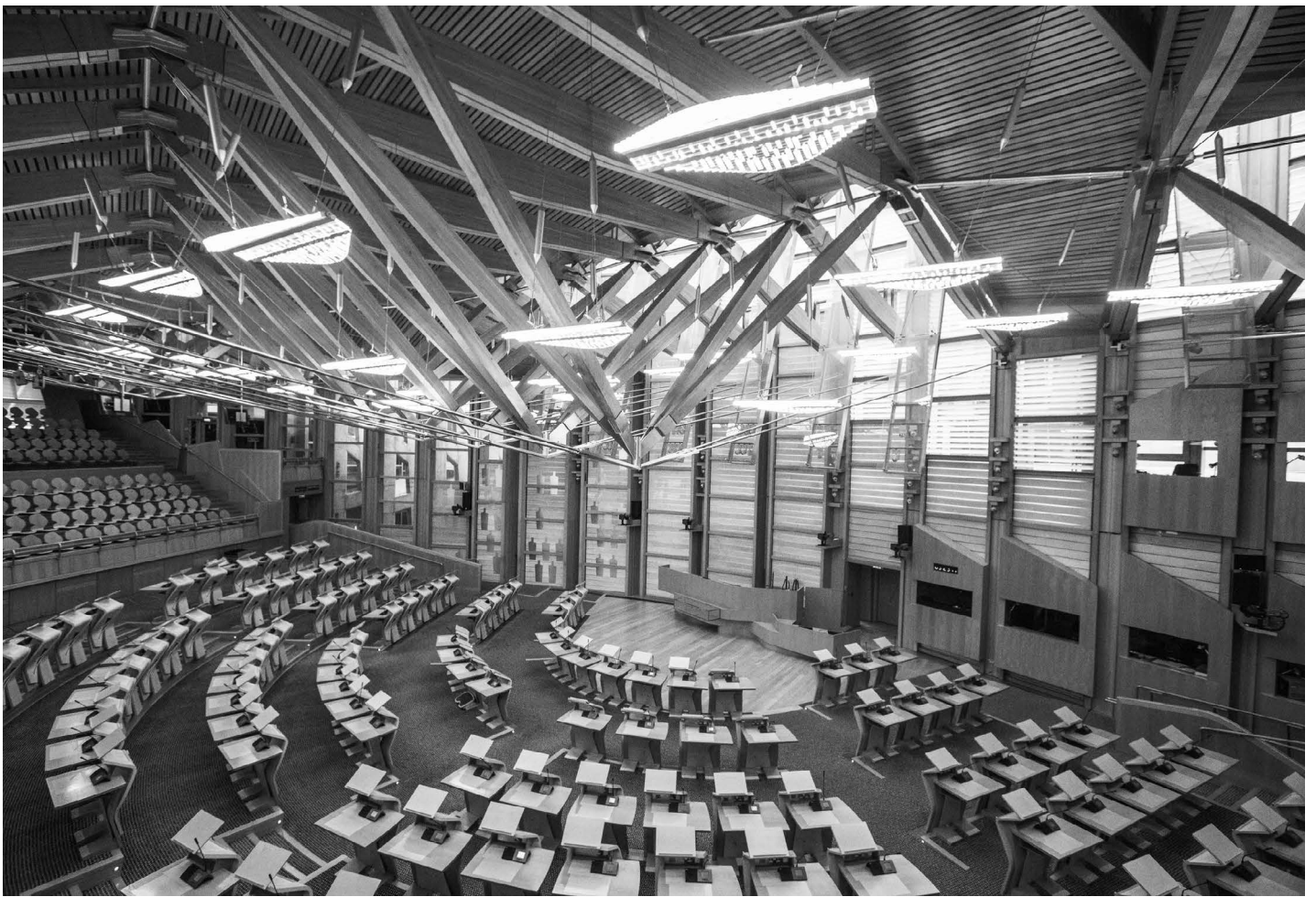
Tax is one example. With responsibility for revenue, Robison had a close-up view of the tax system's complexities. "We have used the income tax powers pretty much to the maximum. I would call that progressive. It's the UK government tax system that is not progressive. The idea that someone earning forty-something thousand pounds should be in the same tax bracket as somebody on nearly a hundred thousand pounds is just inherently unfair. So we raise taxes, but through the complexity of the fiscal framework, you actually end up not raising as much as you would otherwise."

But what about the challenge that government and parliament have failed to use the powers they have to reform local tax or introduce wealth tax? "You know", Robison explained, "we've been attempting to look at ways forward in the land value taxation space. The Scottish Land Commission is looking at it, but it is far from simple and requires a proper valuation of the land mass in terms of who owns what. That's going to take some time. That doesn't mean it shouldn't happen. It definitely should. But you've got to have all of the infrastructure and the building blocks in place, which would then lend itself for us to look at different taxation systems. Council tax needs reformed, clearly, but try getting an agreement as to what replaces it without a majority. Everybody agrees it's flawed, but there are about ten different answers."

And then you've got the wealth tax. It's worth noting that when they were drawing up the Scotland Act, they put clever blockages in. For example, when I got the building safety levy agreement with the UK government – a very straightforward power that they had already given themselves – I had to jump through hoops to get their agreement. Any new tax has to have the UK government's agreement. So clearly a wealth tax is not going to be straightforward by any manner or means.

So I do think that sometimes – and Green colleagues, I think, sometimes fall into this trap – other parties make things sound very simple. Why don't we just do this and why don't we just do that? If it was simple, it would have already been done. The fact is that it's not simple, whether it's negotiating with the UK government or just having the infrastructure and data that's required to shift the balance of taxation. I'm a big supporter of all of that, but it is far from straightforward under the devolved powers.

It is easy to forget, Robison said, that the last time the Scottish and UK Governments worked in genuine cooperation was under David Cameron. So might the blockages and hostility from Westminster start to change after the recent election results?



Scottish Parliament Debating Chamber.

Credit: David Barbour for Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body.

“With the Celtic nations now all having nationalist governments, I think it could go one of two ways”, Robison suggested. “The UK Government could recognise their power is weakened and respond appropriately by talking genuinely about devolving further powers. Or, with its centralisation instinct from both ministers and civil servants, it might try to further marginalise devolved governments.”

Within these limits, then, Robison expresses pride in the SNP government’s work to address the cost of living around heating bills, childcare improvements, and above all the child payment, “putting money in pockets of families who really need it”. “But you know, to really do serious stuff in a cost of living space requires further powers. Otherwise, you’re just removing money from one block and moving it to another.”

A Divide in the Movement?

It certainly rings true that the public overestimates the powers of the Scottish Parliament, and it would be interesting to see the focus groups or polling data that backs up the claim. If it is right, then of course it is partly a result of opposition parties’ strategies to attack the SNP by suggesting they are failing to act. But the public perception is also in part the result of the SNP’s desire to present an image of itself as an ambitious government that can meet every challenge with competence and strength. “Everyone sees what you appear to be”, wrote Machiavelli, but “few experience what you really are.” Only those in power bump up against its edges.

So has the SNP got the balance right, between deploying every limited power it has, while demonstrating the limits of devolution?

“I think the SNP has managed to do both, which is remarkable in itself”, Robison affirmed. Indeed, in its governing years the SNP seems to have overcome its old disagreement on this question. ‘Gradualists’ tended to want to use limited powers of government to full effect, demonstrating Scotland’s capacity to govern itself well. ‘Fundamentalists’ preferred to demonstrate Scotland’s powerlessness without independence, pursuing the goal of ‘independence – nothing less’, and warning of the risk of getting stuck in devolution. This divide did not always fall along left-right lines, but fundamentalists tended to seek more radical change than the gradualists, who operated closer to the centre-ground. Does the debate within the SNP and its different traditions still fall along these lines?

“I think less so these days”, Robison replied, predictably keen not to air old party faultlines. She pointed instead to the SNP’s remarkable unity, more than a quarter-century after devolution: “I think the party falls centre left and that is its instinctive kind of position. When an issue comes up, I know straight away what the SNP’s position is going to be: not far left, but centre left. Whether it’s on domestic affairs or international affairs, I would say 99% of the party is aligned there. There are people further to the left and there are probably people further to the centre. But I wouldn’t say there was anyone particularly on the right, not these days anyway. The party has taken in a whole new generation of folk, particularly post the indyref, and that has grounded the party in the centre left. There are no longer those kinds of debates of, you know, those principles. I think we’re quite comfortable in our skin as a party.”

One area of historic difference between centre-left and further-left nationalists has been the question of foreign investment and Scotland’s exposure to neoliberalism and global markets. The

question directly concerns the limits of Scotland's current and future powers. Should Scotland adopt a new economic model favouring inward investment and state intervention, involving a strong and active government in its economic management. Or should it facilitate private capital and use government to try and mitigate the harms and inequalities when the wheels of profit are spinning?

For Robison, the centre-left position involves the best of both worlds. "I'm a pragmatist. I want investment into Scotland, particularly in the key sectors where there's growth and well-paid jobs. We have made a global name for ourselves in the renewables sector and in the food and drink sector, all of which is in severe peril from the current UK government obsession with nuclear power, but also, my God, from what might come along the tracks, with Reform UK explicitly saying they want to kill off the renewable sector. It's mind blowing in its stupidity. I think you can have both FDI [foreign direct investment] in sectors that are key for Scotland, and you can marry that with strategic investments that are homegrown. A lot of the investment we've made into renewables through the Scottish National Investment Bank has been a catalyst for growth. Focusing on the infrastructure, making sure that you start that ball rolling, you then expect private investment to follow. So it's not an either or."

And yet, a moment later, Robison did edge towards a more radical alternative. Much greater levels of industrial intervention and control would, she said, be possible and desirable, were Scotland not so powerless. "We don't have powers over corporation tax, we don't have powers over most economic levers, actually. Hence you get situations arising like in Grangemouth or Mossmoran, where it is utterly frustrating that we're not able to potentially pivot those towards new industries. Essentially, we are only able to provide some additional funding, try to extract money from the UK government, and try to start to build some new industries from the bottom."

This starts to sound like a vision of a much more active and ambitious industrial strategy. And Robison continued to develop the picture when it came to the new industries: "The other worry I have is on the renewable side. It had always been envisaged that you would have the decline of oil and gas in terms of the North Sea Basin, and at the same time you would have the growth of renewables that would uptick and overtake and provide space for those skilled workers to move into. And because of all the prevarication around things like the linking of renewable electricity to gas prices, all of the things that just work against renewable energy, we've not seen the uptick be at a great enough pace to be able to absorb people. So you've got that loss of 1000 jobs in the North East every month from oil and gas and that is not good. These are well paid jobs that are going to impact on the income tax take.

So there are a lot of big items in the in-tray for all the new ministers that are taking over. And again, coming back to the limited powers, if we were designing an energy policy here in Scotland, we would centre it around renewables, not nuclear, and we would be really turbocharging it in a way that is then going to be able to harness and absorb all those skilled workers. And it is so frustrating that we're seeing growth, yes, but a lot of investors are very nervous at the moment because of what might be coming down the line. And when they're getting essentially being put on notice by Nigel Farage. That's going to affect investment in the here and now.

The figure of Farage took us to an area where the Scottish Parliament and Government have done relatively little to test the limits of their power: migration and work. I asked about three sectors in particular in which workers, predominantly migrants, are systematically exploited: agriculture, care, and courier gig workers. Is there potential for more regulation of agricultural labour where you have up to eight people living in caravans? What is the prospect of plat-

form regulation and a fair gig work agenda? Will the sectoral bargaining plans around social care be delivered?

"I think that could be an area for some cross-party agreement," Robison suggested. "There is progress being made on national bargaining in the care sector, and there will be cross-party agreement on that at least from Labour, and the Greens."

But Robison stressed that rules and regulatory change alone are no antidote to the obsessive crusade by major parties in England to cut off opportunities for people migrating into Scotland, to demonise migrants, and to deny asylum seekers rights to work.

I think there is a more fundamental issue for Scotland, that we need more people to come and live and work here because we've got an ageing population. And the really sad thing is that we were seeing predictions that population growth in Scotland was going to hit about 5.8 million because people were choosing to come to live and work here. And now because of the obsession of the UK government in cutting off all of these avenues for people to come, we're now seeing the projection to be, I think, 5.4 million. How sad is that? It's just such an act of self-harm.

So first of all, you know, why are we not allowing asylum seekers to work while their application is pending? You have some people who are extremely well skilled. So it makes more sense for the public purse, helps the economy, and helps them to have a better standard of living while they are waiting for their applications. I think that explained properly to the public, the public would absolutely get it.

I think with the best will in the world, yes, you can enhance terms and conditions. You could create better career pathways for people to go into care who could then go into the regulated professions from there. But you could probably employ every single school leaver in the care sector in the future, and it's still not going to be enough. So we have to wake up and reach a more sensible set of immigration policies. I do think there are things we can and should do under devolution around fair work, around care, national bargaining and all of that, but we're still going to hit against this fundamental truth that we need to grow our working age population and we are being hampered in doing so because of the obsession about numbers. The universities are being hit with the same thing. The easy hits of cutting back on international students because it gets the numbers down, at the very time that universities need income: it's just continual acts of self-harm, a bit like Brexit itself.

Once again, Robison guided the conversation back to our major theme, the peril of overstating Scotland's powers. "So, I think we have to be careful of not giving the impression to the public that the Holyrood can solve all of these issues when you've got these massive problems. And it is a tension, because you want the Parliament to be as bold and as ambitious as it can be. But I think sometimes we have been guilty as a party of stepping forward, [saying] "Yeah, we'll roll our sleeves up and get on with it". And then of course you find out you can't, and you maybe raise expectations that something can be solved, when it can be helped, but not solved." Overstating our power not only risks undermining independence, but stoking something worse.

Robison has long been at the heart of a parliamentary party that achieved hegemony by striking a competent and powerful poise. But in the post-parliamentary light of day, she has a warning for new ministers and the wider party: let's not overstate our power, lest its limits are revealed, and disappointed people reach into darker places for reform. There is a radical edge to this message, sharpened by long experience of the limits of Scotland's power, and long commitment to the struggle for sovereignty. "It's about having

FINLAND: A CAUTIONARY TALE

Jukka Seppälä finds that Lesley Riddoch's nationalist image of Finland owes more to fantasy than facts.

The Nordic countries have been well-marketed in Scotland. For elements of the independence movement and indeed the Scottish Government, they embody the kind of social democratic policies and values that Scotland should choose over the London-centric UK.¹ Many Scottish fans of the Nordics will have seen earlier instalments of Lesley Riddoch's 'Nordic Horizons' series. The latest documentary in Riddoch's series, *Finland: The Happiest Country That Almost Didn't Exist*, is a great case study of the strengths and limits of Scotland's self-identification as an aspirational Nordic welfare state. The documentary provides an inspiring but limited view of Finnish social democracy, sticking to the level of specific policies, whilst ignoring the economic and cultural crises facing Finland which should make any leftist wary of Nordic utopianism.

While I admire Riddoch's keen eye for Finland's common-sense policies, she leaves out much that is relevant to analysing the state of Finnish society. The most striking omission is Finland's recent policy record, especially under the current Thatcherite right-wing government. Instead of a capitalist country experiencing class war and the normalisation of xenophobia by its governing parties,² Riddoch portrays a seamless, frictionless nation. Another elephant in the room is the increasing Atlanticism of the Finnish elites after the country joined NATO in 2023.³ Riddoch's perspective echoes the nation-branding PR of Finnish public diplomacy.⁴ Given the compromises inherent to 'being Nordic', the independence movement should perhaps rethink how, and why, it learns from the Nordics.

How Riddoch's Documentary Exposes the Limits of Nordicism

There are grounds for Nordacist awe. In many respects Finland is a very well-functioning society. I have seen how smoothly Finland's larger urban centres seem to function in comparison to parts of Scotland and the wider UK. However, Riddoch's enthusiasm focuses on highly specific facts and snapshots of Finnish life. This includes praising Finland's national preparedness in anticipation of an invasion and marvelling at the coexistence on an island of open prison convicts with residents, which supposedly demonstrates the country's high level of social trust.

Whilst it is reasonable to appreciate such details in isolation, the documentary frames these facts in a manner that largely obscures the role of friction and class politics in shaping Finnish history. Take the following quote for example:

So this is Finland, the happiest country despite the most difficult history. The best place to be a child with excellent education and low child poverty. A land of ice breakers, saunas, cooperatives, and bunkers in case of invasion. A country run by its neighbours for centuries that's created its own com-

mon-sense approach to solving social problems. A different way of running a country in the face of all adversity. If anyone can teach resilience and determination, surely it's the unsinkable Finns.

This framing of Finland as a unified country with high levels of trust and higher levels of happiness seems more instrumental than instructive. Its function is to provide a proxy for a particular vision of Scottish independence. With a brief detour discussing Finland's early history of civil war and struggle against the Soviets during the second World War, Riddoch portrays a unified society that has transcended class inequalities by strengthening itself, against difficult odds, in pursuit of common-sense policies. The film's subtext is that if Scotland also achieved independence (and was nationally 'unified') it could also unleash its national character towards the end goal of an imagined Nordic state without much class contradiction or structural racism.

In contrast to a nationalist argument emphasising the unity of classes, Finnish leftists have often argued that socialist political parties and organised labour are largely to thank for many of the social democratic aspects of Finland we still celebrate.⁵ Labour unions aren't mentioned in the documentary, even though they are key to the Finnish success story. At their peak most Finnish workers belonged to unions, which largely accounts for the better working conditions they were able to negotiate in the Finnish social-corporatist model.⁶ Since the 1990s, however, Finland has gradually come to a point where a majority of its workers are deunionised. This has coincided with the growing strength of capital over labour.

At worst, the foundational nationalist assumption of Riddoch's documentary is part of a lineage of classless nation-branding discourses about the Nordics. Unlike interpretations of Finnish history that recognise class struggle, the Nationalist story is perhaps more sellable to foreign audiences because it centres around that politically safe and marketable word: happiness. This simplistic narrative builds on Finland's high score in the questionably named World Happiness report.⁷ It comes with the added assumption that the measured contentedness of citizens is the ultimate criteria by which to judge a political system. It is a rather uncomfortable assumption given the grave injustices perpetrated by many of the higher-ranking countries, including Israel (8th happiest) against Gaza.

Another problem with this nationalist framing is its lack of explanatory power. At the very beginning of the documentary, the high praise of Finland's education system and of the population's longevity are attributed to Finland's quasi-mythical national character, *sisu*. *Sisu* is a Finnish term for determination and perseverance against impossible odds and formidable trials, from the cold climate to war. As a Finn I never gave this word much serious thought, as it mostly reminds me of the patriotic lingo of Independ



Above: *The General Strike in Finland, 1956. Credit: U. A. Saarinen.*

Below: *A large demonstration organized by the Joukkovoima network in Helsinki on August 22, 2015. Credit: Hannu Hakkinen, CC.*

ence Day speeches. This myth doesn't have much to do with actual politics or life in modern post-industrial society. I doubt its role as a key material factor driving history.

Finland's Policy Successes

But beyond the limits of this sisu-centric story of Finland's success, what about the documentary's empirical value? Riddoch's policy analysis gets a lot right. Facts rightfully celebrated by Riddoch include the fact that Finland has the world's largest number of co-operatives, which Riddoch says is "why Finland also tops the world charts for food security." She also aptly points out that, "While Scotland is dominated by private landowners and developers, Helsinki City Council still owns 66% of its land so can plan for the long term." I also appreciate the love shown to Helsinki's central library,

its diversity of free services, and the fact that Finns are among Europe's top public library users.

There is also the much-praised Finland's Housing First policy, and the continued focus on building affordable housing. However, whilst homelessness is still low compared to Scotland, it has risen for the first time since 1987 during the current right-wing government.⁸

On the other hand, the documentary's claims about Finland's education system ("the envy of the world"), are much more out of date. Indeed, the current domestic narrative about the Finnish education system is almost the opposite. The country was previously proud of its top-level PISA rankings, but its free state education system has plunged in PISA rankings for literacy and maths for more than a decade. The alarming decline of the education system and the relative lack of resources is a hot topic among teachers.⁹

Finland's Rightwards Turn

The facts in Riddoch's documentary largely point to a technologically advanced, progressive and egalitarian state, which has somehow achieved all of this without exploitation but through sheer determination and common sense. Such a story should raise an eyebrow. Indeed, in many ways Finland's current trajectory offers a cautionary tale about what happens when states embrace austerity and neoliberalism, under pressure from international monetary institutions and capital's incessant hunger for profits and so-called productivity. Similarly to the rest of Europe, Finland has seen a normalisation and mainstreaming of radical right parties, and the general acceptance of racist and xenophobic discourses by government ministers. Rather than offering an egalitarian alternative to little England, Finland is a state where anti-immigrant politics are running rampant and far-right street movements exemplify a general mainstreaming of racism, which obviously reflects deeper colonial and racial structures embedded in Finnish society.

The right-wing turn of Finland has ushered in unprecedented government austerity, including but not limited to cuts to welfare benefits,¹⁰ healthcare and culture.¹¹ Finland is also hardly a utopia for the disadvantaged. Finland boasts the highest unemployment rate in all of Europe at the time of writing. Beneath the image of homogenous social cohesion, Finland is a society of ethnic tension, migrant labour powered economies and modern-day slavery. It is a society with a health and care sector in a crisis not dissimilar to Britain's. This is a society where the left is on the backfoot, defending the welfare state, or what is left of it, against erosion.

Another cautionary tale is geopolitical. Neoliberal Finland is a country whose elites have moved from military non-alliance not just to being more (rightly) prepared against real and perceived Russian state threats, but also to being more firmly Atlanticist, a position that ties Finland to imperialism in ways that is scarcely recognised by Nordic Utopians abroad. Indeed, the Left Alliance's leader has argued that Finland's fate is becoming so tied to the United States that it undermines its commitment to international law, and the avoidance of nuclear proliferation.¹² This is scarcely an 'independent' existence: Finland's reliance on the US has coincided with an increasing number of defence deals with Israel and American military bases in the country.¹³ What the Scottish independence movement is to make of this side of Nordic geopolitics is rarely raised.

There is also a notable lack of critical discourse regarding Finnish political elites. Take for example the global liberal establishment's favourite progressive darling, former PM Sanna Marin, now working for the Tony Blair institute,¹⁴ which was tied to the neo-colonial 'Trump Riviera' Plan for postwar Gaza.¹⁵ Or Finland's current president Alexander Stubb, the Europhile who has also been known as the 'Trump Whisperer', and signed an \$6.1 billion icebreaker deal with a Trump regime known for its imperial intentions towards Greenland.¹⁶ Whilst Finland is Nordic and European by foreign policy identity,¹⁷ this identity does not exist in isolation from vassalage to American foreign policy interests. Fans of the Nordics should be clear about their stances on the aspects of the Nordic geopolitical grouping they want an independent Scotland to align with.

Notwithstanding the unanswered questions, there is little doubt that, for many people, it is a 'lottery victory' to be born in Finland (as the Finnish saying goes), and that Scots would benefit from the various policies Riddoch champions. In a time of monsters however, we cannot afford Eurocentric naval gazing and only focus on any country's domestic achievements regardless of their imperial and environmental costs.

Who should Scotland learn from?

When learning from other countries, we should always ask the critical question of what not to learn from them. All societies have their faults. We should inquire deeper and question whether the familiar

reference points are helpful for internationalists or anyone concerned with 'progress' (if one professes to believe in such notions). It is understandable why the independence movement continues to study the Nordics. In a post-Brexit little Britain of increasing xenophobia, it is hard not to champion a turn outwards towards Europe. But perhaps our map of the world should extend far beyond this. I would propose some rethinking regarding how an independent Scotland could orient itself geopolitically. This is key, as there is scarcely a 'Nordic' escape route from currently-existing capitalism, especially if one desires a more egalitarian, polycentric world system. To learn from the Nordics and their allegedly more social democratic systems, we must first acknowledge the cost, contradictions, and limits of such systems. We can start by recognising that there are good Finnish policies which we could adopt at home. Understanding these can help build consciousness of what the British state has failed to provide, as Riddoch so lucidly argues. But let's soon move beyond state-promoted nationalistic interpretations of these countries' histories in favour of narratives that put working class struggle at the centre of the story.

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A TRANSITION AGENDA FOR SCOTLAND'S COLLEGES

Against the drive towards defence, and the commodification of skills, we must establish what future we want for Further Education, writes **Dan Holland**.

In late 2025, the further education lecturers' branch of the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS-FELA) released its first ever formal report into the state of Scottish Further Education.¹ The report uncovered a sector in crisis,² with years of underfunding and cuts reducing staffing by 7% and students by 12% according to the Scottish Funding Council's own figures.³ These cuts have caused course closures disproportionately affecting the education of the most vulnerable. Colleges seem to have lost their sense of civic and social purpose. Former institutions of lifelong learning, community anchors, and 'centres of working-class confidence',⁴ have been indented to the needs of employers for whom education is a commodity, a factory producing compliant workforces rather than critically minded students and community wellbeing. The marketisation already embedded in our sister sector of Higher Education has started to erode community education as a social good.⁵ The report documents the increasing privatisation of services and commercial ventures with opaque financial reporting. These trends raise questions about whether governance structures within the sector are robust enough, given private companies' access to public money without proper scrutiny. FE truly risks becoming a fragmented system focused purely on short-term goals, and a just-in-time ethos undermining the people colleges were created for.

On 12th March 2026,⁶ the UK government announced funding for two 'Defence Technical Excellence Colleges' in Scotland if the Scottish Government match-funds them. Of course, this piqued the interest of established Scottish colleges, who must have seen their continual thirst for funding in the desert of flat-cash settlements about to be quenched by an oasis of weapons manufacture. The sector is already awash with defence contracts; Leonardo, BAE

Systems and Balfour Beatty all utilise the substantial talents of FE lecturers to upskill their workforces through apprentice and day-release teaching programmes. This pivot by the UK government, in response to US foreign policy, is a characteristic of a lack of vision and imagination about how to spend public money for public good. The EIS-FELA report states:

EIS-FELA believe in the intrinsic value of education; if there's political will to invest then it should not be predicated on the arms industries but in transferring these skills to a Just Transition and allowing academic freedoms and the ability of colleges to genuinely meet their local and regional needs.

This is a better starting point for any institution of learning.

On same day as the UK Government's announcement, somewhat ironically, the Scottish Government launched a "college sector of the future workstream".⁷ There is a sharp contrast between the defence-centred vision of the UK Government and this separate Scottish Government announcement, which acknowledged the role colleges play in their communities. The F&HE Minister rightly talked of how "a thriving college sector is vital for our shared prosperity and collective wellbeing", as well as the importance of colleges in the transition to net-zero.

Still, such government rhetoric must be met with careful scrutiny, and a degree of cynicism. We remember, in the face of post-Covid mental-health crisis, that the National Union of Students had to campaign hard for £20m from the Scottish Government to reinstate on-campus counsellors. Furthermore, the Scottish Government promised that redundant workers at Grangemouth would have

access to funds for retraining in the clean energy sector, but while highly skilled workers managed to access some training a year ago, there has been little joined up progress in making a skills transition part of a wider industrial strategy. Meanwhile the UK energy minister recognises the skills of Grangemouth workers and does not want them left behind; so why then is there no talk of a Just Transition Technical Excellence College?

During the last year, the Forth Valley College Branch of EIS-FELA has fought tirelessly alongside central belt communities against the closure of the Alloa campus,⁸ finally winning a 12-month reprieve. The EIS-FELA report argues for a more community-anchored direction, that would fill Alloa campus with redundant Grangemouth workers retraining into clean energy professions. There are around 42,000 clean energy professionals in Scotland who provide a vital public service and improve our environmental future. This is the kind of coherent strategy that we should expect: one which improves our capacity for socially useful shared prosperity.

The Workers of the Future

The 'workstreams of the future' might provide opportunities, but only if used correctly. With stakeholder meetings that report directly to government, trade unions can carve out space to directly influence the process if they coordinate effectively. College trade unions need to develop a shared vision of how they see the sector, building on the EIS-FELA report. College leaders have already gained the initiative by participating in the Tripartite Alignment Group, which currently sidelines the staff voice. The EIS-FELA Executive has therefore passed a motion to organise a trades union-led conference to articulate our collective vision for Scotland's colleges. This needs to be enacted with haste following the election of a new government in Holyrood, and the STUC is well-placed to navigate and coordinate this with its affiliates. The movement and workforce must coalesce around this idea, setting out collective demands of the workstream.

EIS-FELA is concerned at the direction of travel if unions do not influence policymakers more effectively. The potential £20 million towards new defence colleges is simply not enough to create and sustain long-term educational goals, yet the workstream may tilt towards a focus on defence. Likewise, continually filling gaps with short-term private provision and industry-led skills programmes does not provide a sound industrial and educational strategy. It merely sticks a plaster on open community wounds whilst transferring public sector money into private hands. The Scottish Funding Council broadly agrees with EIS-FELA on direct funding,⁹ but the EIS-FELA report opposes outsourcing, including key areas such as Learning Support; the drive for commercial income, including through competing with private providers as well as partnering with them; and the growing use of agency workers.

EIS-FELA recognise the role that businesses play in our communities. We are part of our communities and we use those businesses. However, we must be clear about what drives good quality education. Our priority is that education and skills are available to all, building learner confidence and benefiting Scotland's economy holistically. When I started as a college lecturer, it was continually reinforced that your average worker has around 12 different jobs across 7 different careers in their lifetime, which is why Further Education is so important. We should not defer to the priorities of a single business or industry. That approach is simply not rooted in our students' reality. It equally ignores the emancipatory value of education for our English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and students with Additional Support Needs (ASN); not to mention the critical analysis we all need as western society flails beneath a sea of misinformation, disinformation and AI slop that is scaffolding the worst elements of the populist right.

The EIS-FELA report argues for well-resourced provisions in other industries outside the traditional manual skills context.

Health and social care are desperately short of workers. We must also preserve access to all areas of the creative industries for our working-class communities so that cultural pursuits do not become exclusive. Should we really be saying to our young people that working in events, beauty therapy or social sciences are avenues now closed off to them? These are industries of the present and future, so must be protected at all costs.

The current framing of the skills economy commodifies education, exclusively driven by Key Performance Indicators. To see students as future economic units of output breeds a dehumanising approach to our learners and a demoralising managerial culture for our staff. The Community Wealth Building Act 2026 offers a potential way out.¹⁰ There must be genuine consultation with our communities, which absolutely must include our colleges. Public bodies now have a duty to embed CWB principles, including fair work and sustainability. Colleges are ideally placed to move a Just Transition agenda forward, utilising government industrial strategies which must include a trade union vision of the future skills pipeline to end eleventh hour attitudes. This should include radical ideas like bringing college lecturers into business workplaces so that we can see for ourselves what is needed, and use our expertise to co-design curricula, or speak directly to workforces about upskilling. Nurturing peer-to-peer networks rather than management-driven cultures in workplaces is a profound community-based principle, connecting workers across industries. Businesses could even meet with college union affiliates to establish and consolidate these networks.

To summarise, EIS-FELA are looking for a trade union led conference on Further Education and skills in order to influence the direction of the sector, setting out our collective vision of the best possible opportunities for staff and students. The skills pipeline conversation is clearly missing a critical part: how do we educate workers of the future in the areas in which society needs them? How do we make these future jobs sustainable and fair? And how do we use further education to work towards a Just Transition? If we make insufficient demands under the Community Wealth Building Act and the workstreams of the future initiative, then the direction will be set for us. That money is currently being funnelled into defence spending and short-term initiatives exclusively benefitting business. I question the value of community wealth building if those initiatives are used to train our young people to effectively destroy other communities.

Common threads run through this vision, which the STUC must coordinate. Fair Work, Just Transition and Community Wealth Building are the key ones. The college unions and the wider movement must come together and unite around ideas that benefit us all, setting out an industrial vision which incorporates Further Education. We must positively establish what we want to see in the sector, rather than what we don't want to see. There is a fight for the very heart of Further Education in Scotland, but our vision is narrowed by the coin slots through which we are forced to peer. EIS-FELA is committed to widening those horizons.

This article was written on behalf of EIS-FELA National Representatives.

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A BETTER PLAN FOR BARGAINING IN CARE

After years of waiting, Scotland is close to launching sectoral bargaining in care. **Peter Hunter** explains why there must be no more delay.

On Wednesday 18th March, Scottish Ministers announced the implementation of National Sectoral Bargaining for Adult Social Care workers. Negotiations will commence in 2026 for implementation in 2027/28.¹ This was a landmark moment for low paid workers and a major strategic bargaining and organising success for trade unions. It was also a major moment for the Fair Work Convention and Scottish Government and a credit to the employer organisations who see Fair Work as the only route out of the enduring care crisis.

Those headlines are all important and true. However, the deal is not 'signed and sealed'. Agreement on the constitution for the negotiating body is within touching distance, but as with all major deals, nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. All the smart money says the deal will be done, but why take a risk with the public announcement? Why jump the gun?

In 2015, Scottish Ministers ordered new Calmac Ferries from Ferguson Marine. In 2017 they staged a fake launch using the hull of a possible boat with painted-on windows and plywood funnels. Nine years later, it is still not clear how robust those boats are.

It is not the end of the world, but the Government announcement on sectoral bargaining has a whiff of Calmac about it. A truly joint body would share the timing and content of any announcement on sectoral bargaining. Work is required to ensure the 'good ship' Fair Work is finally ready to sail.

Built in Grangemouth

The origin story for Sectoral Bargaining in Care dates back to the 2013 dispute at INEOS and the bold vision of the Scottish Government that Scotland could find a better way. Jim Mather led the 'Working Together Review' from which the Fair Work Convention was born. In 2019 the Convention's first major report was *Fair Work in Care*. Converting the vision into hard practical gains is proving difficult.

Unions, employers and Government all agreed with the 2019 finding that "the level of wages for frontline support staff in social care is drastically low despite the work being complex and demanding".² Seven years later we can only say that implementation has been tortuously slow. While sectoral bargaining was a leading recommendation, the bedrock of the report was a sector body that would conduct sector bargaining but also lead a wider process of

change. Sectoral Bargaining is the voyage, not the destination, but if the Joint Council can be finalised we have the vessel to sail in.

Initial Progress

Although there was no need for further research and consensus building, the pandemic demonstrated the fragility of the sector and the desperate need for change. As the Covid inquires will prove, infected workers were too poor to take sick leave when infected with the virus. There were countless avoidable infections and deaths as the direct link between unfair work and failed care was cruelly exposed.

Despite the crisis, the initial work during the pandemic was relatively positive. Pay was benchmarked with the bottom end of NHS pay, and a sick pay scheme was hastily improvised to reduce avoidable infections and deaths. The plan for 2023/24 was to consolidate those interim gains by agreeing permanent pay and conditions for the sector as a whole. Since then, the link with NHS pay has withered and the £40m "earmarked" for terms and conditions



was diverted to pre-election tax cuts.³ The good ship Fair Work was taking in water before it left the slipway.

The announcement made in March 2026 remains historic, but it felt a little like political salvage work before the Scottish elections. Now that dust has settled, the new body must make rapid progress and, crucially, display a deeper commitment to the fundamental principle of effective joint working.

Plain Common Sense

The standard explanation for delay between 2019 and 2026 is that sectoral bargaining is innovative and legally complex. That simply is not true. Sectoral bargaining is common across Europe, and in fact it also had a long history in the UK prior to the abolition of Wages Councils in 1993. Sectoral agreements on pay and conditions cannot be described as innovative. On the question of complexity, there are only two moving parts in the engine room.

1. A bargaining process to agree minimum sector standards for pay and conditions.
2. A mechanism to apply those requirements to the sector as a whole.

Fully funded agreements might be tricky to negotiate, but creating the constitution for a bargaining forum is easy. It should not have taken seven years. Even now, that process is incomplete. Comparisons with Calmac will only fade when the constitution for the negotiating body is formally agreed.

It is fair to say that implementation by Government is impeded by the inadequacy of the devolution settlement. Scottish Ministers can only apply new sector standards to care that has been commissioned through the supply chain funded by Government. That covers most but not all of the care provided in the sector. This limitation in scope has been obvious since 2019 and does not explain the delay.

The explanation for the delayed move to sectoral bargaining is quite simple. Service users and care workers see the indispensable economic value of social care. Government and commissioners do not. Service users and care workers simply are not a political and financial priority. That needs to change. Fair funding for care needs to be embedded in every budget planning process and backed with serious political capital.

This change in Government priorities will not come easily. The momentary awakening of the pandemic and 'clap for carers' has passed. After the applause, the sector has slipped back down the political agenda. The national commitment to the demonstrable delivery of Fair Work has lost momentum and, locally, councils are diverting care funds to other priorities through service cuts and extensive rationing. The £20m cuts and privatisation programme in Aberdeenshire is just one example of a wider trend of local attacks on workers' rights and withdrawal of vital care services.⁴ The Scottish Joint Council for Social Care will have its work cut out if the vicious attacks on vital services are to be halted.

The Only Way Is Up

Despite these delays, all the signs are that Scotland will lead the UK in the structural shift to sectoral bargaining for care. The importance of being 'first' is a strategic and industrial point. Any political advantage for the Government is ancillary.

There are two bargaining options on the table: the Scottish model with roots in the Fair Work Convention report, and the new powers under the UK Employment Rights Act (ERA) 2025. It is vital that the Scottish system is in place before the ERA model. Scotland has a different and vastly superior approach to the constitution and operation of the negotiating body. Only the Scottish model has the potential to drive wider transformation of the sector.

The ERA creates separate Adult Social Care Negotiating Bodies (ASCNBs) for the three British nations. Under the English model for the ASCNB:

- The negotiating body is made up of Government appointees.
- The negotiating body then recommends pay and conditions to Government.
- Government can accept or reject the proposals.
- Where no sector recommendations are acceptable to Government, the minister has the power to enforce minimum standards.

It has to be a fundamental right of workers (and employers) to elect, instruct and if necessary remove their negotiating representatives. This is a legal and democratic principle, and the creation of that wider democratic infrastructure also creates local, regional and national forums to address wider issues including workforce planning, skills development, ethical commissioning, protection of displaced visa holders and more.

The English model is not collective bargaining. It will not build the depth and quality of joint relations envisaged for Scotland. The unintended benefit of seven years' delay has been a closer understanding, unity and commitment to action between employers and trade unions. These embryonic joint relations were born from frustration with Government delay and opposition to funding cuts. They now extend to a deeper shared understanding of a wide range of sector issues. Our model is not inherently better by virtue of geography or national identity. We simply have a better plan.

ERA Amendment

Scotland is committed to accountable 'bargaining' in the conventional sense. The ERA model is more akin to a pay review body. So, what happens to this new Scottish body when the UK pay bodies arrive? Will the new Scottish Joint Council be scrapped after 12 months? No: Scottish Ministers appear to have secured devolved control over the bargaining process as a vital 'carve out' from the UK provisions under the ERA.⁵ The current understanding is that the parties will negotiate and agree Scottish sector reforms through a distinctly Scottish bargaining process, while also benefiting from common enforcement measures that apply UK-wide.

The Ministers' announcement that Scottish workers may or may not get enforcement rights under the ERA came as a total shock to those drafting the new sectoral bargaining arrangements. There is a broad political consensus in Scotland that employment law should be devolved so that Fair Work rights can be improved. Using devolved powers to opt out of UK protections would be an act of political folly and it falls to our new MSPs to ensure that point is clarified at the earliest opportunity.

Scottish Ministers deserve full credit for their insight and effort on this point. It is strategically important that Scotland's distinctive approach to authentic bargaining is established immediately, prior to wider ERA implementation, and retained as a forum for deeper sector change by discussion and agreement.

The ethos of social care is unique in the Scottish economy. The wage-work bargain is fundamentally different, as are the barriers that perpetuate unfair work in care. Only authentic democratic voices, for both workers and employers, can create a sector body with the expertise, standing and power to transform the sector and deliver Fair Work in the fullest sense.

1. Improving social care pay and conditions - gov.scot

2. Fair-Work-in-Scotland's-Social-Care-Sector-2019.pdf

3. Care workers unite to demand return of 'missing millions' | Morning Star

4. Aberdeenshire social care cuts see families 'face uncertainty' - BBC News

5. s.39(3) Employment Rights Act 2025

BEYOND THE LEGAL GATES

Kendra Briken and **Dustin Hafki** reflect on community-based efforts supporting workers to overcome legal gatekeeping.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states: "All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law". Franz Kafka's 1915 story 'Before The Law' captured the tensions between law and lived experiences that the UDHR was designed to overcome three decades later. A "man from the country" wishes to "enter the law", but the doorkeeper does not let him in and, even worse, paints a bleak picture of how dreadful the man's experiences will be with the law and with the many other doorkeepers beyond the first gate. "These are difficulties the man from the country has not expected; the Law, he thinks, should surely be accessible at all times and to everyone, but as he now takes a closer look at the doorkeeper, ... he decides that it is better to wait until he gets permission to enter."

Legal gatekeeping is seldom worse than for workers in non-unionised sectors, which comprise the large majority of workplaces today. In recent decades the imbalanced powers of the employment relation have shifted ever more towards the employer, with workers facing significant backlogs when trying to enter the gates of justice. The Bureau for Investigative Journalism predicted in May that claimants awaiting an employment tribunal hearing are being given dates as far off as 2030, and that rogue employers are "more likely to get away with abuse, wage theft or wrongful dismissal". Imagine your wage is withheld, or you lose your job without any notice. With almost half of UK workers living paycheque to paycheque (People At Work data, 2025), and many subsisting on a shoestring, this threat is existential. Waiting ruins livelihoods.

The emotional and material exhaustion this system causes are well known by civil society organisations, who are stepping in to address the lack of affordable and accessible advice. Yet dedicated Employment Advice Centres are rare, despite the subtleties of work-related law and the desperation of workers, and they are often running on precarious funding themselves. Those centres that do exist often did not start as top down organisations. The Inverclyde Advice and Employment Rights Centre, handling over 350 cases per year with marginal paid staff and volunteers, has its roots in the Inverclyde Occupational Health Project (IOHP), initiated by the Greenock and District Trades Council in 1992. Shipbuilding workers, particularly, were suffering from deleterious ill-health caused by their employment. Subsequently, electronics workers, mostly women working in fabrication and 'clean rooms' of assembly and semi-conductor plants, were increasingly presenting with acute conditions, including reproductive trauma and cancers. These workers did not have access to representation, and employers had dodged the responsibility for their health and care, outsourcing the costs to workers, families, communities, and the broader health care system. The endurance of the Inverclyde Centre is testament to its roots in these local projects.

Over the last decade, other organisations have developed alternative approaches to worker empowerment, education and preventative efforts. The Workers' Observatory in Edinburgh focusses on worker-led data collection on exploitative practices in the gig economy, while the Perth-based Worker Support Centre supports seasonal agricultural workers in anonymously reporting illegal practices and providing opportunities to voice concerns politically.



Shipbuilders of Port Glasgow, by John McKenna. Credit: Kendra Briken.

Both groups are embedded in their respective communities, building collectivity and opening doors to civil society. Recent union-led projects such as Trade Unions in Communities and the STUC's 'Our Rights in Action' initiative highlight the importance of community-based approaches. These initiatives are in part a response to far right attempts to organise in worker communities. Centred around supporting individualised workers locally, they are providing legal education and building awareness about how to build collective capacity and power at work, and revitalising what is left of shared and accessible community spaces. This aim has been enhanced lately by the Strathclyde law clinic. Acknowledging that they are a last resort for workers who would otherwise not be able to afford legal representation, the clinic has started focussing on public legal education, including through schools. Initiatives like 'Trade Unions into Schools' and the law clinic hopefully will find ways to work together in the future. These important initiatives are stepping in to provide collective education paired with individual representation across a multitude of individualised contexts.

Where the state fails to make the gates to justice easy to open, workers' power must force the doors. Organisations and projects like the Inverclyde Advice and Employment Rights Centre, The Workers' Observatory, Worker Support Centre, Trade Unions in Communities and Our Rights in Action provide tools to help workers get past the gatekeepers in their respective contexts. Yet most workers never even get to see the gates of justice. Kafka's story signposts to the pertinent question of how to return from futile individual journeys to justice, back to much-needed collective efforts to prevail in power struggles. With limited state support to access justice, community-based, localised approaches are demonstrating success in educating, building cases, gathering evidence and supporting workers on their endless journey to get beyond the legal gates.

This article was inspired by a network meeting initiated by the authors as part of a larger ESRC funded project on 'Amplifying Worker Voice' in May 2026. The authors wish to acknowledge the input of all groups attending the event.

DOES SCOTLAND EXPOSE A CRACK IN REFORM'S ARMOUR?

Scotland's migrant-friendly civil society, egalitarian identity and the breadth of support for independence all provide ballast against Reform's siege, writes **Nicole Treanor**.

Reform Scotland's choice to announce its new leader at Dean Park Hotel in Kirkcaldy felt very intentional. Malcom Offord took to the stage with a pitch to "represent ordinary, decent, hardworking Scots who are fed up with mid-table mediocrity in Holyrood". At one time the world's largest exporter of linoleum, this once-thriving seaside town is now hollowed out. It has exactly the ingredients that the far-right seeks to exploit by deploying a weaponised nostalgia and presenting itself as an anti-establishment antidote which can return our communities to what they were before.

Kirkcaldy happens to be my hometown. Observing the resources and political will that have been spent here over the last six months has been surreal. And the lang toon is not unique, but a microcosm for the broader question that now faces Scotland. Can the idea of Scotland as a more welcoming and egalitarian society than its southern neighbour survive the reactionary politics sweeping the union and indeed the globe? Can it resist a movement that preys on those bearing the brunt of a cost of living crisis, of late stage capitalism, of rampant misinformation, of algorithmic exploitation?

For the best part of two decades, Scotland has returned SNP governments to Holyrood. It is the only UK country in which the Greens have held national office. It has not voted for a Conservative Government since the 1950s, and 62% of voters backed Remain. Afua Hirsch recently argued that baseline Scottishness is rooted in culture, food, music, folklore, language and place; as opposed to Englishness that is "tainted by race", more intertwined with the decline of empire, and more fertile ground for creatures like Farage to thrive. By contrast, the SNP presents 'New Scots' not as a threat to Scottish identity but part of modern nationhood. Yet this vision of Scotland as more open and more flexible than England has never been stable. Racism is threaded through Scottish society, from structural outcomes to hate crime data. Edinburgh and Glasgow drew much of their wealth from empire, while we exhibit a form of colonial amnesia as to how crucial a role Scotland played in the transatlantic slave trade.

Unsettling Trends

Scottish identity is a site of negotiation and contestation, as has become increasingly apparent over the last year. When the first photos appeared from Tommy Robinson's 'Unite the Right' march last year, Scottish flags were peppered through the Union Jacks. Now opposing groups are battling to claim the saltire as their own. Once associated with the independence movement, anti-nuclear campaigning, pro-European sentiment, and the vision of what Scotland could be, it has been (re)claimed by anti-migration protesters and used, much like St George's Cross, as a marker of who gets to belong. At the summer protests organised outside the Cladhan Hotel in Falkirk, far right protesters were draped in saltires while holding signs that read 'Stop the Boats'. It was at these very protests that Offord announced his defection from the Tories, via livestream.

These are some of the reasons why the stakes felt higher in this Scottish Parliament election. Reform was on the ballot for the first time, knocking our doors and appearing on our screens, making their case to be the next party to lead Holyrood. Despite being reserved matters, immigration and asylum dominated the campaign. Reform dubbed Glasgow the 'asylum city of the UK' and claimed it housed 10% of all asylum seekers in the UK. They homed in on the SNP's decision in 2022 to abolish the requirement to show a 'local' connection when applying for housing, and claimed that this resulted in asylum seekers being prioritised for housing over locals (a claim debunked by organisations like Positive Action in Housing). Offord called Scotland the 'food bank of the world', blowing the dog-whistle that 'enough is enough', frothing that working class communities were at breaking point, and that we need to look after 'our own people'. He linked a stabbing incident in Edinburgh to a 'massive insurgence of immigrants' and parroted Farage's assertion that one in three schoolchildren in Glasgow do not speak English.

Reform have thought carefully about how their messaging can make sense to a Scottish audience. Take education. Since devolution, free university tuition has occupied a sacred position in Scottish policy and is seen as a system with Scottish Enlightenment roots. Salmond quoted Burns to promise that "rocks will melt with the sun" before he would allow tuition fees to be imposed on Scottish students. Now this cornerstone of Scottish policy is under pressure. Polling by the Carnegie Trust suggests that up to 48% of voters believe Scottish students who can afford tuition should pay for it. Taking advantage of this turn in public sentiment, Reform's manifesto claimed that "Scottish education was once the gold standard of the world, but in the last twenty years has plummeted from being outstanding to just average". They propose a "comprehensive review of University funding to ensure degrees are meaningful, value-for-money and grounded in genuine academic merit rather than EDI or sustainability metrics".

Reform sits uncomfortably in Scottish civic and political life. Its playbook is to target working-class communities who have been failed by party politics, and to package the party as the anti-establishment alternative. Reform is an exercise in wilful contradiction. We are shown a party whose leadership attended elite schools, whose donor base raises serious questions, whose champions own country mansions. Offord dwells in a realm where owning six houses, six boats and five cars is a point of pride.

On 5th May, Kenny Farquharson predicted in *The Times* that election day would be "remembered as the day that Scottish exceptionalism ended". The results suggest a mixed picture. Scotland delivered Reform its weakest result across Britain. That still matters. But 15.8% of the vote, more than 350,000 people, is significant for a party only beginning to establish itself. Their successes show that Scottish identity is never settled, and that Scotland is already a place where too many must negotiate to belong.

THE ROOTS OF WOMEN'S FIGHTBACK

Katy Hight explains how Women against the Far Right are using united front tactics to challenge racism and sexism in Scotland.

On Saturday 11th April, hundreds of women occupied Buchanan Street steps in Glasgow, in a powerful display of defiance. Several weeks earlier, an Edinburgh-based far-right organiser had called for a rally of “angry Scottish men” to take over the city. Holding the space for several hours, the women-led counter-protest overwhelmed a measly crowd of fifty, predominantly men. From the steps, representatives from anti-racist groups, refugee support organisations, trade unions and the women’s rights sector called for women across Scotland to refuse the weaponisation of violence against women to stoke up division, racism and Islamophobia.

This mass mobilisation was organised by Women against the Far Right Scotland, a Stand up to Racism initiative launched in October 2025 in response to far-right exploitation of women’s safety to demonise refugees. Since the first public meeting, which sold over 400 tickets, the campaign has touched a nerve. Over 3000 people signed our open letter, including Nicola Sturgeon, actor Elaine C Smith, and TV presenter Jean Johansson. Six months on, the momentum continues, sustained through a grassroots organizing model that has tapped into a wider mood of anger, frustration and defiance.

Misogyny is a systemic, pervasive reality, but blaming refugees does nothing to make women safer. The far-right’s hyperfocus on cases of assault by migrants ignores the fact that the biggest danger to women lies in our own homes. One in four women in the UK will experience domestic abuse in their lifetimes. Even the UK Government describes the situation as a ‘national emergency’. Those who claim to protect us by attacking migrants are themselves often perpetrators of violence against women (including Glasgow’s John Watt, organiser of the far-right ‘Unity Rally’ and convicted domestic abuser). Decades of austerity have seen services for women subjected to devastating cuts by current and previous Scottish and UK governments. Now Reform UK are threatening essential legal protections for women, as well as our bodily autonomy. Women across the country are understandably furious at a system that abuses and endangers us, and at far-right attempts to exploit our fears for racist agendas. The campaign is channeling this anger, mobilising many who had not been organised. Unsurprisingly, the campaign is resonating with young women for whom incel culture is a deeply troubling school-yard reality. One placard at the Rage against Reform UK protest in Glasgow read: “Farage vs. 1 very angry 17YO girl”.

Much of the campaign’s success lies in its united front tactic of building unity in action around shared goals. The steering committee comprises activists across party lines and from various women’s rights organisations, charities, civil society groups, and trade unions, and relies on robust processes of debate and decision-making. It is through these democratic structures that we adopted, from the outset, our trans-inclusive stance, as well as the position that, while women-led, our events are open to all genders. Within the united front there are inevitably tensions, particularly around elections, with some organisations being less able (or willing) to openly campaign against Reform UK due to electoral laws. But what we share is a commitment to anti-fascism, and an acknowledgement that the threat to women is too great not to unite.

The campaign’s dynamism also brings risks. Women in the spotlight have endured a torrent of harassment, vile abuse and

death threats from far-right men, both online and in person. This has raised questions about police engagement, particularly given the justifiable lack of trust that women have in the police. It has prompted important discussions as to how a mass mobilisation of women can provide robust solidarity and care. We are also coming under attack from the ‘gender critical’ movement. Given the alliances between certain gender critical groups and right-wing movements, our campaign will remain vocal in welcoming our trans sisters. We refuse to let gender critical groups represent the women’s movement in Scotland.

The election results mark the next challenge for the campaign. Women have consistently been failed by successive governments, but Reform UK’s successes will endanger and impoverish women, migrants, and workers even further. We prepare to fight back confident that we have the numbers on our side. The unity demos organised across Scotland prior to the May elections saw thousands of anti-racists take to the streets to demonstrate true community solidarity. Comparatively smaller but equally crucial demonstrations took place where anti-racist organising is less historically rooted, including in Kilmarnock, Paisley, Dunfermline and Livingstone. As Talat Yaqoob, co-convenor of Women against the Far Right Scotland, said at the April counter-protest: “we can see clearly at our rallies that there are so many more anti-racists in Scotland. The far-right worked for weeks to organise and only managed a handful, but their views are getting reach and platform beyond their numbers, and we have to fight that”.

We have women across the country, from the highlands and islands to coastal villages, contacting us for support in setting up their own local branches. Women against the Far Right will be spending the next few months on the road, growing our bases across the country and building in new areas. It is a tall task, but we are confident that we will find support from the many, many women who are sick and tired of being used as political footballs by people who are themselves a direct threat to our liberation.

Follow the campaign on instagram @womenagainstfarrightscotland or email sutrscot@gmail.com to join the whatsapp group or set up a WAFRS branch in your area.



Photo credit: Sadia Sikandar

GO PROUDLY: 90 YEARS SINCE THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR



*La Pasionaria
Statue, Custom
House Quay,
Glasgow.
Credit:
International
Brigade Memorial*

Mike Arnott pays tribute to the Scots who, ninety years ago this year, joined the greatest international democratic army the world has ever known.

17th July this year will be the 90th anniversary of the 1936 military coup which led to the Spanish Civil War, sometimes called the Spanish Anti-Fascist War. It began in colonial Morocco, spread to mainland Spain the following day, and marked the culmination of months of planning among right wing generals, sympathetic political leaders and landowners. It quickly drew the allegiance of the Catholic Church hierarchy.

All this was in response to the election, that February, of a progressive Popular Front government, elected by a broad alliance of republicans, progressive liberals, socialists, communists and anarchists. Their programme signified a return to the democratising programme of the 1931-33 republican government, elected following the restoration of parliamentary democracy after the fall of the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera and the flight into exile of the royal family.

For a country with a largely rural economy, dominated at every level by men, by the church, and economically by landowners, the February 1936 government's programme of land reform, secularising education, aspects of gender equality including female suffrage, and regional autonomy represented an assault on every facet of traditional Spain. By May 1936, armed groups representing elements of both left and right were attacking members of the other side in the streets. Conservative politicians and their client press were able to stir up fears about stability and openly called for the government's overthrow, encouraging plans for the coup being developed by leading figures in the military, including General Francisco Franco who would later become its leading figure.

The nationalist coup was immediately supported by military units in places like Morocco, Pamplona, Burgos, Zaragoza, Valladolid, Cádiz, Córdoba and Seville. However, rebelling units in important cities such as Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Bilbao and Malaga were unable to capture their objectives, primarily due to workers' and citizens' militias taking to barricades and fighting the insurgents in the streets. In rural areas, adjacent villages sometimes declared for opposing sides. Spain's navy stayed mainly loyal to the Government. These were heady days, captured vividly in black and white archive photographs and on film, showing cars and lorries, some with quickly improvised armour, crammed with clenched fist-saluting militia, heading out from the loyalist cities to take on the insurgency in surrounding areas.

On 19th July, British pilot Cecil Bebb had flown Franco from the Canary Islands to Spanish Morocco in a chartered plane from Croydon Airport. Hitler and Mussolini agreed to help the nationalists, particularly with the important airlift of the experienced Army of Africa over to the Spanish mainland. From Seville they began their advance, during which they overthrew the recent communalisation of rural land, massacred opponents such as at Badajoz, took control of South West Spain, and eventually arrived at the outskirts of Madrid in November.

For the 'democracies', Britain, followed by France, demonstrated their attitude by their eagerness for a Non-Intervention Agreement, which was signed within three weeks of the outbreak of hostilities. Their desire to appease fascism, rather than defend Spanish democracy, saw the Madrid government denied the right



*Crowds welcome Spanish brigaders back to London in December 1938.
Credit: Mike Arnott*

to even purchase weapons to defend itself. Though Germany, Italy and Portugal signed the Agreement, they had no qualms about supporting their fascist allies in Spain. Italian submarines and German planes attacked international merchant shipping bringing supplies to the Republic. The Soviets, for their part, signed and provided important military and material aid to the Government side, but this became less sustainable as the conflict progressed. In the final analysis, the impact of non-intervention on the Republican forces, as opposed to the nationalist side, proved the crucial factor in the eventual outcome of the war.

The conflict on land soon became more internationalised. Some of the first to take up arms, alongside their Catalan hosts, were overseas competitors in Barcelona in July for the Workers' Olympiad, being held in opposition to the Berlin Olympics. The first from Britain to fall in action was a Surrey artist and Communist Party member, Felicia Brown, also in Barcelona ahead of the coup. She volunteered to join the PSUC (Catalan communist) militia called the Karl Marx that was heading for Aragon. She was killed on 22nd August, attempting to sabotage a nationalist train. Surrey Unison unveiled a memorial to her last year, outside its offices in Reigate.

Those Who Didn't Wait

The first of the International Brigades, the XIth (eleventh), was formed in October 1936. Their recruitment was organised by the Communist Parties of the individual participating countries, under the co-ordination of the Comintern in Moscow. The 16th (British) Battalion of the XVth International Brigade, wasn't formed until just after Christmas 1936, although numerous Scots had already been fighting with German and French battalions within the XIth. Their introduction at the battle for Madrid, on 9th November, had helped to halt the fascist advance on the capital, which only fell at the end of the war, thirty months later.

Glasgow's George Square saw two significant departures. The first was in September, when the Scottish Ambulance Unit, under the adroit leadership of Fernanda Jacobson, left in a fleet of buses, lorries and ambulances. Then in December, led by Peter Kerrigan, three busloads of military volunteers from across Scotland left the Square for the channel ports.

By the end of the war, some 35,000 International Brigade volunteers, from over 50 countries, had fought with the Spanish Republic. Over 500 of these were from Scotland and a quarter of these still lie in Spanish soil, on the battlefields of Jarama, Brunete, Teruel, Belchite, Caspe, Gandesa and on the Ebro River.

This year, the International Brigade Memorial Trust, AABI in Spain, ACER in France, KSFR in Germany and our other internation-

al sister organisations, along with local commemorative groups, will begin to mark 90th anniversaries of the major events of the Civil War. Here in Scotland, the annual North Lanarkshire commemoration will take place in Motherwell on Sunday 26th July with Fife's in Kirkcaldy on 26th September. The IBMT will hold our 2026 AGM in Glasgow on 10th October, with the annual commemoration at La Pasionaria taking place that morning. The anniversary of Jarama will coincide with Dundee's annual commemoration in Albert Square on 13th February next year. The next weekend a sizeable Scottish contingent will be in Spain to mark the 39 Scots who fell at Jarama, at an annual ceremony in Tarancón, and to participate in AABI's annual Jarama March on the battlefield itself.

In the last fifteen years, a number of places have begun to hold an annual commemoration at their local International Brigade memorials including at Dundee, Motherwell, Kirkcaldy, Irvine and Glasgow. Events also take place in Aberdeen, Renton and Edinburgh. If you have a local memorial, why not use the ninetieth anniversary as a focus for launching an annual commemoration? To keep tabs on events coming up, check the IBMT website, or the Scotland and the Spanish Civil War Facebook page. Join the IBMT and affiliate your trade union branch.

In our current political situation, it is more than appropriate to remember and to celebrate the role played by the men and women who left these shores to confront fascism in Spain. Many had already fought the Blackshirts on their own streets. Our streets.

You Are History

In his last words to his mother, Patsy McEwan, a 25 year old Dundee YCL member, said: "If I don't go and fight fascism, I'll just have to wait and fight it here". He was one of 19 from the city who didn't return.

In her words to the departing International Brigaders in Barcelona in October 1938, La Pasionaria said: "You can go proudly. You are history. You are legend. You are the heroic example of democracy's solidarity and universality. We shall not forget you."

When the British Battalion arrived home at Victoria Station that December, a press report said their welcome represented "British democracy spontaneously expressing its abhorrence of Fascism and its appreciation of bravery. They had made history, by forming part of the greatest international democratic army the world has ever known."

Their example speaks to us today. Their legacy shouts more loudly across the years than at any modern time. Because it is a living legacy, not of memorials or sepia images, but of anti-fascist action.

THE SUMUD FLOTILLA AND SCOTTISH ANTI-FACIST HISTORY

Palestine is a site of genocide and a testing ground for oppression.
We know what happens when that mould is left to spread,
writes **Cal Rosie**.

I wrote most of this article during a possible interception of the Global Sumud Flotilla, not knowing whether my friends and comrades would last the night without being abducted by the Israeli regime; the second such abduction in as many weeks, the first of which resulted in Flotilla participants detained for 40 hours (or 10 days in the case of Saif Abukeshek and Thiago Avila who were both taken back to Israel), beaten, held in brutal, inhumane conditions, with some experiencing sexual abuse. And all of what is taking place is the merest hint of what our Palestinian cousins have been experiencing over the last two and a half years of genocide, and eighty years of colonial oppression.

As I finished writing, the entire Flotilla was attacked again by Israeli forces and all 428 participants abducted. Our legal team on the ground in Occupied Palestine reported similar barbaric treatment as the previous interception. In fact, it seems likely to have been even worse.

The Global Sumud Flotilla is an international effort to break the illegal Israeli siege on Gaza made up of hundreds of dedicated activists and at least sixty boats at its height. Setting sail from Barcelona in early April, it is the latest in a long series of civilian-led flotillas that have sailed to break the illegal Israeli siege, and the largest; it is in fact the largest civilian flotilla effort since Dunkirk.

The Flotilla is inspired by the resilience of our Palestinian comrades: *Sumud* translates to steadfastness, a trait taught to us by Palestinians and the way they have refused defeat after almost three years of genocide. Every single participant knew the risks of sailing against a genocidal army, and for the last leg they sailed directly into a storm, but each one was determined to reach the shores of Gaza and stand shoulder to shoulder with our cousins in Palestine - the real heroes of this story.

Scotland should be proud that we have been represented on this mission by my comrades Owen Richardson Okie, Bryn Higgs, Antonis Vradis, and Hughie Stirling. Three of these comrades are

lads from the same part of the Highlands who all volunteered together to do their part in ending the genocide and combatting UK- and US-backed Israeli fascism.

Owen, Bryn, Antonis, and Hughie are continuing a long tradition of Scots standing against fascism. Oswald Mosley's black shirts never managed to get a foothold in Scotland, and their every attempt was blocked by Scottish men, women, and children. Meetings were dispersed, speakers were debated and/or heckled, and when all of that failed, tossing them out head over foot tended to do the trick.

This anti-fascist stance led to Scots being well represented in the first large-scale international fight against fascism, with many Scots joining the Spanish civil war on the side of the Republicans against Franco's Nationalists. So great was the support from places like Scotland that the Republican army established the International Brigade to house them all.

This huge show of support was despite the UK's policy of non-interference in the war, enforced by the Foreign Enlistment Act, which meant that fighting in the war (on either side) was illegal. Recognising that fighting injustice was more important than UK foreign policy, thousands from all over the UK volunteered to fight or provide medical support, and even more remained home to raise funds and organise support for the Republicans. Much of this support was organised and facilitated by Scottish trade unions, and by socialist and communists organisations. John 'Patsy' McEwan, a member of the International Brigade, explained why he chose to fight in a foreign war more than a thousand miles away by saying: "If I don't go and fight facism, I'll just have to wait and fight it here."

The Flotilla carries on this tradition, albeit in a completely non-violent manner, of bringing together those from all around the world to fight for justice, with activists pulled from every different leftist organisation you can think of: socialists, communists, anarchists, trade unionists, and even mainstream Green Party representatives like Zak Khan who received beatings during his

abduction so severe that he was one of many hospitalised after their release.

What every participant has in common is the inability to stand idle in the face of injustice, and the knowledge that fascism, like black mould, will spread if left unchecked. This was something we understood in Scotland back in the 20s and 30s when fascism first emerged, and we'd do well to remember now.

The Republicans, even with the support of the International Brigade, lost the Spanish Civil War in April 1939. I don't think I need to highlight the significance of that year in the history of fascism. With Hitler and Mussolini (who both supported Franco with weapons and military intelligence) using the Spanish Civil War as a dry run for their own conquest of Europe, it is difficult to say how history may have played out if fascism had been stamped out then in Spain; or it had been properly combatted in Germany in the early 30s; or even if it had been rooted out during its beginnings in Italy in the 20s.

But instead fascism was appeased and ignored by most western countries for almost two decades, much like Israel's crimes against Palestine, and more recently Iran and Lebanon, are either ignored, defended, or supported by European, Australian, and American governments. Back then, it led to the Holocaust, and now to the genocide of the Palestinian people.

And it must be stopped. It would be enough to stand against Israeli imperialism for the sake of the children who have been slaughtered in their thousands. Flotilla Steering Committee member Thiago Avil said, days after being released from brutal Israeli detention:

"These last two years of genocide killed a very important part of me. I believe everyone died a little bit with every child in Gaza."

But if you need more than murdered children to convince you to join this resistance movement, then consider that Palestine has been a testing ground for oppressive techniques and technologies for decades. For example, at a recent pro-Palestine demonstration in London, police deployed live facial recognition technology for the first time; technology that was first tested on Palestinians.

This is sometimes referred to as the colonial boomerang: oppressive policies are first tested out on colonies before being deployed on citizens in the home countries.

And if the idea of the treatment of the Palestinians being extended to Scottish people on Scottish soil seems to you unlikely, I would refer you to the policy papers of Reform UK, tied second largest party in Scotland, and recommend you amend your opinion on the matter.

Scotland must remember its anti-fascist history and work to uproot fascism everywhere we find it. In this we must look to people like Owen, like Bryn, like Antonis, like Hughie, and all of the previous Scottish Flotilla participants including Sid Khan, Jim Hickey, Margaret Pacetta, and Yvonne Ridley. And most importantly we must look to our Palestinian cousins whose unwavering resilience these past years and decades is nothing short of astounding.

We must eliminate fascism, the rot at the heart of humanity, once and for all, and supporting the Flotilla, and direct action efforts like it, is the best place to start. Because if we don't go and fight fascism in Palestine, we'll just have to wait and fight it here.



Credit: The Global Sumud Flotilla

RACE, CONSTRUCTION AND THE PALESTINIAN WORKING CLASS

Phil Chetwynd reviews

Resisting Erasure - Capitalism, Imperialism, and Race in Palestine by Adam Hanieh, Robert Knox and Rafeef Ziadah (Verso Books: £9.99. 2025).

Erasure is a term that has increasingly found currency in the work of Palestinian commentators. This is doubtlessly a result of the escalating attempts by Trump and Netanyahu to wipe out the Palestinian people in its entirety. Hanieh, Knox and Ziadah are certainly well aware of this new phase of Zionist policy, and seek to analyse it from a Marxist point of view.

The book firstly offers a critique of various ideological perspectives common in the current climate of support for the Palestinian struggle. The authors take issue with three common inflections of the pro-Palestinian struggle today: a) the essentialist view (Palestinians as innately aggressive/helpless), b) the humanitarian focus on 'suffering', and c) the legalistic appeal to 'human rights'. These three expressions of solidarity all in their own ways serve to undermine an effective solidarity movement, by deflecting attention away from the fundamental materialist nature of the struggle.

The book contributes to the analysis of the Middle East conflict by situating the class nature of settler colonialism within the broader framework of European capitalism. Settler-colonial capitalism has a different relationship to labour than that found in traditional colonialism. Racism is central to settler colonialism. Palestinians are reduced to a single undifferentiated mass in the service of the Israeli state.

Roughly one-third of the West Bank labour force worked in Israel prior to the Al Aqsa Flood of October 2023. Half of these worked in construction, a vital sector for the large business conglomerates that sat at the heart of the Israeli economy at this time. This integration of Palestinian labour into the Israeli economy not only served Israel's economic needs but further solidified its control over the West Bank and Gaza Strip by making Palestinian livelihoods dependent upon access to employment in Israel. Things changed, of course, after the Al Aqsa Flood, when thousands of Palestinian workers were refused work permits. Israeli capital has not managed to replace these workers, even after frantic attempts to recruit Indian workers in their place.¹

The effect on the Israeli economy has been immense. Military spending surged to unprecedented levels, costing millions of shekels daily. At the same time, domestic and foreign investment plummeted, and key sectors such as technology, tourism, agriculture, and trade have contracted. The budget deficit has ballooned, and national debt now stands at around 70% of GDP. Rising prices, diminished purchasing power, and a labour shortage due to the mass mobilisation of reservists have been the result.

Addressing anti-Palestinian racism, the authors challenge the notion that race is a natural and inherent category. The opposite is true, they claim. "Race is produced through racism", which "is to say in order to marginalise, oppress and exploit particular groups of people, specific differences - real or imagined - are abstracted and said to be the main characteristic of each member of the group (skin colour, culture etc.). These differences allow groups to be compared and placed in a hierarchy which in part determines (and justifies) their treatment." This ideological oppression had the effect of reducing the vast majority of the Palestinian working class to a mass of exploited workers waiting in line at unearthly hours of the day for the chance to work in the Israeli economy. Those working in Palestine for the Palestine Authority are primarily made up of bureaucrats working in health, education and administration. They are the Palestinian middle class. Meanwhile, the Palestinian capitalist class has long assembled itself outside of Palestine in the diaspora.² The authors thus characterise three layers of the Palestinian class system, and highlight how racism weaves a thread through these layers to embed Palestinians in the global imperialist order.

Western Governments provide military aid, economic support, and diplomatic cover for Israeli actions while also suppressing dissent, through censorship, criminalisation and legislation against activist movements. We do not have to look much farther than the Filton 24 and the proscription and subsequent hunger strikes of Palestine Action supporters to see

Resisting Erasure

Capital, Imperialism and Race in Palestine

**Adam Hanieh
Rob Knox
Rafeef Ziadah**

how that has permeated the British scene. So what then of the future for Palestine?

It is a moot point as to whether Trump's latest plan for 'The Gaza Riviera' was part of Netanyahu's vision for Gaza, or whether the Israeli PM simply jumped on the back of Trump's pipe dream. It is, of course, a nonsensical fiction that largely serves to hide the scorched earth destruction by Israel's war machine. What is important here, however, is not so much whether these plans match reality but how they work to ideologically project a vision of the future in which, through 'normalisation', Israel is integrated into the regional economy and Palestinians in Gaza return to becoming a pool of cheap labour jointly exploited by both Israeli and Arab investors.

1. Al Estikal: After the Al Aqsa Flood: How 'Israel' Destroyed the Lives of Over 150,000 Palestinian Workers.
2. MenaCatalyst (2024) "Harnessing the Power of the Palestinian Diaspora: Building a Thriving Entrepreneurial Future for Palestine."

THE CLASS STRUGGLE IN KURDISH IRAN

Sohrab Rezvani analyses the changing strategic and political situation in Rojhelat in the wake of the US-Israeli attack on the Islamic Republic.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, the government of clerics and military generals, is fighting an existential battle with two enemies: the US-Israel joint military machine and its own people. On the one hand, the US, worried about losing its dominant position in the global economy to China, has decided to put drastic pressure on the flow of cheap oil from Iran to China (12-15% of China's crude oil import is from Iran); and the Zionist regime of Israel, dreaming of Greater Israel, is backing the agenda to balkanise Iran. On the other hand, the popular majority in Iran have broken with the Islamic Republic's ideologies and political programs and are striving to overthrow the government. In both battles, the Kurdish region of Iran, plays a strategic role.

Kurdish nationalists call this region Rojhelat, meaning the eastern part of Greater Kurdistan. During the 1979 revolution, the Kurdish region of Iran did not vote 'yes' to support the Islamic Republic in the referendum (30-31 March 1979) and resisted the military occupation by the Iran's national army and the young Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Kurdish left and communist forces like Komala (the Society of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan) organised military and civil resistance, and made the region the last stronghold for other left and communist forces across Iran who were being repressed and searching for a place for refuge. Between November 1979 and May 1980, the city of Sanadaj (Sene) was under the control of left and communist organisations and revolutionary councils, while in liberated rural areas cadres and party members were developing peasant armed committees and recruiting young members into guerilla units. The resistance against the Islamic Republic carried on even after its occupation of cities and liberated areas. The spirit of struggle crystallized in the creation of several political parties with their own military wings. These parties are still fighting the Islamic Republic, hand in hand with the complex network of civil organisations which have grown through waves of social movements and uprisings.

In relation to the Islamic Republic's external enemies – the imperial US and Israel – forces in the Kurdish region of Iran have great importance. It is an open secret that several Kurdish parties are in regular communication with the Americans and Israelis and, directly or through mediators, receive material support from them. US-Israeli forces have benefited greatly from the development of Kurdish regions of Iraq and Syria. The Kurdish parties and military organisations had an important role in the destruction of the two

Baath parties of Saddam and Assad. Both historical events and the current increase in collaboration have made the Kurdish region of Iran a possible entry point for any US-Israeli land operation.

However, the Kurdish region of Iran is not simply a battlefield for bigger global players and Kurdish political and military actors are not mere foot soldiers for American grand plans for the Middle East. There is a sharp distinction between political projects of the working class and bourgeoisie in Rojhelat, more than in any other part of Iran. Political parties within 'The Coalition of Political Forces of Iranian Kurdistan' represent the bourgeois-nationalists, social democrats, democratic socialists, liberal democrats and in general the centre-left to the centre-right of the political opposition in Rojhelat, who are seeking a sort of regional government with a regional parliament that would serve the interests of the Kurdish bourgeoisie and middle classes. Several of the parties in this coalition are not shy about their collaboration with US or Israeli forces. Some of them are still maintaining a gesture of having no communication with the US and Israel. On the other hand, political parties and organisations associated with "the Cooperation Council of Left and Communist Forces" represent the far left and communist forces in Kurdistan that are fighting for governance by *Shuras* (i.e., workers and neighbourhood councils). These forces are explicitly anti-imperialist and pro-Palestine.

The Kurdish region of Iran is therefore of major strategic significance, as the Islamic Republic of Iran battles against both US-Israel attacks and the majority of disenchanted Iranians. This is the context in which the left in Scotland should support and show solidarity to the left and communist forces in Rojhelat who are fighting both against US imperialism and for governance by *Shuras* in Iran.

The Political Opposition in the Kurdish Region of Iran

Six days before the US-Israel attacked on Iran, on 22nd of February, five Kurdish political parties announced the formation of the 'The Coalition of Political Forces of Iranian Kurdistan'. They include the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI), Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK), Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), Organization of Iranian Kurdistan Struggle (Khabat), and the Komala of the Toilers of Kurdistan. After a few days, The Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan also joined the coalition.

However, the right wing faction of Komala, the Kurdish branch

of the Communist Party of Iran, which was maintaining tactical dialogues with these organisations, decided to reject the invitation to join the coalition. (Since 2022, the left and right wings of the Kurdish branch of the Communist Party of Iran have been acting independently). In an official statement, this Communist Party faction mentioned several reasons for not joining the coalition, including their principal disagreement about collaborating with US forces to realise the coalition's objectives. They stated that building a coalition to realise Kurdish people's right to self-determination under the support of US imperialism was a historical mistake which they would not be part of. One of the main provisions of the Coalition was the establishment of a joint command centre for the military wings of all parties. This made provisions for the Coalition to coordinate their operations through the Coalition's structure. The Kurdish branch of the Communist Party of Iran also criticized this decision, and argued that creation of a popular army under the command of a popular and democratic establishment was necessary to prevent civil war between armed parties who might fight against each other, in the same way that Kurdish parties in Iraq (KDP and PUK) had fought each other for several years.

The Coalition predictably ignored those critiques and carried on preparing for the escalation of tensions between US-Israel and Islamic Republic of Iran. The parties began to call their members in the diaspora to come back to their camps in Sulaymania and Erbil, in Kurdish region of Iraq, and prepare for the upcoming fight. Military mobilisation and training increased in different camps. Journalists from Europe and Israel made dozens of reports and short documentaries about the Kurdish forces and their readiness to liberate their lands. And then, the war started. Based on the recent report from Jyar Gol, a BBC journalist, the Coalition was preparing to start a ground invasion on the third day of the war. The plan didn't happen. However, the movement of Kurdish forces, as well as US signals indicating that the Kurdish front would be activated in this war (such as the telephone call between Trump and the leader of PDKI), were enough to redirect a significant amount of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' military resources from the south, near the Persian Gulf, to the west and north west.

However the war resolves, the forces of the Coalition parties will have ended up with a stronger position. The war not only unified their organisations and pushed them to make an umbrella platform, but also significantly increased their membership and resources. Among these parties, one of the main winners was PJAK, which is privileged to share experience and resources with the network of PKK-related organisations struggling for development of "autonomous regions" in Kurdish-majority regions of southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq and north-eastern Syria. PJAK encroached into Iran's mountainous border and took over several abandoned outposts. Social media campaigns managed to present PJAK as a progressive force which wants to bring democracy not only to Rojhelat, but to the whole of Iran. In early May, PJAK was elected as part of the leadership of a recently formed Iran-wide opposition platform called "Iran Freedom Congress" funded by bankers who were involved with the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The spokesperson of PJAK is now confident enough to welcome the idea of No Fly Zone supported by US forces, so that they can start a land operation.

Yet this is not the full story. The 'Cooperation Council of Left and Communist Forces', by lifting the flag of "No to Imperialist War, No to Islamic Republic" and actively building solidarity networks among the people in Rojhelat, has raised another voice in Rojhelat. The people of Rojhelat are tired of war and have already seen the result of empty promises of Kurdish bourgeoisie-nationalist parties in the Kurdish region of Iraq. They do not want a period of violent chaos within which parties would decide about their lives over their head, without people's control or say. They are aware of the destructive role of US interventions in the Kurdish region of Syria that diverted the popular revolution that was unfolding there. For these reasons, most of the organised movements of people in Rojhelat –

the teachers' unions, workers' associations, environmental movements and women's organisations – are searching for political solutions that would ensure their own direct participation in political decision-making processes, and control of their means of production. The popular base of the Cooperation Council is strong: more than ten cities in Rojhelat rose to the Cooperation Council's call for a general strike in January 2025. Although Cooperation Council organisations, such as the left wing faction of the Communist Party of Iran, have their own camps and armed wings, they are advancing a civil strategy for socialist revolution which first and foremost relies on developing mass organisations, workers councils and a general strike that would end in occupation and control of military and state apparatus by the masses, and creation of a Congress of Councils. In an era of disconnected internet Iran, the 24-hour satellite channel of the Cooperation Council is one of their main means of media communication with people.

The class struggle is more visible in the Kurdish Region than elsewhere in Iran. The Kurdish bourgeoisie and middle classes either sided with the central government in Tehran or supported the Coalition. Working class people in Rojhelat are trying to survive against the US-Israel attack and fight against the Islamic Republic through their social movements, workers organisations and political parties in the Cooperation Council. In the grand scheme of historical struggle against the world capitalist order, the Scottish left's natural allies in Rojhelat are neither the American-baked Coalition forces, nor the forces of Islamic Republic of Iran. They are the Cooperation Council and the organised, socialist section of the working class in Rojhelat.

The Politics of International Solidarity

Movements in solidarity with the liberation of Palestine as well as anti-war movements in Scotland are right to mobilise people to disrupt the imperialist military interventions of the Westminster government. The left in Scotland is right to focus on the enemy at home, and organise all sorts of actions, demonstrations, and political campaigns to stop the war machine of US, UK and Israel. But the enemy's enemy is not our friend.

The left and communist movement in Rojhelat has persistently demonstrated an anti-imperialist, pro-Palestine position. 70% of people in Iran live under the poverty line, the Islamic Republic is losing the zeal that won people's hearts, and every revolutionary wave is bigger and more organised than the last (December 2017, November 2019, the Jina Uprising in September 2021, and December 2024). It is not absurd to think that the Islamic Republic will inevitably crumble. We should be prepared to support those in Rojhelat and across Iran advancing anti-imperialist, pro-Palestinian socialist struggle.

This does not mean that the anti-war or Palestine solidarity movements in Scotland should adopt an anti-Islamic Republic position in their public narrative. That, no doubt, is the position of Iranian left and communist forces whether they are inside Iran or among the diasporic communities. In Scotland, I am not suggesting the slogan, "No to Imperialist intervention, no to Islamic Republic". But I am suggesting active intervention to stop the any public narratives that states: "No to Imperialist intervention, Support Islamic Republic". It is important to actively minimize opportunities for pro-Islamic Republic forces to gain space and visibility within demonstrations and public events. In black and white stories about Iran or Rojhelat, there are only imperialist evil forces (the US, Israel, Pahlavi monarchists, Kurdish bourgeois nationalists) and forces of "Resistance Axis". It is critical to learn about the nuances of the geopolitical shifts in the Middle East and the ongoing class struggle in Iran and Rojhelat. This learning is an act of care, both for our comrades in Iran and Rojhelat who can benefit from new relationships and various forms of material support, and also for our comrades in Scotland.

“FOR WORLD PEACE AND AGAINST FASCISM”

90 years since The Left Book Club was founded, its branches are growing a new culture of self-education, writes **Nik Gorecki**

On the 16th May 1936, the first Left Book Club (LBC) book was published. By then fascist forces had come to power in numerous states across Europe, and it was worryingly clear the reactionary wave had further to go. In response, Victor Gollancz, already a successful publisher, was inspired to start the world's first subscription book club, the LBC. In Gollancz's words: "The aim of the Left Book Club is a simple one. It is to help in the terribly urgent struggle for world peace and against fascism, by giving, to all who are willing to take part in that struggle, such knowledge as will immensely increase their efficiency."

The subscription model was unique at the time, and proved surprisingly popular, with membership peaking at some 57,000 subscribers. Crucially, not only were people buying the books, but they were also coming together in reading groups, with over a thousand formed across Britain. Many of these groups became affinity groups, with participants undertaking social activities and forming personal bonds.

Although it is impossible to truly measure the impact of the first incarnation of the LBC, it is widely cited that it played an important role in building the base on which Clement Atlee's Labour government came to power in 1945, ousting Winston Churchill, and enabling the building of the British welfare state. On coming into government Aneurin Bevan, who oversaw the creation of the National Health Service, said that it was "the unorthodox political education of the Left Book Club" which "prepared the way" for the Labour victory of 1945.

LBC Reborn

In 2013 the socialist historian Neil Faulkner brought together a group of people to discuss the possibility of relaunching the LBC. Although volunteer-run and with next to no resources, this group of booksellers, trade unionists and activists had by 2015 successfully restarted the LBC as a not-for-profit subscription book club with similar social and political aims to the original.

Neil Faulkner's motivation had direct parallels with that of Gollancz. Following the financial crash of 2008 Neil was increasingly convinced that the conditions that led to the rise of fascism in the inter-world war period were reappearing, and there was a distinct 'fascist creep' returning to the world, a position that was at the time met with some scepticism. I think it's fair to say that the passage of time has proved him right.

Each One Teach One: Education From Below

Grassroots political education was central to the revived LBC's mission. Yes, we wanted people to subscribe and read the books, but above all we wanted people to come together and discuss them in person. We had witnessed the Occupy movements in London and New York, the Arab Spring, the public-forum 'Circles' in Spain and the wave of British student activism against tuition fees. Many of these movements had adopted horizontalist approaches to discussions and decision making. In a world where political dialogue was increasingly taking place on corporate social media, we believed in the power of people being able to learn together, teach one another, and explore political differences face-to-face. It was also a recognition of the importance of bringing people together to make so-

cial connections, which might go on to become the basis for further actions and activities. This is reflected in our motto: Read, Debate, Organise.

Related to this pluralism is a central belief in publishing across left traditions, and not prescribing any strict ideological line. The original incarnation of the LBC had a 'Popular Front' approach that hoped to unite liberals, socialists, and communists in a common response to fascism. We wanted our version of the LBC to avoid the factionalism that is too often a hallmark of the British left, to build bridges between anarchist and more hierarchical Marxist traditions, and above all provoke a culture of healthy critical discussion and free thinking.

Let a Hundred Reading Groups Bloom!

Since the relaunched LBC began publishing ten years ago, the operation has gone from strength to strength, expanding year on year and even reaching a growing number of international readers. With the day-to-day mechanics solidly in place, over the last year or so we have been concentrating our energies on growing the reading group network. We are on track to reach a hundred reading groups by the end of the year. Our ambition is to get an LBC reading group in every major town in Britain... and beyond!

For anyone who wants to get involved in politics, reading groups can be a perfect entry point and a beginning to that journey. For others already active in political projects, reading groups can be a useful additional activity, and we encourage pre-existing groups, such as local trade union or party branches, to start reading groups and to bring them under the LBC banner. The most important thing for us is to grow the reading group network and create a deep-rooted and long-lasting culture of self-education.

In Scotland we have well-established groups in Glasgow and Edinburgh and a new group just starting in Aberdeen, but we would love to see more. If you are curious please don't be daunted and do get in touch via the website or by emailing me at the address below. The LBC helps people through every stage of the process, and provides support and guidance into the future. You don't need to be an LBC subscriber to join or start a group.

Left Book Club Academy

While the core of the LBC remains the publication and distribution of physical books, the LBC has recently expanded its educational work with a new online Academy project. This takes the form of a growing series of expert-led online courses, followed up with interactive meetings. The courses are designed to act as primers to subject areas and deepen engagement with key texts. Although the Academy is in its infancy, we will be launching more courses through 2026 to ensure we can offer a variety of learning opportunities to make the Left Book Club into a powerful educational institution and a force for political change. The best way for that to happen is with your involvement. Do please consider getting involved with the LBC, and helping to grow the political culture that is essential to transforming our societies. For peace, and against fascism.

Get Involved

- To subscribe to the LBC please visit leftbookclub.com
- Find your nearest existing reading group by visiting leftbookclub.com/groups
- If you are interested in starting a new group please email nik@leftbookclub.com
- Find the LBC on Instagram at [instagram.com/leftbookclub](https://www.instagram.com/leftbookclub)



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THE BLUE JEANS BLUEPRINT

Henry Stead reviews the National Theatre of Scotland production, *Stand and Deliver: the Lee Jeans Sit-In*.

Pop songs that topped the charts in 1981 provide the pulse for this up-beat play, written by Frances Poet and directed by Jemima Levick, while class struggle provides the life blood. Adam Ant's kitsch highwayman, who gives the play its title, is just one of several 80s ghosts that locate the play firmly in Greenock of 1981. Duran Duran's 'Girls On Film' and Kim Wilde's 'Kids in America', also bring suitably synthetic period colour, with the anthems of rapidly deindustrialising Britain, The Specials' 'Ghost Town' and John Lennon's 'Working Class Hero', striking the deeper notes. Poet wanted the show to be a 'good night out', threaded through with the songs of the moment. It does not disappoint on this front. The music sugars well the medicine of a play that bears witness to class war in Thatcher's Britain. The songs, all performed live on stage by the cast, create the kind of uplifting atmosphere (apart from the Lennon) that those 140 plus brave workers — nearly all of them women — needed to sustain morale for seven long months of 24-hour occupation of their workplace.

The Lee Jeans sit-in was a high profile, successful and influential direct action against capital movement and unfair job loss. It was triggered by the need to protect hundreds of jobs in Greenock, Inverclyde, an area where female unemployment was already at over 13%. After a decade of high profitability, buoyed up by low rent and generous subsidies, the US-based multinational clothing manufacturer Vanity Fair co. (VF) decided to shift production to Northern Ireland, where they could capitalise on new and more generous state subsidies. As Andy Clark, author of *Fighting Deindustrialisation: Scottish Women's Factory Occupations, 1981-1982* (2022), explains, this was just good business sense for the corporation and its shareholders. But, as ever, the worker was left to foot the bill for corporate greed. The prospect of plant closure was devastating for the 240 Greenock workers, whose livelihood depended on sewing those popular blue denim jeans. Their offer of going down to a three day week was rejected.

To begin production in Northern Ireland VF would need the machines and materials in the Greenock plant, so occupation offered itself as a way to resist closure. During their struggle the workers were repeatedly failed by the National Union of Tailor and Garment Workers (NUTGW), who are almost up there with 'the Americans' of VF as the villains in this story. On 5 February 1981, the workers' Shop Steward Helen Monaghan (aged 44), played by Jo Freer, called a vote and by majority the workers decided to occupy the factory with immediate effect. Since this is a true story and not so long ago, the theatremakers have been careful to respect and reflect the reality of the situation. They manage to capture an authenticity that could easily have been lost. For example, Maggie Wallace (aged 19), played by Chiara Sparkes, snuck out of a window on the first night

returning somehow with over 200 fish suppers from Aldo's. On the same night the pay phone jammed. It was full of two-pence pieces from all the workers phoning home, and they had no key to empty it. At first these might seem like mere details, but exactly how you maintain security and feed people is a serious matter, as is establishing a stable means of communication with the outside world.

Over the months, while news came in of the deaths of the Irish hunger strikers proving the violence of the system they were fighting, the workers learned the hard way (and with no manual) how to maintain an occupation of this kind. Radical groups who approached them were given short shrift. In fact, a Liverpoolian representative of the revolutionary socialist feminist organisation Big Flame draws as much of Poet's satire as the inept NUTGW boss in London. The Lee Jeans sit-in is such an important story to tell because the success of their action was not only limited to the victory in their own factory. It was no small feat for 140 workers to keep up pressure on employers for seven months and along the way raise enough public interest and national support to negotiate a job-saving deal. VF sold the plant to local management for an undisclosed sum. But the Lee Jeans workers also created a blueprint and an inspiring precedent for factory occupation that would be followed by other threatened workforces in this period of accelerated deindustrialisation in Scotland, notably Lovable Bra, Cumbernauld, and Plessey Capacitors, Bathgate.

Never a Foot Wrong

This vital story of collective action is told with a special focus on the personal experiences of two small family groups: Helen Monaghan and her son Finlay (aged 17), Aron Dochard, and the sisters Maggie and Cathie Wallace (aged 21), played by Hannah Jarret-Scott. All other characters are played by a talented cast of six, including the two ensemble parts, played by the musical director Shonagh Murray and Madeline Grieve. For the extroverted Maggie the show is a coming-of-age drama, which sees her grow from a carefree late-teen rebel to a highly capable fundraiser, who delights in her brushes with fame while campaigning. Helen's arc is less expansive, but just as essential. She has to overcome a natural aversion to the spotlight in order to fight for the cause. At a crucial moment of choice when popular agency manifests in brave individual actions, the two narrative arcs intersect. It takes both Maggie's youthful rebellious energy and Helen's experience, respect and authority to take the stand they did. The brave decision was made and the moment passed into history.

It is at once a cautionary tale of corporate greed and an inspiring one of collective empowerment. Vitalised by their action, the

characters transcend their day-to-day lives. Both Helen and Maggie found themselves propelled into the public eye, mixing with politicians and celebrities. But what happened to them afterwards? The workers were victors for only so long. Maggie, marked out as a militant for her role in the action, had to move to Jersey, where no one knew her, to find work. When Helen quit, she hid her identity from the old women she worked with as a carer (home help) so as not to scare them. The aftermath of the sit-in is a reminder, in case we needed one, that the Lee Jeans sit-in was a victorious battle in a war the workers could not win. Unlike Orgreave (1984), the state did not resort to violence, though it was a constant threat. As we learn

in the play, the police were watching and waiting for the Lee Jeans workers to put a foot wrong.

An exciting moment comes after rumours circulate of VF plans to send in their 'heavies'. The workers hear over the radio that a convoy of vehicles is approaching the factory. The fear is that 'the Americans' will evict them by force. It comes as a huge relief when they see that the convoy is made up of double-decker buses and coal trucks full of miners and shipyard workers, who have been sent by the Transport and General Workers' Union to protect the picket. A 'good night out' it most certainly is, and one you won't forget in a while.



Credit: Mihaela Bodlovic/National Theatre of Scotland

AS LONG AS IT TAKES

Dick Gaughan's extraordinary sense of timing offers a lesson in freedom, writes **Cailean Gallagher**.

Dick Gaughan is a Leither who lives up to the old town's motto: persevere. He reckons he drove a million and a half miles on the road to thousands of gigs across the world. "Making music always took priority over making a living, that's the honest truth", and it took its toll when a stroke put a stop to his performing. But despite his frailty and almost total blindness, he was back on stage in January for a Celtic Connections gig in his honour, and again on May 10th at 'Rebellious Truth' in partnership with Tradfest at the Traverse, in Edinburgh, to talk about his story and his songs.

Dick's mother was raised in a Gaelic household in Lochaber, and his father emigrated to Scotland from an Irish household full of fiddle tunes and Fenian songs. Dick learned from them the art of changing song in the middle if a stranger came in. He picked up politics from his grandfather who drove lorries to Scotland and smuggled arms back into the war of independence. From his mother he learnt a resistance to rigid or 'correct' timing. When his father attempted to accompany her and keep her in time, she yelled, "the song has its own time, and it isn't yours". Following maternal form, Gaughan rarely sings lyrics in lockstep with his masterful accompaniments. He returned to this theme at various points as he shared memories from the first two decades of his freewheeling life as a folk singer, like his enchantment, one night in 1965 in a Cowgate pub, by a drummer who ignored the concept of bar lines but sustained a great cycle of rhythm:

There was none of the rigidity. Time was fluid. You can break it down any way you like. Conventionally you need to have a time signature, but time was flexible. When recently I've been asked what time a song is in, I've said "it's in one". There is no regularity to it at all. ... Guitar and voice are two things that I could meld together, but not in what people regard as 'correct timing'.

Like his music, Gaughan's life was highly irregular. Some of his bands lasted for years and others managed just a single session. He recalled periods when life was like an endless party: "There was a lot of dope being smoked in Edinburgh at that time, not entirely unconnected with us". Once he took a quarter ounce on stage in the Edinburgh Police Club. He avoided jail. He did not however avoid

Thatcher's 'retraining programme' for people on the dole, and was forced to train as a plumber in Plymouth. "I was a lousy plumber, a terrible plumber, I had absolutely no interest in being a plumber at all." When he got a cup of molten lead down his leg, his work became music and music alone.

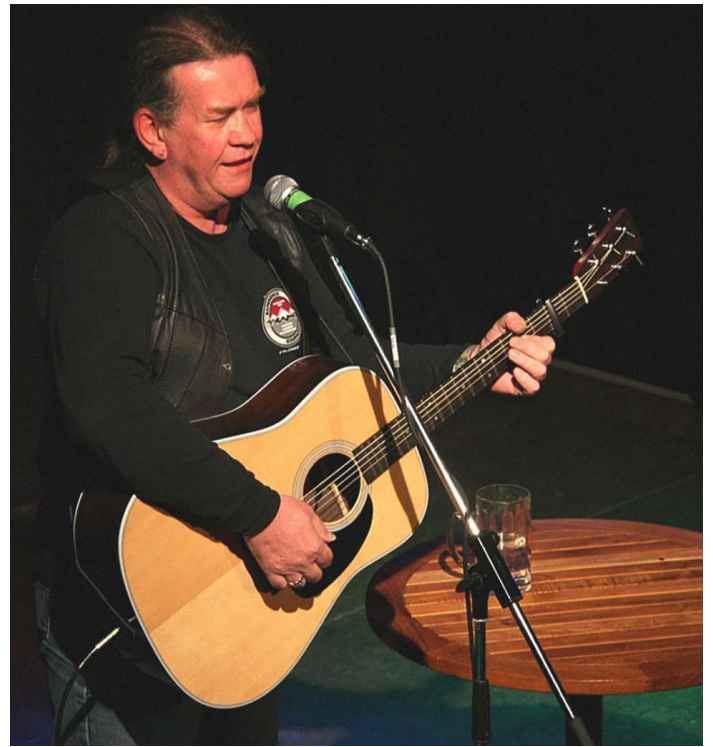
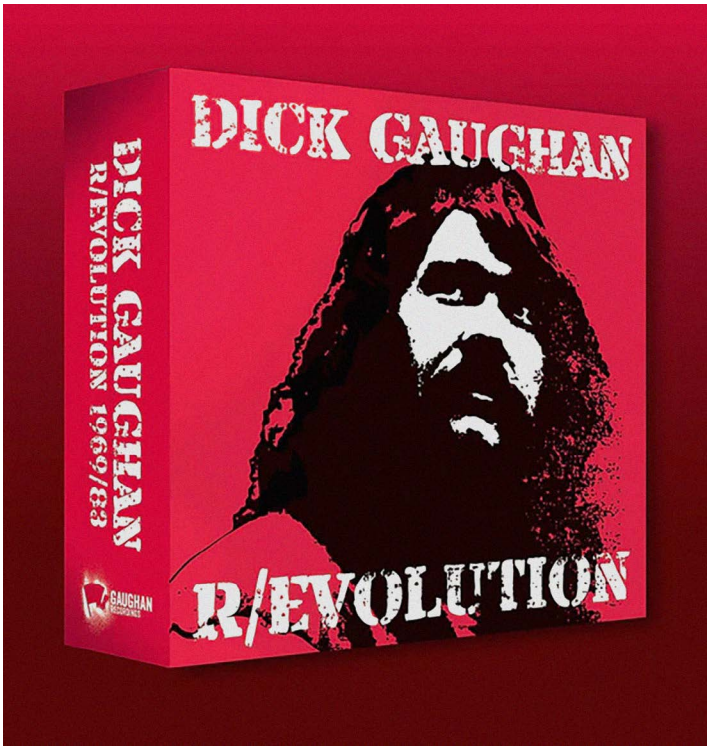
Everything Started with the Song

Musicianship demands irregularity and perseverance. Asked by host Lori Watson his advice for making a living from music, he said: "Preparation is the be all and end all. I would sing the song to myself endlessly, when I was wandering about. You have to know the song so well that you get beyond technique, so that you know it so well and what you're going to do with it. The song might normally be in four four time, but if you know it well enough you can break it down to where its emphases and stresses come through."

The theme returned again in answer to Watson's question about how long it took to learn a ballad. "As long as it took", he said. Whether performing or preparing, Dick Gaughan persistently refused to be tied down by time. The rejection of a rigid tempo brought to my mind E. P. Thompson's timeless essay about the emergence of clock-based time management and discipline in the early industrial revolution, when the working class were faced with new systems of control that imposed working hours and minutes, and faced the choice that still divides the left: to make demands within the system of working hours and minutes, or to reject rigid time management to defend the freer life. Today, most unions are yet to appreciate the freedom relished by gig workers who are unconstrained by working time, even in the face of uncertain and irregular days and the need to persevere or fall into poverty. The established unions might take a lesson from Dick Gaughan and the "fierce flame of freedom that burns in our hearts".

Two Different Kinds of Love Song

The tension between rigid and irregular time is one dilemma well-trodden by the folk whose work is song. Another is the question whether to appeal to the head or the heart. In 1979, after



Dick Gaughan's recently released 7 CD/DVD box set, *R/evolution*, contains 126 audio track and 2 ½ hours of video spanning 1970-2012.

Dick Gaughan at the *Rätsche* in Geislingen/Steige, Germany, 2006'
Credit: Markus Großmann, WikiCommons

Gaughan released *Handful of Earth*, an album still revered across the folk world, he turned his musical focus from interpreting to engaging. In this part of his story, he hinted that traditional musicians had only ever interpreted the world in various ways; but the point is to change it. In *A Different Kind of Love Song* Gaughan confronted the anti-communist culture of the Cold War in his own words. He articulated an ideology that saw class struggle and the fight for justice as an expression of love. He pleaded that people think again before blaming Russian folk for war. He lamented the sight of Nato's war-heads scarring the hills around Loch Long. And to those who asked why he sang about struggle and suffering, he explained that music should be no escape: "To help make the most people happy, I must make you even more sad and angry now".

An argument can justify emotion, but it cannot generate emotion, and that is the heart of the second tension Gaughan described when he answered a question I asked him. Two great radical singers of the sixties, Pete Seegar and Phil Ochs, made two different kinds of music. Ochs was conscious of this difference and pointed to it in 'Love Me I'm a Liberal', his song that satirises Americans who back radical politics until revolutionaries break the law, communists join the union, or Puerto Ricans move next door:

I vote for the Democratic Party
They want the UN to be strong.
I go to all the Pete Seegar concerts;
He sure gets me singing those songs.

Gaughan himself released a song twenty years ago, 'Whatever Happened', that addressed something similar:

Whatever happened to those songs about getting back to the garden?
Whatever happened to 'We shall overcome'?
Whatever happened to '1-2-3 what are we fighting for'?
When did you find yourself marching to the beat of the same old drum?

And so here was my question: Was the difference between Seeger's softer, singalong-socialism and the sharper revolutionary edge of Phil Ochs a conflict that impacted Dick at the time when both were on the folk scene? Who did he emulate more? Maybe I was hoping Dick would echo Phil Ochs' teasing of the hippie types, who like to think of themselves as activists but would never put their lives on the line.

But Dick rejected the idea of any conflict, and instead pointed to the real problem, that revolutionaries can appeal to the intellect, but emotion carries the people. "There was not any conflict between Ochs and Seegar. Seegar thought that you needed to involve people directly." Dick told a story, to make his point, about a gig with Pete Seegar in Denmark.

Pete started by singing 'Michael, Row the Boat ashore', a lively gospel all-join-in number with a kernel of a radical message, but hardly a song of the political left. (The recording on *The Essential Pete Seeger* will give you a sense of the happy-clappy atmosphere.) But although most of the Danish crowd didn't understand English very well, and certainly didn't understand the totality of it, they were all joining in by the second verse.

"If I did that people would piss themselves laughing", Dick said. Indeed, the Traverse audience laughed at the image. It is hard to picture Gaughan strumming a guitar and leading a gospel sing-along. But Dick ended with a lesson we need more than ever:

There's a place for singalong songs. It's not what I do, but Pete was superb at it. Phil Ochs, on the other hand, his songs were more analytic and journalistic. That's more like what I was doing. In his commentary, he did not go out of his way to get people to sing along. Pete was appealing to people on an emotional level. Phil was appealing to the intellect. But I didn't think there was any conflict between them.

A large, stylized red number '25' with a white outline. A small red flame is positioned above the top of the '5'. The background is a textured gradient of blue and brown.

25 years ago, our founding editor Jimmy Reid envisioned a forum of discussion for all voices of the left. As we embark on the next 25 years, we remain true to that purpose. Only with your support can we keep the fire alive.

Cailean Gallagher, Editor

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