

Scotland's pseudo-left groups cover for “just transition” fraud at Grangemouth refinery threatened with closure

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Pseudo-left groups in Scotland are attempting to tie workers at the Grangemouth oil refinery to the “just transition” or “workers’ transition” fraud proposed by the Unite trade union at the closure-threatened facility.

Both the Socialist Party Scotland (SPS) and the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) insist that the 400 jobs scheduled to be lost when the refinery closes in the second quarter of next year can be saved by the trade union apparatus pressing the Labour Party and the Scottish and UK governments to nationalise the facility.

According to Gary Clark writing on the SPS website September 25, nationalisation “would allow the continuation of oil refining while giving time and also funding for the necessary and rapid transition to alternative forms of use, including sustainable aviation fuels, low-carbon hydrogen and other alternatives.”

The SSP made the same claim September 16, with SSP National Trade Union Organiser Richie Venton writing, “the UK and Scottish governments need to be forced to intervene, take the site into public ownership, and tap into the know-how of these skilled workers to devise an alternative plan of green production.”

Venton referred to the 1976 Lucas Plan for alternative production in the then Lucas Aerospace arms firm. The Lucas plan gathered proposals from workers and shop stewards for various more socially useful products than weaponry. The plan, which took a year to compile, was favoured by then Secretary of State for Energy Tony Benn. It was a diversion to prevent a determined struggle by workers in defence of their living standards—then, as now, under attack by a Labour government.

The Lucas Plan was based on what was, supposedly,

possible under capitalism. Interest in it has revived recently somewhat in the face of the accelerating climate emergency. The plan held up the illusion that, presented with rational arguments and good will, capitalism will agree to restrain its essential drive for the maximisation of private profit and agree to save the world.

This is proposed in 2024, with capitalism in the midst of a world war for resources and geopolitical influence with live fronts in Ukraine targeting Russia and the Middle East targeting Iran.

Venton notes that, even in 1976, the Lucas Plan was blocked by capitalist employers. He calls for “the STUC [Scottish Trades Union Congress], and every union to spearhead a fight for democratic public ownership of all energy, and a worker-led plan for rapid transition to clean, green energy production.”

The notion that the STUC, Unite, et al, might promote genuine workers’ control of the oil, or any other, industry, either in the UK or tiny Scotland, is an absurd fraud which rejects every lesson of the last century. Workers’ control of industry can only come about as a product of the working class seizing political power and carrying through the democratic reorganisation of the economy in Britain and internationally for need not profit.

Under conditions of global crisis, with millions of jobs imperiled in industry after industry, the trade unions long ago completed their integration into corporate management. The pseudo-left’s various “demands” give cover to the unions’ own “just transition” project, which serves primarily to maintain the trade unions’ restraining grip on the class struggle.

The Just Transition Partnership was formed in 2016

between the Scottish Trades Union Congress, the Communication Workers Union, Unite, Unison, the Public and Commercial Services Union and the University and College Union, along with environmental groups and the left nationalist thinktank, Common Weal. The group claimed that such a transition would create a “modern low-carbon economy in ways which protect workers’ livelihoods, create a new industrial base and deliver a fairer Scotland.” The partnership spoke fairly explicitly for sections of the Scottish bourgeoisie seeking a means to maximise their opportunities from new “green” industries.

Grangemouth is a case study in the bankruptcy of the entire approach.

Owner Petroineos, a joint project of billionaire Jim Ratcliffe’s INEOS and PetroChina, aims to replace the century old refinery with an import terminal which will employ a mere 100 workers. Nearly 3,000 workers are predicted to be impacted in the surrounding petrochemical complex and in the local area, pitched into insecurity or unemployment.

From the first announcement of the closure threat, in 2023, to its confirmation last month, Unite has promoted the illusion of a responsibly negotiated “just transition” to avoid any mobilisation of Grangemouth workers’ industrial strength, which could make the refinery the focal point for a broader struggle in the working class.

Over 200,000 workers, including some 30,000 working offshore, are dependent on the oil extraction, processing and distribution industries in the UK alone. Many of these are based on the declining output from the oil and gas fields in the North Sea. Industry figures show how, due to exhaustion of resources, employment in the sector has already fallen from 441,000 jobs in 2013 to 214,000 in 2023.

In Grangemouth, employment in the refinery has fallen from 1,200 in 2008 to around 500 today. The collective fear of employers, the government and the trade unions alike is that accelerating job losses, collapsing wages and general social stress may trigger an escalation of class tensions which the trade unions will be unable to control.

This is why, writing in Stalinist *Morning Star*, Unite’s Scottish Secretary Derek Thomson compared the current crisis to the early 1980s, which saw the shift from coal planned by Margaret Thatcher’s

Conservatives provoke the bitter miners’ strike of 1984-85, ultimately defeated thanks to its isolation by the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party.

“Unite firmly believes,” he writes, “that new green jobs can be created with a coherent and properly funded industrial strategy with workers at the forefront. The glaring problem is that both governments don’t seem to have any strategy.

“It’s crystal clear to us that jobs must be protected during the decarbonisation process. We have to manage this process in an organised way to ensure that we avoid the industrial destruction which was unleashed during the 1980s.”

The current crisis is far deeper than in the 1980s. Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham gave a hint of her concerns and made limited criticism of the Labour government. She also draped herself in the Scottish flag to divide workers in Scotland from their class brothers and sisters in England and Wales.

Graham told a Unite delegate conference in Dundee, “We are calling for a workers’ transition, a workers’ transition, that will not allow Labour or the [Scottish National Party] to effectively consign Scottish communities to working-class wastelands. Friends, where are the politicians? All the politicians in Scotland are missing in action. Anas Sarway, John Swinney, where are you? Where are your voices? Defend Scotland, defend Scottish jobs, no ifs not buts.”

Adding the word “workers” does not change her proposal’s character, beyond reminding the Unite delegates and stewards that they need to be fully and on-message if the class struggle is going to be contained.

Grangemouth workers seeking a means to defend their jobs are posed with taking their struggle out of the hands of the Unite apparatus, forming their own rank-and-file committee to discuss and organise an independent struggle based on turning to the broadest sections of the working class in Britain and internationally.



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