

Scottish National Party's Nicola Sturgeon in talks over fracking

By Steve James
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A factor in the Scottish National Party's (SNP) recent electoral wipe-out of the Labour Party was the party's posturing as an opponent of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking.

The oil and gas extraction technique involves pumping millions of gallons of water, laced with numerous toxic chemicals, deep underground at high pressure. Swathes of rural America now host hundreds of thousands of wells.

Fracking is notorious for the threat it poses to ground water supplies. Numerous cases have been reported internationally of water supplies being contaminated with the chemicals released by the fracking process and by methane released from cracked wells. Fracking also releases gigantic volumes of carbon dioxide and methane, greenhouse gases which contribute to global warming.

In the months prior to the May 2015 election, the SNP government in Edinburgh introduced a moratorium on fracking in Scotland. SNP members campaigned for election adorned with anti-fracking badges pledging a "FrackFree Scotland."

INEOS, owned by Swiss based billionaire Jim Ratcliffe, control the large Grangemouth oil refinery and chemical plant near Falkirk and supplies most of Scotland's petrol supplies. In 2013, INEOS locked out the entire oil refinery workforce by shutting down operations to force the closure of 1,350 workers' final salary pension scheme. It also demanded a pay freeze and reduced redundancy terms to keep the plant open. Trade union UNITE capitulated within 24 hours and conceded the victimisation of their local official, Stephen Deans.

In late 2014, INEOS announced plans to spend £640 million on developing fracking in Britain. The company hired executives from the US shale oil

industry and claimed that residents in villages near fracking sites would soon be millionaires. The company bought 51 percent of the fracking rights of the PEDL 133 licence block in the Midland Valley of Scotland, an area amounting to 729 square miles. The company had already explained that its future plans for both its Grangemouth and Runcorn sites depended on fracked natural gas, initially imported from the US.

Overall, the Midland Valley, which covers the entire central belt, is estimated to contain around 6 billion barrels of oil and 80 trillion cubic feet of gas, although only a fraction of this could conceivably be recovered.

Early this year, Scottish Energy Minister Fergus Ewing announced a moratorium on planning consent for fracking projects. The moratorium was hailed by environmental groups as, in the words of a Friends of the Earth spokesperson, a "huge victory for the communities, individuals and groups who have been campaigning to stop this dirty industry in Scotland."

Ewing told the Scottish parliament he wanted a "national debate ... characterised by examining the evidence."

On the face of it, the moratorium was a blow to INEOS. The company had previously opposed a moratorium and an aggressive response would be consistent with the approach displayed during the pensions struggle with its own workforce. But INEOS were all smiles. A statement blandly claimed the company "understands the importance of public consultation" and welcomed the Scottish government decision "to manage an evidence based approach."

Industry body UK Onshore Oil and Gas CEO, Ken Cronin, echoed INEOS, stating, "We recognise that the general public have concerns ... and welcome this opportunity to present the facts to the Scottish people."

The company and industry clearly felt confident that,

based on the US experience, it could trample over public concern and opposition with a combination of bribery, threats, PR and official reports.

A more concrete explanation for INEOS' sanguine response emerged in April. It seems that Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon met with INEOS owner Jim Ratcliffe on the day her government's moratorium was announced. Knowledge of the visit only emerged through a Freedom of Information request.

Commenting on the visit in Holyrood, Labour MSP Lewis MacDonald asked, "Did Nicola Sturgeon meet INEOS to tell them not to worry about the moratorium, it would only apply until after the next Holyrood election, and in the meantime they could explore for fracking opportunities anywhere in Scotland that took their fancy?"

MacDonald's point, though made to score points against the SNP, was confirmed by Dr. Richard Dixon of environmental group Friends of the Earth Scotland. Dixon told the *Herald*, "INEOS plan 1,400 wells across Scotland and seem to be carrying on as if there was no moratorium."

The Scottish government have to date refused to release details either of the discussion between Sturgeon and Ratcliffe or of the correspondence between INEOS and the Scottish government in the months preceding the meeting. Instead a spokesman obfuscated that the meeting was "part of the government's regular proactive release of ministerial engagements."

Conclusions on the nature of the discussion can safely be drawn.

Sturgeon and the SNP's alliance with INEOS to exploit fracking in Scotland, regardless of deep and well-grounded fears over the dangers of unrestricted use of the technology for profit, is entirely consistent with their class character. The SNP is a right-wing, tax-cutting, pro-business outfit seeking to maximise the profits of its business and upper-middle class backers at the expense of the working class. For these interests, building relations with INEOS is essential, not only for fracking, but for the continual extraction of whatever resources remain to be extracted from the rapidly declining North Sea oilfields. It is also a signal from Sturgeon that, where the interests of large Scottish based concerns are involved, the SNP will do whatever it takes to ensure the corporations get their way.

From time to time, purely for show and to obscure their consistent orientation to the business and financial oligarchy, the SNP adopts a pose of concern over the day-to-day interests of working people. The SNP is assisted in this by the pseudo-left tendencies, such as the Radical Independence Convention (RIC), the Scottish Socialist Party, Solidarity, Commonweal, etc., who present the SNP's project of Scottish independence as progressive. These organisations function as little more than external divisions of the SNP.

In line with this, the pseudo-left intermittently become agitated about fracking. The RIC held a conference earlier in the year on the matter, billed under the organisation's pro-independence People's Vow, which "states our firm opposition to all forms of Unconventional Gas Extraction (UGE) in Scotland."

Subsequent coverage in, for example, the nationalist bulletin board *Commonspace.scot* has echoed alarm over INEOS spending on expensive pro-fracking PR stunts, but offered only the friendliest of criticism of the SNP on the subject.

This is of piece with the pseudo-left groups' near-silence over Sturgeon's amicable chats with British Prime Minister David Cameron, the queen, and her reassurance delivered to the *Financial Times* that Scotland was aiming to be a "vibrant business base". Most cynically, the pseudo-left have to date avoided any serious comment on Sturgeon's offer to be a "key ally of the United States" with regard to war and foreign policy. The only article on the matter in *Commonspace.scot* headlined by describing Sturgeon's foreign policy comments as merely "raising eyebrows".

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