

No to the European Union—Yes to the United Socialist States of Europe

By Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
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The U-turn by Prime Minister Tony Blair in accepting the need for a referendum on the proposed constitution for the European Union (EU) has provoked a political crisis in Britain and Europe.

His call was made without any reference to his cabinet immediately on his return from Washington on April 19, after having rejected such a move only three weeks before. It was an attempt by a weakened government to placate right-wing critics in Britain. Blair faced the threat of a withdrawal of the backing of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation and the prospect of the Conservatives making a referendum demand the centre of their election campaign in the local and European elections on June 10, and the general election expected for May 2005. He therefore accepted a referendum in principle, while making clear that this would not take place until well after the general election.

Blair still hopes to convince the bourgeoisie in Britain and his allies in Washington that he can play a key role in shaping Europe in their interests. But irrespective of his aims, Blair's announcement risks bringing to a head conflicts within the bourgeoisie that he has sought to stifle.

It is imperative that the working class determines its own independent attitude to the fundamental question of European integration.

The European population has every right to decide the continent's fate. But this cannot be done in a referendum, whose politically-loaded terms will be decided by the Blair government and its counterparts.

Workers must be politically hostile to both sides of the official debate on the European Union. They have no interest in supporting any aspect of the EU project, which is being carried out entirely at the behest of big business and the banks. In the event of a referendum being held on any aspect of EU consolidation, therefore, the working class must vote "no." But workers must also be implacably hostile to the official "no" camp that is dominated by sections of the bourgeoisie who are just as reactionary and anti-democratic as those leading the "yes" campaign.

The progressive and necessary task of unifying Europe and overcoming its divisions into antagonistic nation states is the responsibility of the working class itself. This requires the development of a political movement against all sections of capital and its market-driven EU agenda, for the creation of the United Socialist States of Europe.

The growing conflict within the ruling class over European integration raises grave dangers for working people throughout the continent. At its heart it is driven forward by the escalating rivalries between the US and the major European powers. These issues are being played out in Britain because it has become the focus of this incendiary global conflict.

Blair's government is hostile to any democratic control by the electorate. Just as he went to war against Iraq in defiance of the popular will, so Blair would also have endorsed the EU constitution without reference to the views of the British people.

His retreat was made in the face of a determined campaign led by the Murdoch press, at the cost of angering his European partners whom he never consulted and thrusting him into a fight he never wanted.

Blair is being moved by events, rather than shaping them. He is seeking to manoeuvre under conditions where his strategy since coming to power seven years ago is in tatters.

During the entire postwar era, British imperialism has sought to maintain a world role for itself based on an acceptance of US hegemony. By offering itself as Washington's most trusted ally both internationally and within Europe, Britain has been able to punch above its weight and to strengthen its hand against the other major European powers. Blair attempted to continue this perspective, but under dramatically altered international conditions. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, and particularly since the coming to power of the Bush administration, the dominant sections of the US bourgeoisie have broken with the policy of compromise with the European powers and Japan through such mechanisms as the United Nations and NATO.

In a desperate effort to offset its economic crisis, US imperialism is seeking to reorganise the world under its undisputed hegemony through an explosion of military conquest, directed not only against the smaller countries such as Iraq, but also against America's major imperialist rivals.

Blair's strategy has been based on an accommodation with this explosion of US aggression, even at the risk of alienating his European partners, as he did over Iraq. But he nevertheless considered that this stand was entirely compatible with his intention to place Britain "at the heart of Europe," epitomised by his claim to be a bridge between the US and Europe and a moderating influence on American unilateralism.

Blair calculated that British participation in the EU project was both necessary and desirable. It was his hope that he could continue to utilise US influence to subvert the dominance of Germany and France and to ensure that Europe developed as a loose free-trade zone that did not conflict with the transatlantic alliance. Indeed Britain's appeal to Washington was precisely as a trustworthy ally in Europe.

Since conceding that a referendum should be held, Blair has mounted a defence of Britain's role in Europe that is designed to undermine the strident anti-European stand of the Conservatives. But he has done so by pitching himself as a determined advocate of British sovereignty, the transatlantic alliance and a vision of the continent free of expensive welfare provisions, deregulated and open to US penetration.

Blair argues that Britain can lead the accession countries in Eastern Europe in a pro-US campaign to reshape the continent. He told the April 30 edition of Murdoch's *Times*, that "Enlargement should reinforce liberal economies and the alliance with the US."

He argued that the East European states "share the same vision for Europe's future direction," as they were "determined to preserve this independence within the EU," believe in a "liberal, competitive economy" and, perhaps most importantly, are "keenly aware of the role that the United States has played in helping them to achieve their freedom and are determined to maintain its partnership with the EU."

Blair's vision for Europe echoes the efforts of Washington to curtail the power of France and Germany, and to assert America's role as a

European power by playing off what US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's referred to as "new Europe" in a struggle against "old Europe."

That Blair makes such an appeal confirms the extent to which the dominant voices within Washington have broken with America's old policy of supporting European integration as a means of stabilising the continent and opposing Soviet expansion, in favour of ensuring that Europe remains politically divided and incapable of advancing itself as a serious rival to US might. Should Blair win the support he seeks from the bourgeoisie in Britain and the US, in the long run this would do nothing to lessen inter-imperialist antagonisms.

Tensions between America and Europe, and within Europe itself, that were manifest at the time of the invasion of Iraq have only been worsened by the difficulties facing the US-led occupation.

The growing national resistance faced by US and British troops, together with the ever-worsening scandal over torture and human rights abuses, will not signal a retreat by Washington. The Bush administration is determined to succeed in its efforts to subjugate the Middle East, and in this it has the full support of the Democrats. They are demanding firstly of Britain that it despatch thousands of extra troops and for the European powers and the United Nations to support the so-called "transfer of sovereignty" to Washington's puppet regime on June 30.

In Europe, however, there is mounting reluctance to become embroiled in what is shaping up to be a second Vietnam. That reluctance has been strengthened by the fall of Washington's other major European ally, Spain's José María Aznar, as a result of mass anti-war sentiment.

When Spain's incoming social democratic government declared that it would withdraw its troops from Iraq, this prompted ferocious denunciations by the US media, slandering the Spanish people as "appeasers" and "cowards."

On every front the US is responding to its crisis with a reckless offensive. In Iraq it has stepped up its violent repression of the civilian population. And abandoning all attempts at impartiality in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, President George W. Bush ripped up the so-called "road map" peace accord jointly negotiated with the EU and embraced Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to unilaterally seize most of the West Bank.

Such actions only intensify Blair's difficulties, but he is determined to maintain his alliance with Washington at all costs. Blair acts as the political flunkie of a financial oligarchy, of whom Murdoch is only the most high profile representative. This layer views trade with Europe as only one area of interest that is subordinate to their ability to exploit the resources of the entire world. They look to America's military might as the primary guarantor of their success in despoiling the planet and regard the US economic model of deregulation and an absence of welfare provision as their template for social relations everywhere.

To the extent that this ruling layer is concerned with a particularly defined interest of British imperialism, it is its strength as a financial power: Britain as the largest overseas investor in the US, as a safe tax haven and the pound as a secondary alternative to the dollar. Moreover, Britain's geopolitical interests are also global. It cannot afford to be left out of the major redivision of the world that the US is leading, particularly in the oil-rich regions of the Middle East and Eurasia.

Hence the dominance of this pro-US wing within the British bourgeoisie. They view any strengthening of the homogeneity of European capital as a political threat. The only aspects of the EU agenda they are prepared to endorse are the elimination of all restrictions on capital mobility and the imposition of measures that deregulate the labour market so as to ensure the maximum exploitation of the working class. They are for a single market, but a politically disunited Europe. If Blair does not give them that, they have made clear they will ditch him and champion the Tories instead.

For this reason Blair has determinedly faced off all attacks on his alliance with Washington, with his spokesman declaring, "It is obvious that there is a desire—reflected in the media—to try and drive divisions between us and the US. And that is not going to be allowed to happen."

Blair can do nothing that will alienate the oligarchs because he has no other social base for his policies. Indeed, his readiness to translate the demands of the super-rich into government policy has succeeded in deepening the isolation of his government from the broad mass of working people.

As the situation in Iraq has deteriorated and Blair's unpopularity has deepened, even his most sycophantic backers have begun openly questioning the wisdom of his strategy and his own future as prime minister. There are reports that only a minority of ministers are now prepared to back Blair as party leader should Labour win a third term in office and that some are considering moving against him prior to next year's general election. Writing in the normally fiercely pro-Blair *Guardian*, Polly Toynbee concluded, "there is no good news anywhere on the horizon. Not in Iraq, America or Europe... When Blair addresses one of the wicked issues, he begins to seem more like part of the problem than the solution."

Amongst Blair's critics there is a belief that he has endangered Britain's interests by too closely aligning himself with the Bush administration. Many are insistent that it is vital that the prime minister now distances himself from Washington and tries to check American unilateralism by aligning himself with the more critical stand taken by Germany, France and the new Spanish government.

Despite the level of concerns expressed, however, there is something impotent and desperate about such entreaties. Those suggesting a closer alignment with Europe do so only in an effort to moderate and curb the worst excesses of the US administration. Few believe an alliance with Europe can achieve more than this, given the extent of America's military supremacy and the absence of any ability or willingness on the part of the European powers to seriously challenge Washington's hegemony. Amongst those who are raising the possibility of Blair being replaced, there is virtual unanimity that the only possible alternative is Chancellor Gordon Brown, who has reacted by stepping up his own Euro-sceptical rhetoric and holding a number of meetings with Murdoch.

To date the response of the European bourgeoisie to America's unilateralist turn has been to seek some form of accommodation. The EU has lent its backing for Bush and Sharon's offensive on the West Bank and is actively seeking some agreement on Iraq through the mechanism of the UN. Blair is only the most consistent appeaser with respect to US militarism. Europe, together with Japan and China, is also continuing to bankroll America's huge debts—never once threatening any serious disciplinary or retaliatory action against it.

This poses the European bourgeoisie with a strategic dilemma. Every concession to Washington only whets its appetite for more. The only possible counterweight to complete subordination available to the European bourgeoisie is to strive to integrate the continent, while building up its own military capabilities.

The draft EU constitution represents precisely such an attempt to consolidate Europe as a unified economic, political and military challenger to the US. The draft proposes giving the EU "exclusive competence" over monetary policy in the euro zone and the role of coordinating economic, employment and social policies. This would be a recipe for major attacks on welfare provisions in order to pay for tax breaks and other incentives to business.

Internationally the draft constitution sets out to grant the EU powers covering "all areas of foreign policy and all questions relating to the Union's security, including the progressive framing of a common defence policy, which might lead to a common defence." This is a clear attempt to establish Europe as a military force independent of the US and NATO,

replete with its own command structure and foreign minister.

It is this which explains the insistence by Blair and Brown that they will not sign up to any treaty which does not guarantee a national veto on tax and fiscal policy and ensures that the EU has no right to determine a common stance on foreign policy, social security and defence. Should Germany and France concede to such demands, it would eviscerate the EU constitution. Hence the angry reaction by Paris and Berlin to Blair's referendum decision. Even before his u-turn, the possibility of a two-track Europe was being raised—a continental version of the “coalition of the willing” led by Germany and France that would exclude those countries that failed to ratify the constitution. After meeting with Blair, French President Jacques Chirac raised the possibility of including a “ratify or quit” clause into the constitution.

It is questionable as to how far the European bourgeoisie will proceed on a course that threatens to bring it into direct conflict with the US. In the final analysis, all they are seeking is to strengthen their own hand at the negotiating tables and secure a greater share in the ongoing efforts to divide up the world's markets and resources.

The only basis on which to oppose the drive to militarism and colonial conquest being spearheaded by Washington, and to defend social gains and democratic rights, is through a combined political offensive of the European working class.

The one goal shared by all sections of the bourgeoisie is the desire to destroy workers' living standards and democratic rights. The most enthusiastic advocates of the EU and its staunchest critics within the ruling elites agree that Europe's still relatively extensive welfare provisions must be dismantled, the state sector privatised and all restrictions on the activities of the transnational corporations eliminated.

It is this which dictates the efforts by Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder to completely refashion Germany's economic and social policies by 2010, and the strivings throughout Europe to eliminate pensions and other social benefits that have led to mass demonstrations in opposition.

The accession of the Eastern European countries—where wages are as little as a fifth of their level in Western Europe, social welfare is practically non-existent, and corporate tax is minimal—will be used to drive down wages and conditions throughout Europe. Accession will inaugurate a combined offensive of governments and the major corporations, which threaten relocation if wage cuts, speed ups and job losses are not accepted. Far from levelling up the conditions facing workers in the countries formerly run by the Stalinist regimes, workers in the west will see their conditions levelled down.

Workers in Britain must be hostile to all attempts to sow divisions between them and their brothers and sisters in Germany, France and throughout Europe. The EU's opponents within the bourgeoisie have attempted to dress up their agenda in democratic clothes and to utilise patriotic rhetoric in order to deceive and disorient working people. And they have had some success in manipulating the legitimate grievances felt towards the EU's undemocratic structures—especially under conditions where the introduction of the euro was accompanied everywhere by massive price hikes. But their road is not towards democracy, but towards war and repression in alliance with Washington and on behalf of a predatory oligarchy.

It would be equally false to place any confidence in the EU as offering a progressive alternative, or even a check on US military aggression and the free market model associated with American capitalism.

European integration is not simply the inevitable objective process that proceeds in accord with economic logic, as it is portrayed by the majority of the governments and media on the continent. From its inception the EU project has been determined by the economic and political requirements of the dominant sections of the European bourgeoisie. Under conditions of relative social peace at home and the friendly competition with the US that dominated the post World War II period, this project was portrayed as

benign and progressive—as a means of overcoming the terrible national divisions that had twice plunged Europe into all-out war and a means of securing economic development by creating a large and efficient market that could in turn provide the basis for developing Europe's extensive network of social provisions.

Today this seems like a distant memory. Under capitalism European unification means the domination of the continent by the strongest imperialist powers. Its aim is still to create a vast internal market, but one with an abundant supply of cheap labour and without expensive social provisions that can end all restraints on the exploitation of Europe's people by the major corporations.

If the old professions of a “social Europe” ring hollow, then so too does the claim of the European powers to be pursuing a purely defensive military policy within the NATO and UN framework. The fall of the Soviet Union has not brought about a decline in militarism, but the reverse. Appeals to pacifism have given way to an attempt by Europe to strengthen its own military capabilities so that it can assume the role at least of a junior partner in the US campaign to reimpose colonial-style subjugation of the world's peoples.

The only means of uniting Europe in a progressive and harmonious fashion—that would genuinely make it a powerful counter-pole to American imperialism—is unification from below. The alternative to the Europe of the big banks and corporations is not a retreat into national isolation, but the forging of a political movement for a Europe shaped by the fundamental social and economic requirements of the working class on the basis of a revolutionary socialist policy.

The United Socialist States of Europe is the only conceivable alternative to the terrible prospect of further wars of colonial conquest, social devastation and right-wing reaction that is threatened by the bourgeoisie of Europe and America.

Bitter experience has shown that opposition to the warmongering of US imperialism can be developed only in conflict with Europe's governments and institutions, which have their own predatory military ambitions. The working class of Europe must unite their forces in recognition of the irreconcilable clash of interests between the European and American working class on the one side, and American and European imperialism on the other.

To fight for this socialist and internationalist perspective, working people need a new leadership. The Socialist Equality Party in Britain and our sister Partei fur Soziale Gleichheit (PSG) in Germany are dedicated to the construction of such a leadership throughout Europe, as sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International. We urge all our readers to support the campaign being waged by the PSG on the basis of this perspective in the forthcoming European elections.



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