

What attitude should British workers take to the May 5 Alternative Vote referendum?

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On May 5, voters in the UK are being asked to cast their ballots in a national referendum on whether to move from a first-past-the-post electoral system to one based on the Alternative Vote (AV).

If the referendum were not timed to coincide with regional elections in Scotland and Wales, and local elections in much of England, turnout would be miniscule. As it is, most estimate that half the electorate will register a vote on what is being presented as one of the most significant changes in electoral procedure since the extension of the franchise to women in 1928.

Such widespread indifference and mistrust are entirely justified. The referendum on AV is an exercise in political cynicism that emphasizes the contempt in which Britain's ruling elite holds the electorate.

It was Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg, now the chief advocate of a "yes" vote on AV, who described it when first mooted as a "miserable little compromise". This is an understatement.

It is, in fact, difficult to conceive of anything other than this squalid backroom manoeuvre that could possibly have allowed for the present first-past-the-post system to be presented in a positive light.

The AV referendum was—with apologies to Abraham Lincoln—conceived in ignominy and dedicated to the proposition that all men should be made more unequal.

In the aftermath of the May 2010 General Election, Clegg and other top Liberal Democrats were in closed session discussing the formation of a coalition government with the Conservative Party, which had failed to achieve a clear majority.

The supposed price extracted by Clegg for this agreement was a referendum on AV. This was in flagrant contradiction to the Liberal Democrats' official position supporting a system based on proportional representation, which they had claimed before the election, would be the

deal breaker in any coalition.

In reality, the Liberal Democrats and the Tories were brought together by far more pressing concerns—the demand by big business that a government of sufficient numbers be formed so as to impose savage austerity measures against the working class.

A secondary consideration was that AV would, if passed, benefit the Liberal Democrats.

Under AV, candidates can be marked in order of preference. If no candidate achieves a 50 percent majority or more with first preference votes, then the second preferences of the least successful candidates are redistributed until a clear majority is achieved.

Every survey of previous election results suggests that AV would not have altered their outcome in terms of which party formed the government. The Liberal Democrats would, however, have secured more seats.

Even as they claim AV is more democratic than the current set-up, many of its advocates, above all the Liberal Democrats themselves, see it as a way of enshrining the type of coalition politics arrived at in 2010. This is considered vital given that both the Conservatives and Labour are no longer able to command an overall majority in elections.

Just as crucial in this calculation is that AV works against smaller parties that would benefit from proportional representation, a more democratic procedure.

The support for AV by Labour leader Ed Miliband and around half of the Parliamentary Labour Party, is an appeal for future collaboration with the Liberal Democrats and little else.

The "No" campaign is led and largely financed by the Tories, who never wanted electoral reform in the first place. They are joined by the rest of the Labour leadership who see their own interests as best represented by the continuation of first-past-the-post and do not want the Liberal Democrats to benefit from their future misfortune.

