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

Socialist Equality Party (UK)
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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.

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Both the Tory and Labour wing of the "No" campaign argue that coalition governments are unstable and should only be resorted to as a necessary evil.

There is not the faintest trace of principled considerations in either camp.

The main appeal of the "Yes" camp is that a successful outcome would represent a defeat for the Conservatives that would undermine the coalition and make possible a future realignment of the Liberal Democrats.

To the extent that this could have any popular resonance, it requires that the Liberal Democrats still be seen as a progressive alternative to the Tories. There is no such sentiment. Clegg and his party are seen as political opportunists of the worst stripe, who ditched every pre-election promise to defend health, education and welfare to sign up to the largest cuts in public spending since the Hungry Thirties.

Labour, too, has no credibility as an opponent of austerity. It was the Brown government that used £1 trillion of public funds in bailouts and guarantees to rescue the banks and City of London in 2008. Labour began the cuts in public spending and has made clear it would continue them were it returned to office.

Any combination of these parties secured by any system of voting is hostile to the basic interests of millions of working people. Both options on offer are inherently undemocratic, designed to perpetuate a political system that actively excludes and works against the broad mass of the population.

Behind the pseudo-democratic exercise of a "popular" referendum, the real decisions shaping political, social and economic life are made by a handful of millionaires and billionaires who dictate the agenda of their servants in parliament.

Contrast the heat that has been generated within the political elite over something that might impact on their own careers, with the unanimity over measures that are plunging millions into poverty.

The cuts now being imposed are projected to mean that, by 2015, public expenditure in the United Kingdom will be lower than in the United States.

This is not a "fiscal readjustment". It is a social counter-revolution.

The issue before workers and youth is not tinkering with the electoral system.

It is not mere coincidence that paralleling the referendum is the ongoing criminalization of any form of political dissent. The last months have seen the repeated mobilization of thousands of riot police in response to protests over cuts and closures. This culminated in the pre-emptive arrests prior to the royal wedding of people who had committed no crime whatsoever, but who were suspected of disagreeing with this grotesque public display of wealth and privilege.

These developments emphasize that the struggle for democratic rights is bound up with a root and branch change in the economic and social order.

In its manifesto for local council elections, the Socialist Equality Party made the observation: "The uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and throughout the region were only the start of an emerging global opposition to regimes that act solely in the interests of the super rich. The mood among workers in Britain is no less angry or combative. But here too workers confront the same problems of leadership and organisation.

"The political system in the UK is just as unresponsive to the needs of working people as those in Tunis or Cairo. All the official parties in Britain function as the instruments of a corrupt oligarchy.

"Working people need their own answer to the crisis and their own socialist leadership."

There can be no democracy worthy of the name while grotesque levels of private wealth are wielded as a weapon against society, when millions have no say over how their workplaces are run and a handful of corporate chiefs and city speculators can strip them of their livelihoods overnight.

The SEP stands for the development of a mass political movement to bring down the coalition and replace it with a workers' government that will reorganize economic and political life based on the principle of social equality.

The only vote worth registering on May 5 is for our candidates, Simon Walker in Walkley, Sheffield and Robert Skelton in Ardwick, Manchester.

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