

Labour and UK Independence Party debate in Manchester

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In their joint campaign in the European Elections, the Socialist Equality Party (UK) and Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG) in Germany have stressed that neither the “pro”- nor “anti”-European Union stance of the various big-business parties represents a way forward for working people.

Claims that the European Union (EU) represents a mechanism for overcoming the national antagonisms that twice in the twentieth century plunged Europe into war are a fraud. Draconian austerity measures in country after country, coupled with its utilisation of the Western-backed putsch in Kiev to instigate war-mongering against Russia, prove that the EU is a tool of big business and a prime source of military aggression.

No less reactionary are the anti-EU campaigns of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), Alternative for Germany party, and the National Front in France. These are far-right parties whose opposition to the EU has nothing to do with its role in instigating growing poverty and national divisions. Rather, they speak for sections of the ruling elite in each country who seek to improve the competitiveness of their respective capitalist economies through beggar thy neighbour policies, and a no less dramatic increase in the exploitation of their “own” working class.

Both these positions were on display at an April 16 debate in Manchester entitled “The EU: Time for a sharp exit strategy?” The debate was organised by New Economy, which promotes business in North West England, and was attended by mainly well-heeled businessmen, Labour councillors, trade union officials and aspiring entrepreneurs.

Speaking in favour of the EU was Angeliki Stogia, a Manchester Labour councillor who is standing for the party in the European elections in the North West constituency.

Stogia, who came from Greece to Manchester as a child, was full of praise for the EU, claiming that it was responsible for peace and prosperity and is the guarantor of workers’ rights, such as a 40-hour week, sick pay, holidays and consumer protection.

She never mentioned the catastrophe inflicted on her home country by EU-dictated austerity measures that have resulted in a disastrous retrogression in social conditions. Health care has all but disintegrated in Greece, while education and other essential social programmes have been gutted and unemployment driven up to 27 percent, or 58 percent for those under 25.

Nor did she mention the British Labour Party’s pledge that it will continue with the coalition government’s austerity measures and its filthy campaign to scapegoat migrant workers for the social crisis caused by the largest spending cuts since the 1930s.

Stogia also did not comment on reports that in addressing a Unite Against Fascism conference last year, she had blamed the growth of the fascist Golden Dawn in Greece on immigrants themselves, whom she apparently described as “a threat to public health.”

Instead, she insisted that the EU was essential in order to help Britain negotiate with and compete against the United States, China and other countries.

Steven Woolfe of the UKIP argued against the EU. Describing himself as a former Labour Party campaigner, Woolfe claimed to be standing up for “freedom” and “democracy” against the “political elite”.

Not the financial elite, however. Woolfe, a barrister, is the UKIP’s City of London spokesman, where he is able to draw on his experience as a legal adviser for Mercury Jove Advisers, which advises hedge funds,

banks, property developers and oil companies. He is also head of the UKIP's Black & Minority Ethnic Association and previously stood for election as Manchester police commissioner.

Woolfe presented himself as the champion of small business against the larger corporations, which he complained were the sole beneficiaries of the EU. One of Woolfe's remits is to investigate the impact of EU regulation on smaller companies for the UKIP.

While criticising the growth of unemployment and poverty in Greece and Spain caused by EU austerity policies, he counterpoised "free trade agreements" and an end to "regulation" as the supposed remedy.

Strikingly, Woolfe also insisted that there should be no more "left/right" divide over such questions, citing so-called "lefts" Labour veteran Tony Benn and Bob Crow, former leader of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (both recently deceased), for their opposition to the EU. In the same vein, he name-checked new Trades Union Congress president Mohammed Taj, who had agreed there "is no fiscal benefit to the UK from migration."

Alongside Stogia in favour of the EU was Juergen Maier, managing director at Siemens UK and Ireland.

Maier, who is originally from Austria, cited the reduction in business regulations as the prime benefit of the EU, along with significant subsidies to Siemens, including help with Research & Development.

Withdrawal from the EU would mean "tariffs would go up 10-30 percent. I would have to drop wages, increase productivity, the government deflates the currency (which would cut living standards) or we close down our 13 factories. The quickest way would be to cut wages", he said.

"The UK receives the biggest share of inward investment. It's seen as a good way to trade with Europe. Don't ruin it", he concluded.

Backing Woolfe was Matthew Elliot, chief executive officer of Business for Britain, which describes itself as an "independent, non-partisan campaign involving people from all parties and none, run by business for business" and committed to renegotiating "the terms of Britain's membership of the EU."

Elliot insisted that a referendum must be held on British membership in the EU, so as to "start talking" about negotiating a "new arrangement".

It should be noted that Elliott was the former

campaign director for "No to AV", which argued against the introduction of a form of proportional representation into British elections in the 2011 referendum on the issue. Although described as a cross-party organisation, it was funded almost exclusively by Conservative Party donors. This is the reality of the anti-EU right-wingers' claims to be the defenders of democracy.

Present in the audience was Paul Mitchell, representing the Socialist Equality Party's campaign in the North West constituency.

Mitchell denounced the Labour candidate for deliberately ignoring the plight of Greek workers, and the threats being made by the EU against Russia. He said that there is no difference fundamentally between Labour's policies and those of the UKIP, both of which represent different avenues by which the ruling class is seeking to slash workers' living standards and swell corporate profits.

At this point, the moderator interrupted to state, "I guess your question to the panel is 'what about the workers?!' " The question was not answered.



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