

Right-wing “Remain” and “Leave” campaigns begin for UK referendum on EU membership

Chris Marsden, Robert Stevens
22 February 2016

A referendum on the UK’s membership in the European Union (EU) is now set for June 23.

Prime Minister David Cameron made the announcement outside 10 Downing Street on Saturday, following his return from two days of negotiations with EU leaders at a summit in Brussels.

What is on offer in the referendum is a choice between two reactionary camps that articulate opposed strategies for the British bourgeoisie. An independent standpoint for the working class is entirely excluded.

The question put before the British electorate will be: “Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?” The choice of answers is: “Remain a member of the European Union” or “Leave the European Union.”

What is not stated on the ballot paper is that the framework for the referendum is the deal negotiated by Cameron with the 28 EU heads of state. The conflict between the camps boils down to whether this deal does enough to satisfy the interests of the City of London and to limit the rights of EU migrants.

The EU has agreed to:

- * An “emergency brake” on EU migrants claiming in-work benefits that will last for seven years and prevent new migrants from claiming full benefits for four years.

- * Restrictions on child benefits for EU migrants that will now be indexed to the rate of a migrant’s home country, with existing EU migrants paid at the lower rate from 2020.

- * A specific opt-out for the UK from the EU’s commitment to forge an “ever closer union.”

- * The right of one country to impose a temporary break on the imposition of contentious financial regulations, to be discussed at a meeting of EU leaders

in the European Council.

Cameron speaks for dominant sections of the financial elite who see UK membership in the EU as essential to their ability to project their interests internationally. He has the backing of the United States and the major European powers, who fear that a British exit (Brexit) could provide the catalyst for the EU’s unravelling under conditions of a deepening economic slump and rising social anger. They are also concerned that a Brexit would jeopardise the NATO alliance and its agenda of militarism and war, especially directed against Russia.

In supporting the “Remain” campaign, Cameron is arguing that he has done enough to ensure that the “competitive edge” of the City of London has been safeguarded so that it can beat off any challenge from Frankfurt and Paris. He is stressing that the principle of discrimination against EU migrants has now been accepted and will in effect operate for 11 years. This will allow the ruling elite to continue scapegoating immigrants as a whole for the social cost to working people of the austerity policies of the government.

The “Leave” camp is dominated by the right wing of the Tory Party and the anti-immigrant UK Independence Party—the forces Cameron sought to placate by promising an in-out referendum in the Tory Party’s general election manifesto last year. It is headed by London Mayor Boris Johnson, Justice Secretary Michael Gove and five other cabinet members. They represent that section of the Tories who believe greater deregulation and independence will benefit Britain’s banks and businesses, and free them from the influence of the UK’s rivals, Germany and France. This is what they mean by their constant

references to “sovereignty”.

This constituency is dominant within the Tory Party membership, which largely shares the prejudices and nationalism espoused by UKIP. There are reports that between 70 to 144 Tory MPs, out of a total of 330, also support the “Leave camp.”

Both camps stand for greater austerity, the further destruction of workers’ rights and vicious anti-migrant measures. That is why Cameron sought to defend membership in the EU, an institution that functions as the main mechanism for enforcing such policies across the European continent, on the BBC’s *Andrew Marr Show* Sunday with a direct appeal to his opponents. He urged them to recognise that EU membership brought with it the “power to help businesses not be discriminated against in Europe.”

No dissent can be expressed in the June 23 referendum from the standpoint of these opposed right-wing camps. In addition, to reinforce the political monopoly of the right, the officially designated “Leave” and “Remain” campaigns, already assured of major financial backing from their supporters in ruling circles, will each be able to spend up to £7 million churning out their propaganda. Any other registered campaign will be entitled to just £70,000. A few hand-picked political figures will therefore be called on by the media as the designated “voices of the people” for their respective positions.

Neither the Labour Party nor the trade unions advance an independent perspective from that of Cameron and Johnson.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has pledged the party’s support for EU membership, claiming that this offers prosperity, jobs and workers “security”. He does so even as he claims to favour a different set of “reforms” from those negotiated by Cameron and agreed by the entire EU, claiming that his own proposals will supposedly ensure a future “social Europe.” He knows he is lying, hence his absolute refusal to mention Greece or any of the countries condemned to endless rounds of savage austerity by Brussels.

Corbyn has joined the xenophobes on both sides of the referendum debate by blaming migration for falling wages in the UK, rather than the employers and governments that have carried out an onslaught against the working class. Writing in the *Guardian* Saturday, he complained, “Cameron’s much-heralded

‘emergency brake’ on in-work migrants’ benefits will do nothing to cut inward migration to Britain. Nor will it put a penny in the pockets of British workers,” adding that it could “drive down pay rates still further as migrant workers take second jobs to make up for lower incomes...”

The Trades Union Congress and the larger trade unions support Corbyn’s position.

This leaves just two significant trade unions supporting the “Leave” campaign: the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT)—which is under the influence of various Stalinists and members of pseudo-left groups—and the Aslef train drivers union.

Their support and the participation of some Labour MPs in the “Leave” campaign is being used to conceal its right-wing pedigree and intent.

Speaking at a Grassroots Out meeting in London on Friday, UKIP leader Nigel Farage insisted, “Sometimes in life things come along that are bigger, more fundamental and more important than normal Left/Right divides in politics.”

He was joined on the platform by former Labour Party and Respect MP George Galloway, who concluded his speech by declaring, “Left, Right, Left Right, forward march to victory on the 23rd of June.” For this, he received rapturous applause and a standing ovation from the mainly right-wing audience. On Twitter, he said of Farage, “We are not pals. We are allies in one cause... Like Churchill and Stalin...”

The central task placed before the British working class is to adopt a socialist and internationalist perspective on which to oppose all factions of the ruling elite. This means workers and young people must reject the nationalist poison of jingoist “patriotism” and anti-migrant xenophobia that dominates both the “Remain” and “Leave” campaigns and reach out to their class brothers and sisters across the continent with the aim of forging a United Socialist States of Europe.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact