

# For an active boycott of the Brexit referendum!

**Statement of the Socialist Equality Party, British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International  
29 February 2016**

1. The June 23 referendum on Britain's membership in the European Union raises issues of immense international importance. The outcome will have implications for workers not only in the UK, but far beyond its shores.

2. The Socialist Equality Party urges workers and young people to boycott the referendum. The Remain and Leave campaigns are both headed by Thatcherite forces that stand for greater austerity, brutal anti-immigrant measures and the destruction of workers' rights. Their differences are over how best to defend the interests of British capitalism against its European and international rivals under conditions of economic slump and the escalation of militarism and war.

3. A boycott prepares the ground for the development of an independent political struggle of the British working class against these forces. Such a movement must develop as part of a continent-wide counteroffensive by the working class, which will expose the referendum as only an episode in the deepening existential crisis of the British and European bourgeoisie.

4. The question put before the electorate as to whether to "Remain" in or "Leave" the EU conceals everything that must be understood about the implications of both alternatives for the working class. The referendum is the outcome of a manoeuvre by Prime Minister David Cameron in 2013 to prevent a further haemorrhaging of support for the Tories in favour of the United Kingdom Independence Party, even as Cameron sought to utilize the United Kingdom Independence Party's anti-immigrant xenophobia to push official politics further to the right. Voters are being asked to take a position on whether to Remain or Leave based on the four demands agreed by Cameron with other EU leaders:

- An "emergency brake" on EU migrants claiming in-work benefits that will last for seven years.

- Restriction of child benefits for EU migrants to the rate of their home country.

- A specific opt-out for the UK from the EU's commitment to forge an "ever closer union."

- The right of the UK to impose a temporary brake on financial regulations that impact the City of London.

5. There can be no good outcome of such a plebiscite. Whichever side wins, working people will pay the price. It is not a question of choosing the "lesser evil"—both options are equally rotten. Any possibility of an independent voice for the working class being registered has been deliberately excluded. A Remain vote means not only endorsing the reactionary institutions of the EU. The terms negotiated by Cameron as the basis of the UK remaining in the EU sanction his government's attacks on migrants and measures to protect the criminal activities of the

UK's banks and financial institutions. A Leave vote, however, would be seized on as an endorsement of demands for British "sovereignty" and "independence"—euphemisms for removing all obstacles to the intensified exploitation of the working class and a more ruthless clampdown on immigration.

6. The responsibility of the Socialist Equality Party is to define a policy that upholds the interests of workers not only in Britain, but in Europe as a whole and throughout the world. Every vote or referendum must be evaluated in connection with its specific context. Even then, the tactical approach taken has always to be determined by principled considerations. The SEP's call for a boycott is not made lightly and has nothing in common with political abstention of an anarchist character. Nor is it advanced as a timeless principle. It is a policy motivated by the need to prepare workers and youth for the bitter class conflicts that will inevitably emerge following June 23.

## Oppose the European Union

7. The SEP is irreconcilably hostile to the European Union, but our opposition is from the left, not the right. The EU is not an instrument for realising the genuine and necessary unification of Europe. It is a mechanism for the subjugation of the continent to the dictates of the financial markets and a forum in which competing states fight amongst themselves and conspire against the working class. That is why, especially since the 2008 financial crash, the EU has shed its previous social democratic and liberal pretensions while facilitating the efforts of the ruling elite to utilise the crisis of its own creation to carry out a social counterrevolution. Billions of euros have been handed over to the banks and speculators while working people have been subjected to unending cuts in jobs, wages and social conditions. Greece and other countries have been bankrupted at the behest of the EU and the European Central Bank and their working populations reduced to penury.

8. This is being accompanied by the deliberate whipping up of the most virulent forms of nationalism and xenophobia. After decades in which Europe's governments proclaimed that the continent would "never again" witness the rule of the swastika and the jackboot, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant propaganda is employed to provide scapegoats for the social crisis created by austerity and encourage the growth of extreme-right and fascist movements. Under EU instruction, border fences and concentration camps are being erected as the waves of desperate humanity fleeing the wars, persecution and misery created by the imperialist powers in the Middle East and North Africa find the doors of Fortress Europe slammed shut.

9. The measures directed today against migrant workers will be turned against the entire working class tomorrow. In response to soaring social

inequality and growing popular anger, the ruling class is preparing authoritarian forms of rule. It is increasing the powers of the security apparatus, stepping up mass surveillance and destroying democratic rights in the name of the “war on terror.”

10. The right-wing putsch in Ukraine, in which the EU played a leading role, has been used to legitimise the remilitarisation of the continent as part of US-led provocations against Russia. NATO is set to dispatch thousands of troops to Eastern and Central Europe and the Baltic states, while naval drills are being staged with increasing frequency in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Some 25 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the US is expanding its nuclear missile arsenal in Europe as part of what NATO describes openly as preparations for “hybrid warfare” against Russia.

11. Europe’s governments are fully complicit in US aggression, regarding it as an opportunity to realise their own militarist ambitions. Each is looking to increase military spending, even as it savagely attacks workers’ living conditions. The British parliament’s decision to bomb Syria was taken at the same time that Berlin decided in favour of military involvement in the war-ravaged country, as part of its drive to restore Germany’s role as a European and world military power. But even as the US and Europe have joined forces to press their imperialist interests in the Middle East and North Africa, tensions have grown between American and European imperialism, as well as between London, Berlin and Paris. These tensions threaten to plunge the continent into military conflict.

### **The Remain campaign**

12. No support can be extended to the Remain campaign. This option has the backing of much of Britain’s corporate elite, who regard EU membership as essential to their ability to compete internationally—not least through a continued offensive against the living standards of the working class throughout the continent. It also has the support of the United States and the major European powers, which fear that a British exit (Brexit) could provide the catalyst for the EU’s unravelling and jeopardise the NATO alliance and its agenda of militarism and war. Twelve former heads of the armed forces signed a letter in favour of the Remain campaign, insisting that “Britain’s role in the EU strengthens the security we enjoy as part of NATO,” and citing the need to confront Russian “aggression.”

13. With the Tory party in a state of civil war, the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) have rallied to the defence of EU membership. This only confirms that these organisations are organically incapable of taking a position that is not dictated to them by the ruling class—a fact not changed one iota by the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour Party leader. Corbyn has come forward as a professional liar and apologist for the EU in an attempt to make it more palatable to those repelled by the noxious chauvinism of the Leave campaign.

14. Corbyn claims that the EU is a source of wealth and jobs and can be reformed to become a “Social Europe”. Not only does this pass over in silence the social crimes the EU has committed in Greece, Ireland, Spain and Portugal, it is aimed at concealing the refusal of the Labour Party and the TUC to wage any struggle against the austerity drive of the Cameron government by promoting the illusion that this task can be left to Brussels. At the same time, Corbyn echoes the anti-migrant agenda, centring his criticism of Cameron’s deal with the EU on the complaint that it “will do nothing to cut inward migration to Britain.” This, and not the actions of the employers and the government, Corbyn blames for driving down pay rates.

15. Corbyn’s pro-EU rhetoric is echoed by pseudo-left groups such as

Left Unity and the Scottish Socialist Party, who hold up Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain and Die Linke in Germany as allies in the struggle to “democratise” Europe. No greater indictment of such claims can be found than the assigning of leadership of this political charade to Yanis Varoufakis, with his “Plan B” for Europe. As Greece’s former finance minister, Varoufakis shares political responsibility with Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras for the betrayal of the struggle of the Greek working class against EU-dictated austerity. He is the archetypal representative of corrupt and privileged upper-middle class layers who regard the EU as their personal milch cow, and who have seized on the economic crisis as an opportunity to further their own careers and gain lucrative posts in government and the state apparatus. Wherever they have assumed such positions, they have attacked the working class with the same vigour as all other capitalist officials and parties.

### **The Leave campaign**

16. None of this imparts a progressive character to the Leave campaign, or justifies lending even the most critical support to it. Its claim that the British parliament and its parties are any less instruments for imposing the wishes of finance capital than the EU is a transparent fraud. Every leading Tory involved in the campaign has sat in successive governments that have implemented basic attacks on democratic rights, waged bloody wars and thrown millions into poverty. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which strikes a populist pose of opposition to the “Westminster elite”, is funded overwhelmingly by multi-millionaire financial speculators Stuart Wheeler and Aaron Banks, and former porn publisher Richard Desmond, now owner of *Express* newspapers. As to their professed concern with democracy, it is telling that one of the Leave campaign’s central demands is for the scrapping of the European Convention on Human Rights.

17. The economic agenda of the Leave campaign is framed from the standpoint of the City of London, whose position as a global financial centre is held out as offering the prospect of revisiting the halcyon days of empire. When UKIP et al. speak of leaving Europe in order to “turn out to the world”, they are asserting the right of British capital to better exploit the investment opportunities offered by countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and China, where the annual minimum wage ranges from £600 to slightly more than £1,000. To this end, they will demand that workers in Britain sacrifice their wages and working conditions on the altar of the “national interest.”

18. The Panglossian vision of economic success offered by the Leave campaign is far removed from the reality of a Brexit. Estimates of the impact of leaving the EU on the economy and jobs vary wildly. But a worst-case scenario—based upon a closing off of trade with Europe—calculated a loss of gross domestic product of up to 9 percent, equivalent to the 2008 crash. Especially under conditions of a developing global slump, a Brexit would accelerate the fracturing of the entire continent and of the United Kingdom itself, unleashing national and separatist tensions and encouraging protectionism and trade war measures. Seizing on Cameron’s initiative, the National Front in France is already urging a “Franxit”, while the far-right Fidesz government in Hungary has called a referendum to endorse anti-migrant quotas.

19. British workers cannot find a way out of the current economic and political impasse on the basis of a nationalist programme. The notion of returning to an isolated and sovereign British state in today’s global economy is as archaic as Stonehenge. In his 1934 essay, “Nationalism and Economic Life,” Trotsky posed the fundamental choice facing humanity as either a descent into nationalist and fascist reaction and war, or a turn

towards the building of a new socialist world order. He described as “the basic tendency of our century... the growing contradiction between the nation and economic life,” and posed the question:

How may the economic unity of Europe be guaranteed, while preserving complete freedom of cultural development to the people living there? How may unified Europe be included within a coordinated world economy? The solution to this question may be reached not by deifying the nation, but on the contrary by completely liberating productive forces from the fetters imposed upon them by the national state. But the ruling classes of Europe, demoralized by the bankruptcy of military and diplomatic methods, approach the task today from the opposite end, that is, they attempt by force to subordinate economy to the outdated national state... decadent fascist nationalism, preparing volcanic explosions and grandiose clashes in the world arena, bears nothing except ruin. All our experiences on this score during the last 25 or 30 years will seem only an idyllic overture compared to the music of hell that is impending.

### Reject “left” nationalism

20. The first consideration of socialists is to safeguard not only the present interests of the working class, but also its future. The biggest political danger in this situation is the mixing of class banners on the basis of the espousal of a supposedly “left nationalism”. It was on the basis of opposition to such a policy that the SEP rejected support for Scottish separatism in the 2014 referendum, characterising it as a retrograde step that cut across the unity of the working class in England and Scotland. Today, the Scottish National Party is threatening a second referendum in the event of a Brexit, on the explicit basis of support for Scotland’s membership in the EU.

21. In the June 23 referendum, a politically criminal role is being played by George Galloway, the leader of the nominally anti-war RESPECT party, and pseudo-left organisations such as the state capitalist Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Socialist Party (SP), a section of the Committee for a Workers’ International. They have utilised left phraseology only to align the working class with a right-wing initiative. Galloway has joined public platforms with UKIP to argue for a Brexit, asserting that divisions between “left” and “right” and between the working class and the ruling class count for nothing when compared with the necessity to defend national sovereignty. He defined “internationalism” as the British bourgeoisie’s right to trade with the Commonwealth, Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, describing them as countries “where the sun is rising, not setting...”

22. This calculated invocation of Britain’s imperial past is of a piece with his rallying call, “Left, Right, Left Right, forward march to victory on the 23rd of June.” On Twitter, Galloway said of UKIP leader Nigel Farage, “We are allies in one cause... Like Churchill and Stalin...” Galloway is fully aware that his analogy will be understood by his audience as an appeal to the jingoism and anti-German sentiment that animates their opposition to the EU. He stands in the politically degraded tradition of Stalinism, with its long history of opportunist alliances with right-wing nationalism. To praise Stalin is to solidarise with the gravedigger of the October 1917 Revolution and the architect of political crimes that cost the lives of millions—a man whose alliance with Churchill was preceded by the Hitler-Stalin pact.

23. Those who claim that their anti-EU campaign is independent of

Farage and company are perpetrating a fraud. The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), the train drivers union ASLEF, the Stalinist *Morning Star* newspaper and the group Trade Unions Against the EU, along with the pseudo-left SWP, its offshoot Counterfire and the SP, all assert that it is possible to wage a parallel initiative to the official Leave campaign on a “progressive” and “socialist” basis. However, their declared opposition to the Tories and UKIP and their invocation of socialist phrases count for little.

24. The lack of seriousness in their approach is epitomised by their focus on the supposed opportunity represented by a Brexit to “mess up the Tories” and provide a means to “remove Cameron.” They give no consideration as to who is supposed to be removing Cameron and to what purpose. They are wholly indifferent to the actual forces being strengthened by the Leave campaign. In reality, they are subordinating the working class to an initiative aimed at shifting political life even further along a nationalist trajectory, thereby strengthening and emboldening the far right in the UK and across Europe, while weakening the political defences of the working class. Having helped release the genie of British nationalism, they are politically responsible for its consequences.

### Lessons of history

25. The lessons of the German workers’ movement underscore the deadly consequences of aligning the working class with right-wing forces. In December 1929, a referendum was held on the instigation of the German Nationalist Party. It sought to introduce a “Law Against the Enslavement of the German People” that would formally renounce the Treaty of Versailles and end the payment of reparations to the victorious powers in the First World War. There was mass opposition to the terms of Versailles, but the referendum was recognised by class conscious workers for what it was—an effort to exploit this sentiment by the nationalist right, and especially Hitler’s Nazi Party, which used it to establish its national presence.

26. The Communist Party of Germany (KPD) opposed the referendum and turnout was less than 15 percent. However, in its aftermath, under instruction from Stalin and the Comintern, the KPD began a process of wholesale adaptation to German nationalism with the adoption of “National Bolshevism.”

27. By 1931, the KPD’s retreat was such that it lined up with the fascists in supporting what it dubbed the “Red Referendum”. Initiated by the Nazis, the referendum urged the removal of the Social Democrats from power in Prussia, Germany’s largest state, which included the capital Berlin. The KPD supported the referendum on the basis that the Social Democrats were “social fascists” and were engaged in repression against the working class. Their removal, the KPD claimed, would be a step towards “national liberation” and a “people’s revolution.”

28. Trotsky’s scathing critique of the KPD is equally a devastating indictment of the role being played today by Galloway and the pseudo-left:

In the conduct of the Central Committee of the German Communist Party, everything is wrong: the evaluation of the situation is incorrect, the immediate aim incorrectly posed, the means to achieve it incorrectly chosen.

29. The KPD had formed a de facto united front with the fascists, Trotsky explained:

If one could designate his party adherence on the ballots, then the referendum would at least have the justification (in the given instance, absolutely insufficient politically) that it would have permitted a count of its forces and by that itself, separate them from the forces of fascism. But German 'democracy' did not trouble in its time to provide for participants in referendums the right to designate their parties. All the voters are fused into one inseparable mass which, on a definite question, gives one and the same answer...

Whether the fascists vote together with the Communists or not would lose all significance at the moment when the proletariat, by its pressure, overthrows the fascists and takes the power into its own hands... To come out into the streets with the slogan 'Down with the Brüning-Braun [Centre Party/Social Democratic Party] government' at a time when, according to the relationship of forces, it can only be replaced by a government of Hitler-Hugenberg [German National Party], is the sheerest adventurism... Consequently, we consider the coincidence of voting with the fascists not from the point of view of some abstract principle, but from the point of view of the actual struggle of the classes for power, and the relationship of forces at a given stage of this struggle.

### For an active boycott

30. Trotsky's insistence on a concrete appraisal of the relationship of class forces informs the SEP's attitude towards the June 23 referendum. There are occasions in which it would be entirely correct to endorse a vote to quit the EU. Under conditions of a movement of the working class involving mass strikes and appeals for solidarity with the Greek masses and other victims of EU diktats, a vote to leave would acquire an anti-capitalist character.

31. This is not the case today. This is the political responsibility of the pseudo-left groups, all of whom hailed Syriza as a model for waging a struggle against EU austerity. Had Syriza honoured the massive mandate of the July 5, 2015 referendum in Greece and taken up a political struggle against the EU, the entire political situation in Europe would have been altered. The Brexit vote would be taking place under conditions where the working class was shaping events instead of right-wing political forces. But then it could be expected that neither Cameron nor UKIP would be pressing for a ballot.

32. Given today's specific circumstances, an active boycott provides the only means through which workers and young people can express an independent class standpoint. Our call is based upon the position advocated by Lenin in 1905 in relation to the reactionary constitution drafted by the Russian minister of the interior, Alexander Bulygin. Urging a boycott of the parliament, or Duma, as part of a revolutionary struggle against Tsarism, Lenin explained:

If we are not mistaken this idea is already fairly widespread among the comrades working in Russia, who express it in the words: an *active* boycott. As distinct from passive abstention, an active boycott should imply increasing agitation tenfold, organising meetings everywhere, taking advantage of election meetings, even if we have to force our way into them, holding demonstrations, political strikes, and so on and so forth....

33. The SEP conceives of an active boycott not as an individual protest, but as a means of beginning the political clarification of the working class and countering the disorientation created by the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and its pseudo-left apologists. We will utilise the active boycott campaign to provide workers and youth with a conscious political orientation and leadership.

### For the United Socialist States of Europe

34. The campaign for the active boycott is intimately bound up with the task of transforming the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) into the international centre of revolutionary opposition to militarism and war. We will work in close collaboration with our European and international co-thinkers, especially the Socialist Equality Party of Germany, to popularise and promote the ICFI's manifesto *Socialism and the Fight Against War*, which lays down four criteria on which a new anti-war movement must be based:

- The struggle against war must be based on the working class, the great revolutionary force in society, uniting behind it all progressive elements in the population.

- The new anti-war movement must be anti-capitalist and socialist, since there can be no serious struggle against war except in the fight to end the dictatorship of finance capital and the economic system that is the fundamental cause of militarism and war.

- The new anti-war movement must therefore, of necessity, be completely and unequivocally independent of, and hostile to, all political parties and organizations of the capitalist class.

- The new anti-war movement must, above all, be international, mobilizing the vast power of the working class in a unified global struggle against imperialism. The permanent war of the bourgeoisie must be answered with the perspective of permanent revolution by the working class, the strategic goal of which is the abolition of the nation-state system and the establishment of a world socialist federation. This will make possible the rational, planned development of global resources and, on this basis, the eradication of poverty and the raising of human culture to new heights.

35. Against the national chauvinism and xenophobia promoted by both sides in the referendum campaign, the working class must advance its own internationalist programme to unify the struggles of workers throughout Europe in defence of living standards and democratic rights. The alternative for workers to the Europe of the transnational corporations is the struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe.

36. The post-1945 project of European unification was an attempt by the ruling elites to resolve the fundamental contradiction that had twice in the 20th century plunged the continent into war—between the integrated character of European and global production and the division of the continent into antagonistic nation states. Economic integration came to be considered as essential to enable Europe to compete effectively in the global marketplace against the United States, with the ultimate aim of an accompanying move towards political union. At the same time, US imperialism promoted the integration of capitalist Europe as a bulwark against the Soviet Union and the threat of socialist revolution by a militant and radicalized European working class. But unity within the framework

of capitalism could never mean anything other than the domination of the most powerful nations and corporations over the continent and its peoples. Rather than national and social antagonisms being alleviated, they have taken on malignant forms.

37. The EU is breaking apart and cannot be revived. It is only through the creation of the United Socialist States of Europe, established as an integral component of a world federation of socialist states, that the vast productive forces of the continent can be utilised for the benefit of all. Throughout Europe there are growing indications of a coming eruption of the class struggle. Mass opposition already exists to the devastating impact of austerity, the assault on democratic rights, military barbarism and colonial-style wars of conquest. But this presently finds no political expression. The SEP and the ICFI offer a perspective on the basis of which the rising oppositional sentiment in the working class can coalesce and become a mighty and unstoppable revolutionary force. We urge all those who agree with us to join the SEP and build it as the new revolutionary leadership of the working class.

*No to the European Union—No to British nationalism!*

*For the unity of the British and European working class!*

*For the United Socialist States of Europe!*



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