

# An exchange on the SEP's call for an active boycott of the Brexit referendum

Chris Marsden  
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*The World Socialist Web Site received numerous comments on the statement of the Socialist Equality Party (UK) calling for an active boycott of the June 23 referendum on British membership in the European Union. Many readers enthusiastically supported the statement, while others raised political objections or questions.*

*We are posting below replies from Chris Marsden, the national secretary of the SEP, to two comments. The first criticized the position of the SEP and advocated instead for a vote in favor of leaving the EU. The second asked how the SEP's position on Brexit related to its call for a "no" vote in the September 18, 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. The original comments can be found [here](#).*

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The Socialist Equality Party rejects your response to our call for an active boycott and urges you to think more carefully and clearly about the implications of your critique.

You state that our analysis of the Remain and Leave campaigns is "faultless," but you clearly disagree with this analysis. Your position is that we are simply too small ("miniscule") to take a position that is independent of the Leave campaign—a right-wing nationalist block. We do not agree. The position we take will be followed by the most advanced workers and youth and will contribute greatly to their political education.

You assert that a Leave vote is still somehow an expression of the wishes of the "vanguard of the working class and class conscious workers generally." But nowhere do you explain how, if that is the presently existing consciousness of the mass of the working class, leadership of the Leave campaign has fallen to the right wing of the Conservative Party and

the UK Independence Party, at whose behest the referendum was called.

You write as if this situation can be overcome through the judicious allocation of socialist slogans—"No to the Bosses, Bankers, and Tory EU", "Workers Unity against Nationalism, Fascism, and War", etc.

If this is all it takes to "clearly demarcate a Socialist opposition to the EU", then the official Leave campaign would be a political consideration of no great significance. As we explained, "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."

But this is not the case today and this situation cannot be overcome by wishful thinking and rhetoric. It must be changed through a political struggle to demarcate the independent standpoint of the working class, free it from all bourgeois and petty bourgeois influences and arm it with a consistently socialist and internationalist perspective.

You describe our reference to Lenin's call for an active boycott in 1905 as "utterly inappropriate, irrelevant, and far-fetched". However, we are not making a direct historical parallel but rather explaining how Lenin urged independent political action to establish the leading role of the working class and to prevent its subordination to the bourgeois opponents of Tsarism.

More importantly, you say nothing about our warning of the tragic result of the mixing of the class banners when we referenced the "Red Referendum" of 1931. The German Communist Party, under Stalin's instruction, also took the position that the judicious use of radical phrases and "skilfully basing ourselves upon

the natural antipathy of workers”—at that time to the Social Democrats—could somehow transform the character of a referendum called by the Nazis into a vehicle for revolutionary struggle. The result was a political catastrophe.

You urge the “small forces of Revolutionary Socialism” to adopt a political strategy “aimed at building those small forces.” However, yours is a recipe not for expanding the political influence of socialists but for transforming the socialist movement into a political apologist and adjunct of a right-wing nationalist movement.

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The position taken by the Socialist Equality Party in the referendum on Scottish independence and the call for an active boycott of the referendum on UK membership of the European Union are politically consistent. Both positions are motivated by our opposition to nationalism and our fundamental aim of maintaining the unity and political independence of the international working class.

We called for a “no” vote in the Scottish referendum because we are opposed to the setting up of a separate capitalist state, as demanded by the Scottish National Party and supported by the pseudo-left groups—behind insincere and politically false promises that this would eventually become the basis for a Scottish road to socialism.

We explained, “The primary function of a separate Scottish state would be to establish more direct relations with the major banks, corporations and speculators by offering to drive up exploitation, smash up wages and working conditions, destroy or privatise social services and eliminate as far as is possible taxes on corporate wealth.”

We made no concession to the Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat and big business backers of a “no” vote, but we insisted that “separatism only weakens and divides the working class in its struggle against these forces.” We warned that encouraging separatism in Scotland would, moreover, be a green light for similar movements of the regional bourgeoisie in Catalonia and elsewhere that would end in the “Balkan-style carve-up” of the European continent.

We called for “the overthrow of British imperialism and its state apparatus”, the “creation of a workers’ government committed to socialist policies” and “the

formation of the United Socialist States of Europe.”

The vote to Leave is not a vote for a socialist Britain, let alone the starting point for a struggle for a socialist Europe. It is an endorsement of a British nationalist agenda—spearheaded by far-right forces—which would be equivalent to our having supported a “yes” vote for Scottish independence. Like a “yes” vote then, it would just as surely provide an impulse for the nationalist division of the European continent and its working class.



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