

# Brexit referendum: Remain camp backs European Union of austerity and militarism

Robert Stevens, Chris Marsden  
10 March 2016

The Remain campaign in the June 23 referendum on Britain's continued membership in the European Union is led by the Conservative government of Prime Minister David Cameron.

Support for a Remain vote, therefore, necessitates an endorsement of the renegotiation of the UK's terms of EU membership secured by Cameron last month. These centre on measures limiting in-work benefits for migrants and protecting the City of London from financial regulation.

For the dominant sections of Britain's financial and business elite, continued EU membership is vital to maintaining trade links within the world's largest single market. Their campaign for "membership of a reformed EU" translates into support for a Europe dominated by finance capital and dedicated to policies of austerity, militarism and war.

Britain Stronger in Europe (BSE), likely to be the officially designated Remain campaign group, stresses that EU membership is vital to the UK's economy. Some three to four million jobs are linked to trade with Europe, with 44 percent of all exports—worth £229 billion in 2014—going to Europe. Foreign Direct Investment in the UK from Europe averaged £24 billion a year over the last 10 years.

David Sainsbury, the Labour peer, supermarket heir and billionaire businessman, provided BSE's start-up funding. The group is headed by former Marks & Spencer boss Lord Stuart Rose, who currently chairs online grocery group Ocado. Co-treasurers are Roland Rudd, founder of public relations corporation Finsbury, and Sir Michael Rake, chairman of BT Group, former president of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), and former chairman of KPMG International.

BSE has lined up the main international financial and economic institutions to warn against a Brexit (British exit from the EU), with the G20 and the International

Monetary Fund issuing statements supporting EU membership. The United States and the major European powers, which fear that a Brexit would precipitate the breakup of the EU, have all lent their support.

The heads of GlaxoSmithKline, Siemens, Vodafone and Virgin Group have endorsed a Remain vote, while the chairmen or chief executives of 36 FTSE 100 companies, including Burberry, BAE Systems, BP, Shell and EasyJet, wrote to the *Times* calling for support. The CBI, which represents 190,000 businesses across Britain, said that the "majority" of its members "want the UK to be in a reformed EU."

Other board members are drawn from all the main parliamentary parties, including Lord Cooper, a former director of strategy at Downing Street under Cameron, and Sir Danny Alexander, Liberal Democrat chief secretary to the treasury in the 2010-15 Conservative-led coalition.

The Tories and Lib-Dems are working hand-in-glove with the Blairite wing of the Labour Party. Former Labour prime ministers Blair and Gordon Brown sit alongside the only other surviving former Conservative prime minister, John Major. They are joined by Lord Peter Mandelson, Blair's closest adviser, and Stephen Kinnock, son of former Labour leader Neil Kinnock. The executive director of BSE is Will Straw, son of former foreign secretary Jack Straw.

Caroline Lucas, the former leader of the Green Party and its only MP, has offered her threadbare credentials as a political progressive to BSE.

The Remain campaign's propaganda also focuses on the importance of British defence capabilities as a member of NATO with the world's fifth largest military budget. One of the key members of the BSE's board is General Sir Peter Wall, who was chief of the general staff until September 2014.

Wall is a vocal advocate of confronting Russia and last

year complained that UK defence cuts, including the 2010 defence review, “set a lower level of ambition for UK involvement in global security than ever before.” He warned of “the state-on-state confrontation in Europe initiated by Russia” and urged “sustained reinvestment” in the military.

A joint article by Tory MP Nicholas Soames and Mandelson, published in the *Daily Mail*, stressed the need to confront Russia as a key argument in favour of EU membership. Soames is the grandson of former prime minister Winston Churchill. Mandelson is the grandson of Herbert Morrison, Labour home secretary in the wartime coalition led by Churchill.

Invoking World War Two to appeal for national unity, they stated, “Britain and our allies emerged victorious, but to do so, everyone, including politicians from opposing parties, had to pull in the same direction.”

Calling on anti-communist sentiment, the two authors wrote of when “the Russians drew down the Iron Curtain on a broken and suffering Eastern Europe,” and of how “When the Berlin Wall fell at the end of the 1980s, those countries and their great capitals—Warsaw, Prague, Berlin, Bucharest and Sofia—were released from the grip of a ruthless Soviet machine” and “stampeded to be a part of the European Union...”

A Remain vote is officially backed by the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress, including Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. But given the overtly Tory agenda of Britain Stronger in Europe, they have not affiliated to it, fearing a repeat of the political damage that uniting with the Tories in the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence caused. Even so, Sir Brendan Barber, a former leader of the TUC from 2003 to 2012, who also served as a director on the Bank of England board, is a BSE board member.

Corbyn has stated that he will not personally share a platform with the Conservatives in the referendum campaign, which prompted denunciations from within the parliamentary Labour Party. But whether he sits alongside Cameron or not, he shares a common political platform thanks to his efforts to whitewash the EU and insist that it can be reformed in the interests of the working class.

Corbyn attempts to strike an oppositional pose by calling for “progressive reform in Europe.” But he endorses anti-immigrant measures by complaining of “the undercutting of wage rates and industry-wide agreements through the exploitation of migrant workers.” He echoes the criticism of the Tory right and UK Independence Party that “Cameron’s much-heralded ‘emergency brake’ on

in-work migrants’ benefits will do nothing to cut inward migration to Britain.”

No event more surely exposes the lie that the EU is either a progressive body or one that can be made progressive than the fate of Greece, which was targeted by the EU for austerity measures that destroyed the jobs, livelihoods and social conditions, including access to health care, of millions of workers and their families.

As such, it is treated as radioactive political material by everyone aligning with the Remain camp, especially Corbyn. Even when addressing the Party of European Socialists in the European Parliament last month, he spoke only of a general need to “work in a common way to address the negatives of the European Union from a progressive point of view” before urging closer cooperation with the United Left group. The latter formation includes Syriza, whose own pro-EU stance was integral to its betrayal of the struggle of the Greek working class against the “troika” of the EU, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund.

As the Socialist Equality Party’s statement “For an active boycott of the Brexit referendum!” explains, “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.”

We call for a rejection of the Remain campaign in defence of the EU and of the Leave campaign dominated by far-right forces preaching nationalism and xenophobia, and for the working class to take up the perspective of a common struggle with their brothers and sisters across the continent for the United Socialist States of Europe.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**