

The pseudo-left's nationalist "Leave" campaign in the UK Brexit referendum

Part one

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This is the first part of a two-part article.

Opposition to British membership of the European Union in the June 23 referendum is dominated by two rival nationalist and pro-business groups, Leave EU and Vote Leave.

Britain's two largest pseudo-left groups, the Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP), claim to offer a progressive alternative that allows workers to cast a "leave" vote without endorsing the xenophobic campaign dominated by the right wing of the Conservative Party and the UK Independence Party (UKIP).

In reality, neither group is mounting a genuine opposition to the chauvinist agenda of the official Leave forces. For years, they have lent a left cover to some of the worst purveyors of nationalism within the Labour and trade union bureaucracy—above all, those influenced by the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain (CPB).

The Socialist Party has been in a political alliance with the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union since 2009. The RMT, together with the Aslef train drivers union and the BFAWU bakers union leadership, are urging a "leave" vote alongside the Trade Unionists Against the European Union (TUAEU) campaign, which is politically led by the CPB and its newspaper, the *Morning Star*. TUAEU is reportedly seeking funding from the RMT.

Above all other considerations, the opposition to the EU by the trade unions involved in the Leave campaign centres on the free movement of labour (for EU citizens.) Whether or not this is portrayed in explicitly nationalist terms, it is what unites the Stalinist trade union apparatchiks and the far-right UKIP.

Seven years ago, the TUAEU's forerunner, Trade Unionists Against the EU Constitution (TUAEC), launched No2EU as a front to stand candidates in the European elections. No2EU was backed by the RMT executive, led by long-time Stalinist Bob Crow, along with the CPB and the Socialist Party.

Central to the TUAEC/No2EU's campaign was nationalist opposition to the use of migrant labour. This was coupled to a distinctly militarist agenda centring on the complaint by the TUAEC that the Lisbon Treaty would make it "significantly harder to direct UK government investment into essential industries and services" and would be the "main obstacle" should "we want to ensure that we had a merchant fleet again." The campaign called for a referendum on the treaty and the "return of national democratic rights."

TUAEC was an affiliate of the Campaign Against Euro

Federalism (CAEF). Founded in 1991, CAEF declared, "Our nation state can only be democratic if it has the right to self-determination." It called for Britain to "restore sovereign control over its own military forces."

CAEF, in turn, was affiliated to the Campaign for an Independent Britain (CIB), which traced its origins back to the right-wing Monday Club in the Conservative Party. CAEF also called for anti-immigration measures, stating in 2009, "The use of foreign workers in Britain stems from the Single European Market defined as the 'free movement of capital, goods, services and labour'."

Not surprisingly given this political pedigree, No2EU from its founding focused on intervening in or publicising disputes in which trade unions opposed the use of foreign contract labour, beginning with the 2009 Lindsey oil refinery strike.

The Lindsey dispute achieved notoriety when numbers of those involved raised the demand, "British jobs for British workers"—in the process attracting the support of the fascist British National Party. No2EU professed opposition to this slogan, but nevertheless railed against ferrying "workers across Europe to carry out jobs that local workers can be trained to perform."

In 2011, No2EU published an article by Alex Gordon, then the RMT's president, which made an explicit call for immigration controls, stating, "Across Europe, it is clear that we are witnessing large movements of capital eastwards as labour heads west. ... To reverse this increasingly perverse situation, all nation states must have democratic control over their own immigration policy and have the right to apply national legislation in defence of migrant and indigenous workers."

Calls for migrant labour to be covered by national labour agreements do little to disguise the clearly anti-migrant thrust of No2EU's policies, the main demand of which is for migrant labour to be excluded wherever possible from the UK. In 2013, Crow, in his role as RMT general secretary, made this clear by denouncing the EU's "free movement" of workers for undermining the control of "national parliaments." Crow, who died in 2014, declared that "Free movement within the EU impoverishes workers."

Brian Denny, the Stalinist press officer of the RMT, complained of "social dumping, whereby cheap foreign labour displaces local workers." Denny is now the spokesman for TUAEU, which has

taken over No2EU's programme in its entirety—including a word-for-word repetition of a passage insisting, "Nation states with the right to self-determination and their governments are the only institutions that can *control* the movement of big capital and *clip the wings* of the trans-national corporations and banks."

The central role in glossing over the nationalist opposition to immigration of the TUAEU and its predecessors has been played by the Socialist Party. Behind ritual invocations of the necessity for a United Socialist States of Europe, the SP has consistently minimised or apologised for the nationalism of the Stalinist wing of the trade union bureaucracy.

In July 2009, commenting on the Lindsey oil refinery dispute, the SP wrote of the "shame" of "some on the Left" for being "taken in by the headlines in the capitalist press during the dispute, which highlighted the 'British jobs for British workers' elements of this struggle." They blamed this on the fact that "the unofficial strike began without any leadership," implying that the trade unions had done nothing to promote nationalism—even when the then-general secretary of Unite, Derek Simpson, used the dispute to support a *Daily Star* campaign pushing the demand, "British Jobs for British Workers."

They praised the RMT for its decision to launch No2EU in 2009, supported by the SP after its conference was addressed by Gordon and Denny. Later, in the 2010 general election, they promoted the Trades Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) electoral front, which still exists today.

In a September 2015 article, the SP cites the Lindsey dispute as a seminal event, with Clive Heemskerk writing, "While some on the left—many now calling for a Yes vote or abstention in the EU referendum—failed to understand Lindsey, the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers' union (RMT) gave immediate support and drew the most important political conclusion: workers needed their own political voice against the EU."

Describing No2EU as "at bottom a pro-worker bloc," the SP admits in passing "a danger in posing issues in such a way as to reinforce the idea that there are lasting solutions to the problems workers face within the confines of a nation state," before stressing that "the bigger danger is vacating the field to the right within the national terrain."

Not "leaving the field" to the right for the SP means fighting on its anti-migrant labour terrain.

Heemskerk compares the fate of Greece with how Germany was made to pay war reparations under the Versailles peace treaty. He writes: "Trotsky insisted, the working class cannot abandon the field to the nationalist right, as its mass organisations—the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the KPD (Communist Party)—did in December 1929 when a referendum was promoted by the German National People's Party (DNVP—led by the media baron Alfred Hugenburg) to reject the Young Plan re-affirming German war reparation debts. The KPD abstained in the referendum while the SPD deputies voted for the Young Plan in the Reichstag, 'in support of international law'."

Heemskerk implies that the KPD was wrong to boycott the 1929 referendum, commenting that "The Nazis' participation with the DNVP in the referendum campaign—the first time an important section of the capitalists had collaborated with Hitler—was a factor

in their phenomenal surge from 810,000 votes (2.6 percent) in the May 1928 general election to 6.3 million (18.2 percent) in September 1930, against the backdrop of the 1929 crash."

He cites Trotsky's comment that in the general election the working class had been given yet another "chance to put itself at the head of the nation as its leader" but had not done so, following the missed opportunities of the previous decade. The intention is for the reader to conclude that Trotsky viewed the KPD's referendum abstention as one such example of a missed opportunity.

This is a deliberate historical distortion. The position taken by the KPD in 1929 towards the referendum called by the nationalist right was correct and was never opposed by Trotsky. His critique in 1930 makes no mention of 1929 and is directed at the KPD for its designation of the SPD as "social fascist"—on the basis of which it refused to call for a united front against the fascist danger. He attributed "the weakness and strategic impotence of the revolutionary party" to "the wrong policy of the Communist Party, which found its highest generalisation in the absurd theory of social fascism," which enabled the Social Democrats to maintain their hold over the working class.

Under instruction from Stalin and the Comintern, the theory of "social fascism" became the starting point for an increasingly open and politically disastrous adaptation, defined as "national Bolshevism," to German nationalism on the part of the KPD. It led to the KPD's support in 1931 for a referendum initiated by the Nazis urging the removal of the Social Democrats from power in the state of Prussia. The SP has nothing to say on the position taken by the KPD on what it dubbed the "Red Referendum" to justify lining up behind the Nazis, because to cite Trotsky's scathing critique would undermine the political justifications employed by the SP in covering for the nationalist Leave campaign in the Brexit referendum.

To be continued



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