

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

Part Two

Chris Marsden
19 March 2016

This is the second part of a two-part article. Part one was posted here.

In June 2015, Socialist Party (SP) General Secretary Peter Taaffe raised curbing migration as a central issue in his argument in favour of a vote to leave the European Union (EU).

Citing “fear and resentment that scarce resources in housing, education and the NHS will not be sufficient if a new wave of immigrants comes to Britain,” he complained that “even Cameron’s attempt to limit Polish immigration to Britain was met with a flat rejection by the Polish Prime Minister, Ewa Kopacz”—whom he criticised for being “only too happy to continue to ‘export’ her problems...”

In the midst of these comments, Taaffe makes a half-hearted call for “common action across national boundaries, as well as within nations” to stop the bosses “from exploiting and gaining from divisions within the working class.” But even then, he offers the consolation that this would mean, “many workers would choose to return to the country they were forced to move from...”

Taaffe writes not as a socialist, but as a vulgar advocate of trade unionism. He sees the unprecedented integration of economic life and of the working class itself not as a spur to an ever more concrete posing of the necessity for a socialist and internationalist party, but as a threat to existing national economic relations between the unions and the employers—the labour market is being flooded with cheap labour, therefore immigration must be discouraged.

The SP no longer write as participants with the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) in the No2EU electoral front. The organisation appears to be defunct and to have been supplanted by Trade Unionists Against the European Union (TUAEU). The reason for this is that the RMT is well on its way to re-affiliating to the Labour Party, on the basis that Jeremy Corbyn’s election as leader has supposedly restored it as a political vehicle for the working class. Left out in the cold by their former allies, and with the

bulk of the trade unions taking a pro-EU stance alongside Corbyn, the SP nevertheless argues that the trade unions could even now stop the Leave campaign being “dominated by the reactionary right.”

“The unions still have the chance to put themselves at the head of a working class leave campaign that could transform the situation in Britain,” they write, urging that the unions take pride of place in building an “independent party, with socialist policies and a clear internationalist position, to defeat pro-capitalist politicians ‘at home’ as much as in Brussels.”

This is a political fraud. The trade unions have spent the better part of four decades imposing one defeat after another on the working class, as defenders of capitalism and advocates of the national interests of British imperialism. Divisions between the trade unions are not between “left” and “right”. Those which the SP criticises, such as Unison, argue that Britain’s interests are best served within the EU while those to which it is allied, such as the RMT, argue in favour of national sovereignty while opposing foreign labour for undermining the national compact they have secured with the employers. Both factions and both positions are entirely hostile to the interests of the working class.

The Socialist Workers Party’s (SWP) perspective is only a more disguised version of the same nationalist line and focuses on the possibility of ensuring a defeat for Cameron that they say will pave the way for the election of a Corbyn-led Labour government.

“It is not too late for Labour’s Jeremy Corbyn to shrug off the pressure from the right and launch a left-wing leave campaign. It would condemn Cameron to defeat,” they write. Once again, the pro-capitalist stand of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy is treated as an unfortunate error.

In a February 23 essay claiming to outline “The internationalist case against the European Union,” the SWP’s leader, Alex Callinicos, complains, “Disastrously, a section of the radical left in Britain links opposition to the

EU to rejection of one of its core principles, the free movement of labour.”

Having done so, he manages to criticise Taaffe and the SP without once mentioning the position taken by the RMT. The only implied criticism of the trade unions is by way of an historic detour into the referendum on Britain’s continued membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1975.

Callinicos writes, “The key Tory anti-Marketeer in 1975 was the racist demagogue Enoch Powell, who broke with his party over the EEC in the February 1974 general election,” but the “most powerful support came from left wing cabinet ministers—Michael Foot, Tony Benn, Peter Shore and Barbara Castle—and left-led trade unions such as the Transport and General Workers’ Union (TGWU).”

“The basis of this alliance was inevitably nationalist,” he admits. “Benn, Foot and Powell alike portrayed the EEC as a threat to the sovereignty of the British Parliament.”

This is readily excused with the simple assertion that “for Labour left wingers, this nationalist critique mingled with the concern that restrictions on state sovereignty involved in EEC membership would prevent the pursuit of socialist policies.”

Callinicos readily accepts the protectionist nostrums espoused by Benn and company as socialist policies because he too is wedded to a nationalist programme. Calling for a Leave vote “doesn’t mean that we should simply dismiss the widespread fears that opposing the EU represents a retreat into nationalism,” he states. But, “Strategically the problem is that since the 1980s, but more especially as a result of the eurozone crisis, a Europe-wide neoliberal regime is being constructed. Breaking that is most likely to happen at the national level. To make successful resistance dependent on a coordinated movement at the EU level is to postpone that resistance indefinitely.”

Neil Davidson was until a recent split one of the SWP’s leading theoreticians and still shares its essential outlook. In “A socialist case for leaving the EU”, he makes a more explicit nationalist argument than Callinicos, hailing the supposed reformability of the nation state, and Britain in particular, in contrast to the “supra-national” structures of the EU. He writes:

“Capitalist states are permanent structures until they are overthrown, although they can adopt different policies according to the political parties or coalitions which oversee the apparatus at any time... In fact, behind the façade of continuity, the British state has been one of the most flexible and adaptive states in the history of capitalism and always concedes reforms when forced to, which is one reason why it has managed to survive for so long.”

Davidson’s blasé reference to the overthrow of capitalist

states has nothing to do with the actual programme he advances. His advocacy of a Leave vote is based upon a declaration of support for the “permanent structure” of the state and its strengthening, which flows from his advocacy of an independent capitalist Scotland, through a negotiated constitutional break with the UK, that he hopes will follow a possible Brexit from the EU.

Against the pseudo-left, the Socialist Equality Party intervenes in the referendum campaign in order to clarify the fundamental historical and programmatic issues raised by the struggle against austerity, militarism and war. This is the very opposite of utilising socialist phrases to conceal the political realities of the Leave campaign and of the trade unions in particular.

The working class must secure its independence from all factions of the British bourgeoisie, based upon the adoption of a socialist and internationalist programme. The Vote Leave and Vote Remain options in this referendum are both dominated by right-wing, anti-working class, anti-migrant and pro-capitalist forces and this is not changed one iota by which camp the various representatives of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and their organisations line up behind. The trade unions take their stand on the basis of the nation state and capitalism. The working class must seek to transcend the nationalist division of Europe and the world through socialist revolution.

The United Socialist States of Europe is the only conceivable form through which the working class can exercise its own rule under conditions of the integrated character of production across the continent and globally. It cannot emerge either through the reform of the EU or as a by-product of its nationalist fracturing. It requires the conscious political unification of the working class, under the leadership of the International Committee of the Fourth International. This is the significance of the call by the Socialist Equality Party for an active boycott of the Brexit referendum. It provides a means by which the most farsighted workers and young people can declare their opposition to both the capitalist EU and the nationalist division of the continent and for a socialist alternative.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact