

Socialist Party's TUSC electoral front seeks official "Leave" status in UK Brexit Referendum

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The Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) has applied to the Electoral Commission to be designated as the official representative of the Leave campaign in the referendum on British membership of the European Union (EU) on June 23.

The application unmasks the pretensions of TUSC—an electoral coalition led by the Socialist Party (SP) and the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT)—to be organising an independent, “left” opposition to the big business EU and its agenda of austerity and militarism. It confirms that they are bourgeois tendencies, bitterly hostile to working people and socialism.

TUSC had originally written to the Electoral Commission to ask it to “use its power not to make a leader campaign designation for the Leave outcome” in the referendum. Citing statutory regulations for the establishment of the Electoral Commission and its role in referendums, it argued that none of the designated Leave organisations could be “expected to speak with one voice.”

Noting the right-wing campaign of the Conservative and UK Independence Party (UKIP)-backed Vote Leave and Grassroots Out organisations, it cited the Fifth Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, which had “rejected the idea of obliging anyone who wished to campaign in a referendum to do so under the auspices of a single group as ‘wrong in principle’.”

A statement by the Socialist Party argued that as a “key component of TUSC”, it “will campaign to leave the EU but we will not sign up to a common political platform with reactionary leave supporters...”

Nowhere in its original application did TUSC denounce the anti-democratic character of the Electoral Commission and reject the right of the state to dictate who should be awarded official backing and thus be able to access £600,000 in public funds, campaign broadcasts and free mailshots. Rather, faced with the refusal of the Electoral Commission to meet with TUSC representatives in advance of the April 14 deadline for it to select the lead campaigns, it has applied for the imprimatur of the official Leave campaign.

Its appeal makes clear the opportunist and nationalist calculations motivating the SP and TUSC. The same SP statement acknowledged that a “referendum by its very nature... creates pressures to blur the conflict of interests between workers and capitalists. It reduces a range of issues to one binary question, with the capitalist rulers of the day setting the wording and, they hope, the terms of the debate.”

“This pressure”, it continued, is amplified by the legislation introduced by the Blair Labour government governing referendums, “which builds in the expectation that cross-class campaigns will be created to conduct the debate.”

This is especially relevant to the Brexit referendum. Called as a means of regulating internecine warfare within the bourgeoisie, and the ruling Tory Party in particular, the terms of the referendum—both in its pro and anti-EU stances—are predicated on nationalism, xenophobic opposition to migrants and the destruction of the jobs, conditions and democratic rights of working people.

It is on this basis that the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has made a principled and considered appeal for an Active Boycott of the referendum. The attempt to railroad working people behind two equally reactionary camps takes place against the background of the deliberate whipping up of economic nationalism and anti-migrant sentiment across Europe and internationally. Under conditions in which millions of working people throughout the continent face a common struggle against the catastrophic consequences of the capitalist crisis and EU policies, the Brexit referendum is part of a pre-emptive strike by the bourgeoisie against a developing European-wide insurrection of the working class.

The SEP’s policy is based on the class interests not only of workers in Britain, but across Europe and internationally. The tactic of an Active Boycott is necessary to cut through the confusion generated by the paralysing and nationalist agendas of the Labour Party, trade unions and the pseudo-left—in both the pro and anti-EU camps—and map an independent path for workers and youth based on the development of a mass working class movement against the bourgeoisie and its representatives.

In particular, the SEP statement stresses, “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’.”

On this basis, the SEP argues, “The alternative for workers to the Europe of the transnational corporations is the struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe.”

In sharp contrast, TUSC and the SP are promoting “left nationalism” in the service of a faction of the British bourgeoisie. TUSC’s application for official status is made on the explicit basis that only its campaign—by utilising “left” phraseology against austerity and big business—will be able to reach those workers and youth hostile to the reactionary character of the other Leave camps and thus build sufficient support to secure a vote for exit.

Vote Leave and Grassroots Out fail to “meet the test set down by the 2000 Political Parties and Representation Act requiring referendum campaigners to ‘adequately represent’ all those campaigning for a

desired outcome,” it complains.

They cannot “claim to represent the anti-austerity millions who want their voices to be heard,” Clive Heemskerk, TUSC's national agent, said. “TUSC on the other hand, would provide an alternative anti-austerity, anti-racist and socialist campaign that would offer a far greater challenge to EU supporters than Vote Leave or Grassroots ever could.”

In other words, the SP will seek to conceal the real agenda of the Leave campaign by the Tories and UKIP in whose interests an exit vote will be used.

TUSC's application is being fronted by the SP's Dave Nellist, who issued a challenge to “[Tory London Mayor] Boris Johnson, [Tory MP] Michael Gove, [UKIP leader] Nigel Farage or any other leading figures in the Vote Leave and Grassroots Out organisation.

“Before the Electoral Commission makes its decision on April 14th, let's have a public debate: ‘Who should be the voice of Leave? Trade unionists and socialists—or bankers, Tories and ex-Tories’, he said. “They can choose the venue... but let's have the debate and see who really represents those millions of working class voters who will leave on June 23rd.”

This extraordinary demand is bogus. No one, least of all Johnson, Farage et al, could or would claim to represent “millions of working class voters”. Rather, Nellist's call for a “public debate” is a device through which TUSC and the SP are seeking to establish their political credentials in providing these arch reactionaries with a “left” cover.

In this, TUSC and the SP are following in the footsteps of Respect MP George Galloway, who appeared at the launch of Grassroots Out. As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained, Galloway's appearance—in which he joined forces with Farage to extol the virtues of “British sovereignty” and free trade—did not “muddy” the class line. “It obliterates it”, as epitomised in his call for “Left, right, left, right, forward march.”

On a political level, for all its rhetoric about standing up for workers against bankers, there is nothing fundamentally to distinguish TUSC's Leave campaign from that of the right-wing. In its letter to the Electoral Commission enumerating the differences between TUSC's campaign and those of its nominal opponents, no reference is made to the common interests of workers in the UK with their class brothers and sisters in Europe in the fight against capitalism, as represented by the EU and its component national governments. There is no call for a unified offensive of the working class across national borders, let alone the fight for the United Socialist States of Europe as the only progressive way forward.

This is not accidental. TUSC's arguments are framed entirely from the social interests of a section of the middle class—exemplified by the trade union bureaucracy—who regard the development of such a struggle as a threat to their national privileges, which are dependent on their role in regulating and suppressing the class struggle on behalf of their “own” bourgeoisie.

This is made clear by the SP's and TUSC's writings on the threatened closure of Tata Steel's UK operations. In its March 31 statement, the SP makes no reference to the global capitalist recession as the source of the crisis in the industry, nor the tens of thousands of steel workers' jobs that are being destroyed internationally.

Bemoaning the possibility that a “fundamental part of the [UK] national economy could be lost, and that part of the country's heritage is disappearing,” it cites approvingly, “The former First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff complained that all United Nations Security Council countries had major steel plants to support their defence

industries.

“Even the Daily Mail has asked: ‘...after Labour bailed out the bankers, are the Tories to be remembered as the party that let our steel industry die?’”

Nellist, speaking in his capacity as TUSC national chairman, told BBC Coventry Radio that the government must act to protect Tata Steel because it is a “strategic national industry” of “national importance”.

When the interviewer cited Conservative MP Ken Clarke warning against the dangers of starting a trade war with China, referencing the consequences of the turn to economic protectionism in the 1930s, Nellist dismissed such considerations, stating, “I'm not surprised Ken Clarke either rules out nationalisation and *is against serious measures being taken to control trade.*” [emphasis added]

Such statements confirm the SEP's warning that the pseudo-left's claim to be waging a parallel initiative to the official Leave campaign on a “progressive” and “socialist” basis are a fraud and that their “declared opposition to the Tories and UKIP and their invocation of socialist phrases count for little.”

This is a deepening of the role played by the pseudo-left in the lead-up to the referendum on Scottish independence in September 2014. Repudiating any prospect for a unified struggle for socialism in Britain, they functioned as champions of Scottish nationalism, actively campaigning to recruit workers who were otherwise hostile to the big business Scottish National Party to line up behind its “Yes” campaign.

“Having embraced nationalism in Scotland, these groups are emerging ever more openly as right-wing tendencies. They seek the atomization of the working class and its paralysis in the face of the class enemy,” the SEP wrote, predicting, “It will not be long before they jump into similar alliances with regional capitalist cliques south of the border.

“There is no line they will not cross.”



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