

UK Brexit referendum campaigns officially begin

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Friday was the first official day of the ten-week referendum campaign leading up to the June 23 vote on British membership of the European Union (EU).

The British population will be bombarded over the coming months with propaganda from two right-wing campaigns. While the Leave campaign is headed by right-wing Thatcherite forces within the Tory party and the leader of the anti-immigrant UK Independence Party (UKIP), Nigel Farage, the Remain side has the backing of the deeply unpopular government of Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron and the vast majority of the opposition Labour Party.

Polls indicate the vote will be close, with one ITV survey showing 40 percent in favour of staying within the EU and 39 percent in favour of leaving. Other surveys have divided the population 50-50.

The referendum is taking place under conditions of a deepening crisis for the Conservative government of David Cameron, which was shaken over the past two weeks by revelations from the Panama Papers. These shed light on just a portion of the criminal practices engaged in by Britain's super-rich, who stash their wealth in offshore tax havens while demanding that workers pay for the economic crisis with cuts to wages and public services.

In the lead-up to Friday's launch, the Electoral Commission designated Vote Leave as the official campaign for a Brexit (British withdrawal from the EU), while Britain Stronger in Europe (BSE) was selected as the official Remain group. Both organisations will be able to spend up to £7 million, including £600,000 in public money, and will be given the opportunity to send a mail shot to every address in the UK.

Vote Leave, which combines nationalism with appeals to anti-immigrant chauvinism, is headed by London Mayor Boris Johnson, six Tory ministers and former chancellor under Margaret Thatcher Nigel Lawson.

The Remain campaign is based on the reactionary deal

negotiated by Prime Minister Cameron and the other 27 government heads in Brussels. It includes a clampdown on immigration to Britain by preventing new arrivals from claiming welfare benefits and an exemption from EU financial regulations for the City of London.

Britain Stronger in Europe is chaired by Stewart Rose, the former head of retail giant Marks and Spencer, and has the backing of a significant section of FTSE 100 companies and major British banks. Among BSE's main donors are Lord Sainsbury, the former chairman of the supermarket chain, and Goldman Sachs bank.

Farage accepted the commission's decision, noting that he would be willing to cooperate with all pro-Brexit forces in the upcoming campaign. Significantly, he said Vote Leave was on board with the "immigration issue," making clear it had accepted UKIP's xenophobic stance.

Although Vote Leave's official status means that Grassroots Out, the group cofounded by UKIP and a number of Tory MPs, will receive the far smaller sum of £700,000 in public funds, UKIP is entitled as a political party to spend £4 million during the campaign. The Midlands Industrial Council, a group of businesses who favour a Brexit, has already pledged up to £5 million to Grassroots Out.

Vote Leave began its campaign by fraudulently posing as a defender of public services. Johnson and Labour MP Gisela Stewart, who co-chairs Vote Leave, proclaimed that the £350 million allegedly saved per week by leaving the EU could be reinvested in the National Health Service (NHS). Johnson combined this by striking a thoroughly dishonest pose as the defender of Britain's "democracy and freedom" against EU bureaucracy.

Johnson and Stewart are members of parties that, whenever they have held power over the past three decades, have taken the axe to public spending and built up antidemocratic state structures under the guise of the war on terrorism. The privatisation of the NHS, begun

under the previous Labour government, has been accelerated under Cameron with the full backing of the entire ruling elite.

Remain left it to Labour's Yvette Cooper to answer Vote Leave's claim to support further NHS funding. Cooper was a minister in the former Labour government, which oversaw deep cuts not only to healthcare spending, but also to education, social welfare and other public services.

A day prior to the launch of the campaign, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn delivered a speech in which he reversed his previous opposition to Brussels, based on a programme of economic nationalism, and lined up with the dominant sections of big business in favour of continued EU membership. He laid out his own nationalist programme, urging the EU to adopt protectionist trade measures to prevent the "dumping" of Chinese steel on the continent's market, and claimed that the EU, which has served as the chief instrument for imposing ruthless austerity on workers in Greece and other countries, could defend workers' rights.

In a speech Friday, former Labour Chancellor Alistair Darling spoke on behalf of the dominant sections of the UK's financial elite, who fear that the city of London's position as a global financial centre will be threatened by leaving the EU. "They can't guarantee trade without tariffs," Darling said of the Brexit supporters, "which would put prices up. They can't guarantee investors won't leave Britain, risking jobs. They can't guarantee our service sector will have free access to Europe, hitting growth."

The deepening crisis of global capitalism is driving concern internationally that a vote by Britain to exit the EU could have disastrous consequences. The International Monetary Fund declared this week that a British decision to leave would create uncertainty for investors. A Brexit could result in "severe regional and global damage," it warned.

US President Barack Obama, who is set to visit Britain, has long indicated the White House's preference for London's continued membership. On Friday, a spokesman said that Obama would speak out in favour of the UK staying in the EU if asked. Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national security adviser, said the president "will be very straightforward and candid as a friend on why it's good for the UK to remain in the European Union."

Concern about the impact of a Brexit was bolstered by a report released by the London School of Economics, which projected that of Britain's £1 trillion in foreign

direct investment, one quarter would be withdrawn over the next decade. It warned that real incomes would decline by 3.4 percent.

The Bank of England projects that sterling would decline in value by 20 percent following a vote to leave. At its Monetary Policy Committee meeting in April, the Bank predicted that a Leave vote could produce "an extended period of uncertainty about the economic outlook, including about the prospects for export growth."

There is no avenue on either side of the official campaigns for the interests of the working class to be expressed. A victory for the Leave campaign would strengthen the most right-wing political forces, who are attempting to advance the interests of British capitalism with reactionary appeals to national unity.

The success of Remain would result in Britain continuing as a member of an institution whose programme is leading to the fracturing of Europe and encouraging the re-emergence of the nationalist divisions that plunged the continent into two world wars in the first half of the 20th century. The vote takes place under conditions where the EU is pursuing an inhumane and xenophobic policy towards refugees and imposing devastating austerity measures on workers in every country.

Working people can find a voice only in the campaign of the Socialist Equality Party for an active boycott of the referendum. This is the precondition for the development of a political movement in the working class, fighting on the basis of a socialist and internationalist programme, to oppose the EU and its pro-capitalist, nationalist critics and lead a continent-wide offensive for the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by the United Socialist States of Europe.



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