The political significance of the campaign for an active boycott of the Brexit referendum

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The campaign for the June 23 referendum on Britain's membership in the European Union is officially underway after its launch on Friday. The Socialist Equality Party (Britain) calls for an active boycott of the referendum in opposition to the reactionary nationalism of both official camps. We urge a rejection of both the defenders of the EU and the chauvinist advocates of a British exit in the official Remain and Leave campaigns.

The electorate in Britain is being asked to choose whether to leave the EU or remain on the basis of reactionary concessions negotiated by Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron. These include an "emergency brake" on EU migrants claiming in-work benefits, restrictions on child benefits for EU migrants, and the right of the UK to impose a temporary stop to financial regulations that impact the City of London.

There is no mechanism in this referendum for working people to register opposition to austerity and the national hatreds being whipped up by the entire British political establishment.

To vote Remain is to endorse both the EU—an imperialist bloc dedicated to austerity, militarism and war—and the xenophobic, pro-business agenda of the Cameron government. To vote Leave means supporting Cameron's opponents on the right wing of the Tory party and in the UK Independence Party. They argue that the measures Cameron secured to clamp down on migrants do not go far enough. The position of these forces is that EU legislation cuts across the City of London's ability to act as a global hub of financial parasitism and prevents UK businesses from ramping up the exploitation of working people.

Whether the outcome of the vote is to leave or remain in the EU, bourgeois politics will be shifted even further to the right, along with an intensification of national tensions. In the face of the spread of nationalism and militarism by the ruling classes across Europe and the growing danger of war between nuclear-armed powers, the SEP advocates an active boycott to arm the coming struggles of the working class with a revolutionary socialist and internationalist perspective.

This past week, Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn pledged himself to support the Remain camp, claiming that the EU can be reformed in the interests of the working class. His endorsement of the EU is an attempt to rescue British capitalism from the threat posed to its interests by a possible Brexit, under conditions where the Cameron government is widely reviled and internally divided over Europe.

The reactionary character of the EU was underscored by the announcement just one day after Corbyn's speech that President Barack Obama will visit the UK to solidarise the United States with the Remain campaign. His high-profile endorsement points to the essential function of the EU as a military bulwark within NATO, with the European powers presently engaged not only in bombing missions in Syria, but also in military manoeuvres in all the states and international waters bordering Russia.

Alongside waging war, the EU's two other major preoccupations are the continued imposition of savage austerity and the policing of the borders of Fortress Europe. Greece's creditors are reportedly considering €3 billion more in cuts on top of the package of €5 billion in tax increases and spending cuts already being negotiated. This month, the Syriza government in Greece began deporting hundreds of migrants to Turkey under the March agreement signed between Brussels and Ankara. The thousands more yet to be deported will be kept in concentration camps, guarded by the EU's Frontex forces as warships patrol the

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In opposing the Remain camp, working people and youth can give no support to the Leave campaign. Under conditions of a mass movement of the working class against the EU, involving strikes and appeals for cross-border solidarity with the Greek working class and other victims of EU austerity, a vote to leave the EU could acquire an anti-capitalist character. Under the current conditions, however, a Leave vote would only promote the most nakedly reactionary forces in British politics.

A Leave vote would accelerate the breakup of the EU under the pressure of growing national antagonisms between the European powers and boost far-right forces across the continent. The neo-fascist National Front in France is only one of a host of parties seeking to exploit popular hostility to the EU and channel it in a nationalist, anti-migrant direction—epitomised in Marine Le Pen's depiction of herself as "Madame Frexit."

The greatest danger facing the working class is posed by those aligning themselves with the Leave campaign on the basis of a "left" nationalism that portrays a sovereign British state as the basis for progressive, anti-austerity policies. These are the same forces who hailed the election of Syriza and its perspective of reforming the EU and covered for the Syriza government as it imposed even more drastic austerity measures. Now they call for a "Left Exit" (Lexit), a threadbare cover for a political alliance with extreme right-wing parties.

In urging the rejection of both nationalist camps, the SEP orients its polices to the explosive social discontent that is mounting among masses of workers and youth in Britain and across Europe, and fights to arm this discontent with a revolutionary socialist perspective.

As the mass protests in France against the Socialist Party government of François Hollande demonstrate, there is a growing desire among millions of workers and youth throughout Europe for a fightback against austerity, militarism and war. But this must find independent political expression.

The SEP's call for an active boycott provides the means through which the opposition of working people in the UK to the Cameron government can be articulated and connected with the emerging movement of the working class throughout the continent. It will advance the struggle to build the SEP in Britain and the International Committee of the Fourth International across Europe as the necessary leadership to take forward the struggle for a genuinely socialist and internationalist movement against the EU and its constituent governments.

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