

"Left Leave" Brexit campaign: Apologists for nationalism and defenders of capitalism

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The Socialist Workers Party, the Communist Party of Britain, the Indian Workers Association, Counterfire, and the Rail and Maritime Transport union have launched what they describe as a united “left-wing campaign” for a Leave vote in the June 23 referendum on Britain’s membership of the European Union (EU).

An article posted on *Socialist Worker* claimed that the formation of “Lexit,” as this campaign is dubbed, would be “an alternative for those faced with an unpalatable choice between [Prime Minister] David Cameron’s pro-business campaign to stay in the EU and the existing Leave campaigns dominated by the xenophobic right.”

It is nothing of the sort. Rather, it provides an object lesson in the gulf between a principled approach to the referendum, based on the concern to elaborate an independent, socialist policy for the working class in Britain and Europe, and one that rejects this in favour of the promotion of “left” nationalism and tactical expediency.

The Socialist Equality Party is irreconcilably hostile to the EU. The EU is an instrument of the major European imperialist powers for driving forward trade and military measures against their global rivals, and a social counter-revolution against workers across the continent.

But the “Brexit” referendum is not motivated by opposition to the reactionary character of the EU. It is the product of a faction fight within the Conservative Party and its fringes, especially around the UK Independence Party (UKIP). As a result, the Leave and Remain campaign are both headed by neo-liberal, Thatcherite forces, equally committed to austerity, anti-immigrant chauvinism, militarism and war. Their differences are solely over whether these are better achieved within or outside the EU.

There is no “lesser evil” between these two camps. Whatever the outcome of the referendum, it is the working class that will pay the price through a stepped-up offensive against jobs, living standards and democratic rights.

The SEP opposes all efforts to corral workers behind one or another bourgeois clique, based on a “yes” or “no” answer to the referendum question—Remain or Leave. Our call for an active boycott of the referendum is the means through which we seek to oppose the noxious poison of nationalism and cut through the confusion created by the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, and their pseudo-left apologists on both sides of the campaign, to provide workers and youth with an independent class orientation: No to the EU and British nationalism—For the United Socialist

States of Europe.

In contrast, Left Leave makes virtually no reference to the common class issues facing working people in Europe, let alone call for a unified struggle. While bemoaning the EU’s onslaught against Greece, they omit to mention that they promoted the Syriza government in Athens as a progressive and even socialist alternative. With Syriza now imposing EU-dictated austerity, the groups constituting Left Leave are politically responsible for this betrayal of Greek workers and youth, which has played a major role in enabling the right wing in Europe to gain the upper hand.

While acknowledging the reactionary character of the referendum campaign, the Lexit forces argue that by making criticisms of the EU from the “left”, they will reach those “distrustful of the mainstream arguments on either side” and make “our voices heard” above the general right-wing “clamour” so as to ensure a “radical” vote for Leave. But there is nothing left or radical about their critique, which centres on refuting the pro-Remain campaign’s predictions of an economic disaster should Britain exit by glorifying the existing situation in the UK and, in particular, the strength of British parliamentary democracy.

The Socialist Workers Party’s “Six myths about the EU” does not mention the words capitalism, big business or corporations at all! Instead, it counterposes to the bogus claim that the EU is a guarantor of workers’ rights the claim that “some British workplace legislation, such as health and safety, is stronger than the EU demands” and that “Much of EU employment law has also been implemented through British legislation, and is often stronger than the EU requires.”

This is a picture of social relations in the UK that few—outside the tenured academics that populate the higher echelons of the pseudo-left groups—would recognise, especially the millions on zero-hour contracts who have no protections whatsoever.

Regarding democratic rights, the SWP argues that Britain’s “human rights provisions come through international treaties,” none of which “have anything to do with the EU,” and, as they are “now British law...won’t be repealed if we leave the EU.” This is said of a country that has led the way in the assault on civil liberties under the guise of the “war on terror,” including imprisonment without trial and targeted assassination.

It gets worse. Answering concerns that immigrants will be “kicked out” of the UK if the ballot goes in favour of an exit, the SWP responds complacently, “Bosses need European migrants—and if Britain left the EU, they would not be kicked out.”

“Mass deportations or even a tough visa regime would risk economic disaster,” the SWP asserts. “The majority of tourists come to Britain from Europe, a market bosses don’t want to endanger.”

After a vote to leave, the two-thirds of foreign nationals in Britain who are from outside the EU “would be unaffected,” the SWP soothes. Anyhow, “visa-free travel is allowed from Brazil, and Irish immigrants already have more rights than other EU nationals.”

In fact, the Leave campaign intends to severely restrict immigration through the imposition of an Australian-style points system.

The SWP’s rose-coloured view of the UK—where a rational, risk-adverse bourgeoisie presides over a flourishing, classless and timeless democracy—differs in no way from that presented by the right-wing Leave camp. It dovetails with the claim made by leading Tory Michael Gove that a British exit would spark “the democratic liberation of a whole continent” and be “a reassertion of the system of democratic self-government pioneered by Britain and copied all over the world.”

The Communist Party’s *Morning Star* is more explicit still. Complaining of the efforts by media columnists to portray opposition to the EU as rooted “in an out-of-date and simplistic rejection of the ‘capitalist club’ that is the EU,” it insists, “Actually it was, and is, about democracy.”

If Left Leave’s opposition to the EU is not motivated by anti-capitalism, then its evoking of democracy is nothing more than a variant of the paeans to “national sovereignty” delivered by Gove et al.

What then do the Lexit allies claim are the benefits for working people of supporting a Leave vote? Alex Snowden, for Counterfire, opposing what he describes as the “pessimism of those who see the consequences of exit as an automatic shift to the right,” argues that a Brexit vote will lead to Cameron’s fall and his replacement by a Labour government under Jeremy Corbyn. Labour will apparently proceed to nationalise everything in sight and build Jerusalem in England’s Green and Pleasant Land.

Theirs is a fake optimism, aimed at politically chloroforming working people. Outside of the working class intervening into this crisis as a conscious, independent force, the beneficiaries of a Brexit will be the most ultra-right sections of the Tory Party and UKIP. The nationalism they seek to generate in the Brexit campaign is aimed at providing the ideological basis for deepening their offensive against working people. The Lexit campaign facilitates these plans.

It is striking that the pseudo-left Leave backers never attempt to square their grandiose claims as regards a Corbyn-led government with the fact that the Labour leader is the key proponent of a Remain vote. Snowden complains that Corbyn is helping Cameron deliver “the vote he needs to survive,” but does not make the obvious point that Corbyn’s conversion to the EU cause is intended to reassure the dominant sections of British capital that he will defend their interests, regardless of his former “left” rhetoric. It is of a piece with statements by his fellow “left” shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, that a Labour government “will be absolutely ruthless about how we manage our spending.”

On that basis, the party has instructed Labour councils, which control spending in every major city and town, to impose the austerity measures demanded by the Conservatives. That is why the venal right-winger Richard Littlejohn can state in the *Daily Mail*, “And, frankly, I would prefer to live in an independent Britain under a democratically elected Labour government than stay part of a sclerotic superstate with a pro-EU Tory puppet in No. 10.” At least we could “kick them out and replace them with other candidates who are capable of leading an independent nation.”

One further significant point should be noted. The SWP lists negatively—as one of the “four freedoms” guaranteed to big business by membership of the EU—the right to “hire labour across its member states.” The implication is that the right of workers to seek employment wherever they can is one Left Leave thinks must be quashed.

Opposition to free movement of labour places Left Leave in the same trench as UKIP and is understood in this way amongst its supporters. *Socialist Worker* reports that at the Left Leave launch, “there was some debate from the floor on whether or not to campaign with the right,” citing John Hamilton from Lewisham People Before Profit who said, “I’ve been on the same stall with UKIP people.”

The article makes no negative political comment on this admission, publishing just two one-line personal comments from individuals opposing collaboration with UKIP.

As the SEP explains in its statement, the pseudo-left’s indifference to the “actual forces being strengthened by the Leave campaign” means they “are subordinating the working class to an initiative aimed at shifting political life even further along a nationalist trajectory, thereby strengthening and emboldening the far right in the UK and across Europe, while weakening the political defences of the working class. Having helped release the genie of British nationalism, they are politically responsible for its consequences.”



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