UK Brexit referendum campaign dominated by xenophobia and war rhetoric

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The June 23 referendum on continued UK membership of the European Union began as a means of deciding a factional dispute within the Conservative government over the best means to advance the interests of British imperialism.

As the campaign has unfolded, the agenda of both sides has been shown to be dictated by the growth of national antagonisms and the resulting danger of military conflict. This accounts for the filthy mixture of jingoism and xenophobia being forced on the UK electorate in an attempt to create the necessary climate of reaction for the shared agenda of all sections of Britain's ruling elite.

With opposed claims regarding the potential economic impact of an exit from the EU relegated to the background, the Remain campaign has focused instead on the negative impact on Britain's security and that of Europe flowing from a decision to leave. Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron's keynote Remain speech on Monday cited the threat of terrorism, but focused overwhelmingly on the need to combat what he described as a "newly belligerent Russia" as the main reason for remaining in the EU. This, he argued, was necessary to maintain and reinforce the NATO military alliance.

He was backed by an extraordinary international alliance of spies and warmongers, including US President Barack Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry, 13 former US defence and foreign affairs chiefs, five ex-NATO secretaries-general and the former heads of Britain's MI5 and MI6 Jonathan Evans and Sir John Sawers. The former NATO heads warned that a Brexit would "give succour to the West's enemies."

To this rogues' gallery was added a campaign video showing four veterans who fought in the Second World War, including Lord Bramall, the former head of the Armed Forces.

The Vote Leave campaign, headed by the Tory right, was incensed at being so politically outgunned, and responded with statements overtly hostile to the European powers—including former Tory Party head Iain Duncan Smith complaining of a German veto on UK policy and Justice Minister Michael Gove announcing that cabinet ministers backing Brexit have drawn up a draft bill to prevent the EU interfering with the UK's intelligence services.

But to make absolutely clear that the two camps share a pro-war agenda and a determination to target Russia, former Tory defence secretary Liam Fox declared that a Brexit would "give an impetus to the political aspect of NATO." He continued: "My worry is that you have far too few European countries pulling their weight inside NATO, seeing the EU as some sort of soft option for them in terms of defence."

The main platform of the Leave campaign has been to beat the anti-immigrant drum, with its most prominent figure, outgoing London Mayor Boris Johnson, complaining, "We have no powers to control the number of people coming from the EU with no qualifications," and Duncan Smith insisting, "The only way to take back control of our borders is to Vote Leave on 23 June."

The referendum campaign has exposed the dangers confronting the working class as a result of the growing conflict between the imperialist powers over control of the world's strategic resources and markets—above all, those presently controlled by Russia and China. However, no genuine alternative is offered by either the Remain Campaign of the Labour Party and Trades Union Congress, or by the Left Leave campaign of the UK's main pseudo-left groupings.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn makes a feint of

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political independence by refusing to share a platform with Cameron, but this is a fraud. He shares a *political* platform with the government by defending the EU and saying absolutely nothing about its policies of austerity and war.

For its part, the Left Leave campaign, made up of the RMT and ASLEF rail unions, the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain, the Socialist Workers Party and Counterfire, does not advance a socialist opposition to the EU. Indeed, they are wholly indifferent to the fate of the European and international working class.

Their role is to encourage a national reformist approach among workers and young people by arguing that an exit from the EU and what they call a return to British sovereignty will allow Labour to come to power and free Corbyn from its pro-market restraints. As if Corbyn had not already performed one political capitulation after another without any prodding from Brussels!

Left Leave's pro-Labour propaganda is combined with constant efforts to minimise the danger represented by the right-wing forces dominating the official Leave campaign.

There is not a single article critical of the official campaign on the Left Leave web site outside of one line referencing "the reactionary anti-EU campaigning of UKIP (the anti-immigrant UK Independence Party) and the Tory right." Instead, Counterfire's Chris Bambery sets out to explain why the referendum debate is "not the orgy of racism that so many predicted," and laments that "some continue to be fixated about combating UKIP."

Another article goes so far as to solidarise with UKIP as the supposed victim of "McCarthy-like campaigns directed at those who have a different vision for Britain," and complain that UKIP is "dismissed as a far-right group bordering on the fascist."

The Socialist Equality Party's decision to campaign for an active boycott of the EU referendum has been fully vindicated. Our February 29 statement explained that the Remain and Leave campaigns are both headed by Thatcherite forces whose differences "are over how best to defend the interests of British capitalism against its European and international rivals under conditions of economic slump and the escalation of militarism and war."

It is not a question, therefore, of choosing the "lesser evil" because "both options are equally rotten. Any possibility of an independent voice for the working class being registered has been deliberately excluded."

As the statement explains, "British workers cannot find a way out of the current economic and political impasse on the basis of a nationalist programme." Our campaign for an active boycott is bound up with the task of building an international, anti-capitalist and socialist movement in opposition to austerity, militarism and war "based on the working class, the great revolutionary force in society."

Against the advocates of British nationalism and apologists for the EU, the SEP seeks to unify the European working class in a common offensive for the United Socialist States of Europe.

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