The case for an active boycott of the Brexit referendum

Chris Marsden
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In less than three weeks, the June 23 referendum will determine whether the UK remains a member of the European Union. The decision will have long-term political repercussions for workers throughout the continent.

The Socialist Equality Party of Britain is calling for an active boycott of the referendum.

Presented as a vehicle for allowing the "people" to decide, the referendum is in reality highly undemocratic. It offers only a binary choice for workers and young people to declare for one of two officially constituted campaigns, both of which are led by pro-business, pro-austerity, militarist, anti-worker, anti-migrant forces drawn from opposed wings of the Conservative Party: one led by Prime Minister David Cameron and the other by Boris Johnson, the former mayor of London.

The SEP is irreconcilably hostile to the European Union. But our opposition is from the left, not the right.

The EU is a mechanism for the subjugation of the continent to the dictates of the financial markets and a forum in which competing states fight amongst themselves and conspire against the working class. Working people cannot therefore extend support to the Remain campaign. It is shaped by the interests of Britain's corporate elite, who regard EU membership as essential to their ability to compete internationally—above all, by imposing draconian austerity measures on the workers of the continent—and the ability of NATO to successfully pursue an agenda of militarism and war against Russia and China.

However, the opposed Leave campaign is dominated by the most right-wing forces in Britain, including the xenophobic UK Independence Party, whose railing against the "Brussels bureaucracy" is nothing more than a demand to end all vestigial limitations on the dictatorship of big business and the financial parasites of the City of London. The Leave campaign is focused almost exclusively on demands to "take back control" of the UK's borders in order to clamp down on EU migration—blaming migrants for the collapse of essential social services that have been gutted by years of anti-working class measures implemented by successive Labour and Conservative governments.

Cameron would like nothing more than to express his full agreement with such anti-migrant rhetoric, if only it were not directed against him for failing to meet his commitment to cut net migration to less than 100,000 a year.

It is to create the best conditions for consciously establishing the political independence of the working class from both reactionary camps in the referendum that we have called for an active boycott.

No one else speaks for the working class.

The Labour Party, under Jeremy Corbyn, together with the Trades Union Congress, have lined up behind the Remain vote, claiming that the EU offers checks on the actions of the Tory government and can be reformed in alliance with other "progressive forces" on the continent.

Corbyn has specified as his allies Syriza in Greece and the Socialist Party government of Francois Hollande in France. But Syriza is imposing more savage austerity measures than its predecessors as a condition for maintaining EU membership, while Hollande is ramming through anti-worker legislation that has sparked a wave of strikes and protests, which his government has met with brutal repression. Should he ever come to power, Corbyn would do the same.

Pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party claim to offer the possibility of a Left Leave. But the alternative they

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propose consists of the argument that the EU must be broken up so that a future Labour government can implement a few minimal reforms. In pursuit of this will-o'-the-wisp they take every opportunity to dismiss the threat posed by the ability of the extreme right across Europe to exploit anti-EU sentiment on the basis of nationalism and anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Only this week, the leader of France's National Front, Marine Le Pen, gave an interview to RT in which she complained that "the European Union supports tens of millions of immigrants" coming "onto the European Union labour market to push down wages." She continued, "So, in fact they have betrayed, if you like, the working class."

None of this matters to the Left Leave crowd.

Proclaiming their refusal to "abandon the referendum to the racists," the SWP declares, "The racist Tory right and UKIP, not the left, brought up the debate on the EU. They, not us, are the most visible face of 'Brexit.' That much is true, but it doesn't follow that they would be the ones to benefit… The biggest beneficiary so far of the Tories' EU splits has been Jeremy Corbyn… Telling people that the choice is between Cameron, the EU and the bosses on one hand and Farage and the racists on the other is dangerously counterproductive."

For the SWP, it is always "counterproductive" to tell workers the truth: That a victory for the right wing strengthens... the right wing. And that Corbyn has proved again and again that he will not fight the right wing, even in his own party, and has declared in favour of EU membership.

The referendum raises fundamental questions of perspective and orientation—either capitalist nationalism or socialist internationalism.

The SEP does not advocate the break-up of the EU on the basis of economic nationalism and anti-immigrant xenophobia. We say that workers and young people must oppose the EU on an independent class perspective—not the nationalist splintering of the continent, but the development of a common offensive against both the EU and its constituent governments.

Everywhere, amid deepening economic crisis, free trade is giving way to trade war, financial security to insecurity and joblessness, prosperity to austerity, the free movement of people to the erection of razor wire borders and concentration camps, democracy to dictatorship and the rise of the fascist right.

The collapse of the EU is preparing the way for an explosion of the very national antagonisms it was meant to end. Unless the working class intervenes, the end result will be humanity dragged once again into the maelstrom of world war.

The struggle for a socialist Britain within a United Socialist States of Europe is not a propaganda slogan, but a burning necessity for workers who, in every country, face the same class enemy and the same problems of austerity and war. To end these dangers, the grip of the financial oligarchy over society must be broken and the economy liberated from the restrictions placed upon it by the profit system and the division of the world into antagonistic nation states.

British workers have powerful allies in waging such an offensive.

Across Europe—mass strikes and protests in France, a strike wave in Belgium, general strikes against the Syriza government in Greece—we are seeing the initial stages of a continent-wide movement of the working class, fuelled by mass alienation from official political parties of both the nominal left and right that speak only for big business and the super-rich.

Before and after the referendum, the SEP will orient workers in the UK to this international development and provide political leadership. With our comrades internationally, we will lay the basis for the building of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International as the new socialist and internationalist leadership of the European and international working class.

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