

UK: Why are the Socialist Workers Party and the Greens debating the merits of the European Union?

Robert Stevens
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The Green Party and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) are holding a national tour billed as the “Left Debate on the EU”. This will culminate in a debate between Green Party leader Natalie Bennett and the SWP’s Joseph Choonara at the SWP’s upcoming “Marxism” event in July, “Where next after the EU referendum?”

The Greens are part of “Another Europe is Possible”, which they describe as the “progressive EU alliance” in the campaign for the June 23 referendum on continued UK membership, in which they are working closely with the Labour Party. The SWP is part of Left Leave, in alliance with the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain, the Maoist Indian Workers Association, the SWP split-off Counterfire and the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union.

The SWP and Greens are well aware that their participation in the referendum campaign has damaged them politically. The Greens stand in same trench as Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron and the dominant sections of the ruling elite in backing the EU, specialising in peddling claims that it functions as a progressive brake on Cameron’s own government.

Left Leave focuses most of its energies arguing that the xenophobic character of an official Leave campaign in which right-wing Tory leaders and representatives of the UK Independence Party demand Britain “take back control of our borders” is secondary to the possibility that the Conservative schism over Europe creates conditions for a Labour government under Jeremy Corbyn.

The tour, in which each side accepts the stated political motives of the other and their claim to speak for “progressive opinion”, serves to provide a mutual

amnesty for their real role as backers or apologists for different wings of the British bourgeoisie dedicated to the pursuit of austerity, anti-migrant measures and war. Being part of opposing camps on the issue of the EU referendum is treated for what it is—a tactical disagreement between political friends.

Central to this charade is the claim that they are both determined opponents of racism, to which end they cynically utilise the fate of hundreds of thousands of refugees seeking access to the EU and the UK.

The necessity for adopting a leftist pose is seen in the paucity of their justifications for supporting Remain or Leave.

At the Manchester debate last week, Bennett claimed the EU was a haven of workers’ rights. One would not know from her comments that the EU has been at the forefront of imposing devastating attacks on working people in Greece and throughout the continent since the 2008 financial crash.

In truth, the Greens’ support for the EU is based on their own pro-capitalist programme. The party’s web site warns that the EU “gives British businesses, both small and big, access to a 500-million strong market”, and that “leaving the EU would risk economic stability in Britain.”

Aware of mass disillusionment throughout Europe in all the capitalist parties and institutions, Bennett argued, “We need a huge amount of reform [in Britain], but that doesn’t mean the answer is to give up on Westminster or give up on democracy... I think the answer is to stay in with Westminster and fight to reform it, just as we need to stay in as part of the EU and fight to reform that.”

Choonara rubbished fears that a leave vote would

strengthen the right wing. With criminal light-mindedness he argued, “The reality of the EU referendum campaign is not the threat from the right.” Should former Conservative London Mayor Boris Johnson—the leading light in the official Leave camp—come to power following a vote for Brexit, he would “inherit a disastrously damaged, weakened Tory government, and that government will not survive.”

At the meeting, Bennett said she supported open borders and “celebrated the free movement of people.” For this she was praised by Choonara, who said, “I think the stance that Natalie has taken over refugees and migrants is absolutely commendable.”

After this mutual backslapping, the meeting concluded with a call for everyone to support a “Convoy to Calais” being organised by number of groups, including the Stop the War Coalition, People’s Assembly and seven national trade unions. Its stated aim is to “deliver aid of any sort, material or financial,” to refugees living in squalid conditions in the northern French port town of Calais.

It is hard to imagine a more deeply cynical exercise than this transparent effort to utilise the terrible plight of refugees in Calais and throughout Europe as political camouflage.

Bennett regularly gives speeches peppered with phrases opposing “Fortress Europe” and “Fortress Britain”. However, the reality is that the Greens support the EU, which is imposing Fortress Europe. The deal reached with the EU by Cameron, which will be implemented should Remain win, pledges further attacks on the rights of EU migrants.

The SWP’s “fight” against Fortress Europe is centred on the coming to power of the most xenophobic sections of the Tory party.

The SWP routinely employ the argument that demands by Johnson and UKIP leader Nigel Farage to end free movement to EU citizens is of no importance because the main issue at stake is to open all borders. But this is just rhetorical blather, which commits them to nothing. Above all, it is intended to avoid any conflict with the SWP’s Stalinist trade union allies in the Leave campaign, especially the RMT, which has argued for years that the “free movement of labour” must be opposed as a mechanism for “social dumping.” (Barring these three smaller unions, the rest of the UK’s trade unions are signed up to the Remain

campaign—with the Trades Union Congress declaring its support for “the freedom of movement of workers in the European Union” and “a managed migration system for those outside the EU.”)

The donation of a few tins of soup and bottles of water to refugees at Calais does nothing to offset the union’s portrayal of migrants as a threat to working conditions—conditions that the unions themselves are responsible for through their suppression and betrayal of all struggles against big business and the government.

The longer-term purpose of the Green/SWP debates is to ensure that, after June 23, this temporary fallout between friends is forgotten as quickly as possible so they can resume their collaboration. It should be remembered that during the 2015 General election campaign Bennett led calls for a “progressive alliance” between Labour and the Greens, to be bolstered by other pro-capitalist parties, the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru (the Party of Wales). At that point they were spurned by then-Labour leader Ed Miliband, but they hope that Corbyn will be more amenable.



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