

UK trade union federation calls for Britain to remain in EU

Robert Stevens**11 June 2016**

This week, the leaders of 10 trade unions affiliated with the Trades Union Congress (TUC) issued a letter in the *Guardian* newspaper calling on their members to vote to remain in the European Union (EU) in the June 23 referendum.

The list includes the leaders of Britain's two largest unions, Len McCluskey (Unite) and Dave Prentis (Unison). The other signatories are Tim Roache (GMB), Manuel Cortes (Transport Salaried Staffs' Association—TSSA), John Smith (Musicians' Union), Dave Ward (Communication Workers Union—CWU), Matt Wrack (Fire Brigades Union), John Hannett (Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers—USDAW), Gerry Morrissey (Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union—BECTU) and Roy Rickhuss (Community).

The TUC itself has officially called for a Remain vote in the upcoming referendum. It claims an affiliated membership of 5.8 million workers. Four million of these are in unions supporting the Remain campaign, led by Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron and backed by the Labour Party. Just over 100,000 are represented by the three unions in favour of leaving the EU—the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT), the train drivers union ASLEF and the Bakers, Food and Allied Food Workers Union. Around 2 million workers are in unions that have not declared support for either the Remain or Leave campaigns.

The unions supporting the Leave campaign do so from the standpoint of economic nationalism, which serves to divide the working class in Britain from their class brothers and sisters in Europe and globally. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), opposes both the Remain and Leave campaigns and is calling for an active boycott of the referendum.

The trade unions, corporatist and right-wing organisations allied to the ruling class and the state, have no right to speak for any worker on any question, including the attitude they should take to the EU. The TUC's claim that only if Britain remains in the EU can workers have protection from the

attacks on jobs, wages and conditions being carried out by the Conservative government is utterly cynical. The TUC is backing a Remain campaign headed by the Conservatives and fronted by Cameron.

Its support and reported financing of the Remain campaign is based on a filthy agreement reached last month in which it secured a few concessions, related largely to maintaining the union bureaucracy's income stream from members' dues, in exchange for allowing the Tories to pass the draconian Trade Union Act. The TUC saw to it that the legislation would pass unopposed even as it admitted that the law attacked "the right to strike—a fundamental British liberty."

Last week, TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady released a document, "Better Off In," which claims that workers would lose an average of £38 a week as the result of a Brexit (British exit from the EU). The document notes that this is at a time when, due to years of austerity, real wages are still £40 a week below their levels prior to the 2008 global financial crash. The TUC says a Brexit would threaten many jobs in the UK manufacturing sector. Although comprising just 10 percent of the economy, manufacturing jobs would be hit seven times harder than those in the services sector because so much is exported to the EU, the document states.

Of course, O'Grady makes no attempt to explain why and how the TUC has allowed this assault on the working class to proceed, under Labour as well as Conservative governments.

The position of the TUC and Labour Party is being coordinated at the highest levels of the British government, as the millions of members and voters they hope to mobilise are critical to the success of the Remain camp in the referendum. The *Guardian* noted that O'Grady's "intervention, which is part of the Stronger In campaign being coordinated from Downing Street, is aimed at convincing Labour voters and traditional trades union supporters that they should vote to stay in the EU."

O'Grady makes political capital out of the fact that some of the main representatives of the Leave camp in the

Conservative Party are associated with attacks on the working class, stating, “I think people know a phoney when they see it. It’s a bit like [former Work and Pensions Secretary] Iain Duncan Smith pretending to be the friend of the poor, when everyone knows he was the minister for food banks. Has Priti Patel [Tory Employment Minister] ever struggled to pay the gas bill? I doubt it.”

Patel stated recently that she wanted to “halve the burden of the EU social and employment legislation” on businesses. This is code for removing every impediment to the ability of corporations to increase profits at the expense of pay and conditions.

The letter from the union bosses also states that “maternity and paternity rights, equal treatment for full-time, part-time and agency workers, and the right to paid leave” would “be under great threat” from a Tory government led by figures such as Duncan Smith and Justice Secretary Michael Gove. After Brexit, they would have “an unrestricted, unchecked opportunity to attack our current working rights.”

Every worker knows that Gove, Patel, Duncan Smith, et al are no “friends of the poor,” but this also applies in spades not only to Cameron, but also to the TUC itself. The unions have imposed everything demanded by the ruling class over decades, accelerating their collaboration since the 2008 crash. A TUC report notes, “Workers in the UK have endured the longest and steepest decline in real earnings for a century and a half,” adding that “real earnings are still 6 percent below the pre-crisis peak (in 2007)—and far below any other comparable decline.”

The letter documents the “material reduction in the number of full-time employee posts,” now standing at just 62.5 percent of all jobs—down from 64.4 percent ahead of the crisis. “This shortfall of around 2 percent corresponds to around 600,000 full-time jobs,” it states.

“Second, 3.2 million people are underemployed—which is up around 900,000 since the crisis... Likewise, there are 8.5 million part-time jobs, up from 7.5 million ahead of the crisis.”

The TUC cites official statistics showing that for October–December 2015, the number of workers on zero hour contracts increased by 15 percent over the previous year, reaching 801,000. This equates to one in 40 workers (2.5 percent of all those employed).

None of this would have been possible without the assistance of the trade unions, which have suppressed every struggle by workers and youth under successive governments led by their Remain allies, the Labour and Tory parties.

The TUC makes clear it fears that a Brexit could undermine the ability of British firms to compete and disrupt the unions’ cosy relations with the employers. “Better Off

In” states that employment rights applicable within EU legislation “are not impediments to business nor a drain on national resources.” They offer “protection to workers and [help] employers to build high productivity companies.” The document continues: “Good employment practices boost workforce morale and motivation, which has a direct impact on productivity and profitability.”

The TUC stresses that under this framework, workers are “much more likely to embrace change and developments such as the introduction of new technologies or working practices.” It continues: “Workers who are consulted about the way in which change is introduced are much more likely to buy into that change, without their levels of commitment and morale being damped.” This plays a “vital role in facilitating innovation, productivity and true adaptability.”

The report notes that EU austerity policies have led to unprecedented social devastation across the continent, with “brutal” cuts imposed in Greece. But it does so only to complain that “[T]here has been a retreat from the social dimension that helped build support for the EU amongst working people.”

“Better Off In” states, “Leaving the EU poses big risks for wages and good jobs—but the EU must rediscover its social mission if it is to deliver more for working people.”

Far from a return to some golden age of a “social Europe” as promised by the TUC and the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn, the only “social mission” of the EU now and in the future is the systematic impoverishment of the working class on behalf of the major corporations and the super-rich.



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