

For an active boycott of the Brexit referendum: Socialist internationalism versus left nationalism

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The Socialist Equality Party of Britain is campaigning for an active boycott of the upcoming referendum on UK membership in the European Union. The following is a speech delivered by Chris Marsden, national secretary of the SEP, at meetings in Manchester and Sheffield.

A final meeting will be held in London on June 14. It will be addressed by Peter Schwarz, secretary of the International Committee of the Fourth International and leading member of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit in Germany. Full details of the meeting are here.

The June 23 referendum on continued UK membership of the European Union needs to be understood for what it really is.

Portrayed as the most democratic of instruments because it allows the “people” to decide, it is highly undemocratic. There is only a binary choice to be made, either to Remain or to Leave. There is no opportunity to register an argument as to why you are in favour or against remaining in the EU because for that to take place there must be a party that advances a political argument, a programme, with which you can express your agreement.

For that reason, all that is on offer to workers and young people is to declare for one of two officially constituted campaigns, both of which are led by right-wing, pro-business, pro-austerity, militarist, anti-worker, anti-migrant forces drawn from opposed wings of the Conservative Party. One is led by Prime Minister David Cameron and the other by Boris Johnson, the former mayor of London.

I will spend some of my time tonight addressing the arguments of the advocates of what they themselves call a “Left Leave” option, or Lexit: the Socialist Workers Party, the Socialist Party, Counterfire, the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain and just three trade unions—the Rail Maritime and Transport Union, the train drivers union ASLEF, and the Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union. This is not because they represent a major political alternative, but because they claim to and don’t.

The objective role they play is to subordinate the working class to the open political representatives of sections of the British ruling elite, most immediately the Eurosceptic wing of the Tories and the UK Independence Party, but also to the other leading force in the pro-EU Remain camp, the Labour Party led by Jeremy Corbyn and the Trades Union Congress (TUC).

Our statement, “For an active boycott of the Brexit referendum,” clearly lays out our own approach and I will cite some key passages.

We explain first of all: “The SEP is irreconcilably hostile to the European Union, but our opposition is from the left, not the right. The EU is not an instrument for realising the genuine and necessary unification of Europe. It 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...”

“No support can be extended to the Remain campaign. This option has

the backing of much of Britain’s corporate elite, who regard EU membership as essential to their ability to compete internationally—not least through a continued offensive against the living standards of the working class throughout the continent. It also has the support of the United States and the major European powers, which fear that a British exit (Brexit) could provide the catalyst for the EU’s unravelling and jeopardise the NATO alliance and its agenda of militarism and war...”

Over the past weeks, we have written extensively against the EU and the forces dominating the Remain campaign. We note firstly the role played by the EU in imposing devastating social attacks on the working class of Greece, Portugal, Ireland, Spain—which provides an unanswerable refutation of the claims made by Corbyn, Labour and the TUC that the EU offers social protection to the working class.

Secondly, we have noted the increasingly strident invocations of national security and the danger of war with Russia used to support EU membership. However, our statement then explains:

“None of this imparts a progressive character to the Leave campaign, or justifies lending even the most critical support to it. Its claim that the British parliament and its parties are any less instruments for imposing the wishes of finance capital than the EU is a transparent fraud...”

“British workers cannot find a way out of the current economic and political impasse on the basis of a nationalist programme. The notion of returning to an isolated and sovereign British state in today’s global economy is as archaic as Stonehenge...”

The Leave campaign is led by staunch advocates of austerity who have worked alongside Cameron to implement attacks that have devastated the lives of millions. This basic fact needs emphasising because we now have the disgusting spectacle of Gove, Johnson, Priti Patel and even Nigel Farage of the UK Independence Party posturing as defenders of the poor worker, the NHS and the welfare state from what they claim is exclusively EU-driven austerity.

The reality is that austerity is “Made in Britain” and has gone further here than most anywhere else. In 2014, the TUC, which now sides with Cameron, noted that whereas the government’s original proposals expected austerity to amount to 6.7 percent of GDP, “This is now expected to reach 10.3 percent, increasing in cash terms from £120 billion to £210 billion.”

According to the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR), real per capita spending on public services will be cut by 23 percent between 2007/8 and 2018/19. This means that between 2014/15 and 2019/20, spending on public services, administration and grants by central government is projected to fall from £5,650 to £3,880 per head in 2014/15 prices.

This is set to worsen after June 23. Around 60 percent of cuts will be delivered in this parliament, with the OBR noting that the “implied

squeeze on local authority spending is simply severe.”

By this month, government funding for councils is estimated to be 53 percent lower than it was in 2010, after Chancellor George Osborne made an additional £4 billion in cuts this year. The OBR said the chancellor’s plans would mean one million additional government job losses, a 20 percent fall overall. The Institute for Fiscal Studies warned that “colossal” cuts to the state would take total government spending to its lowest level as a proportion of national income since before the Second World War. By the end of the process, “the role and shape of the state will have changed beyond recognition.”

Then there is the warmongering on both sides. In backing Remain, Corbyn is lining up behind British imperialism’s alliance with Washington in furtherance of NATO’s war preparations against Russia and China, which now involve military operations in every state and all of the waters surrounding Russia. Cameron described EU membership as essential to combating a “newly belligerent Russia.” He was backed by 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.

This week, the largest military exercise ever staged by NATO in Europe takes place, involving 30,000 troops, mainly from the US and Poland, as well as 3,000 vehicles, 105 aircraft, and 12 warships, based on a simulated war with Russia. Operation Anaconda, a dress rehearsal for a NATO invasion, is the real agenda concealed behind claims that Russia is the belligerent party.

But claims that Left Leave articulates opposition to the NATO alliance and British, US and European imperialism are false. The campaign for a UK exit from the EU has secured the backing of a dozen former senior military officers, collectively described as “Veterans for Britain.” They portray the EU as a challenger and a threat to NATO.

Major General Julian Thompson, commander of land forces during the 1982 war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands/Malvinas, declares, “NATO is responsible for peace across Europe. NATO has been the cornerstone of Western security since World War II and won the Cold War before the EU even existed...”

“MI5 and MI6 base their information on the Five Eyes agreement with the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The EU doesn’t help intelligence sharing; in fact, many members cannot be trusted due to their close relationship with Russia.”

This description of other European powers as Russian quislings is extraordinary. Rear Admiral Roger Lane-Nott, the former NATO commander, submarines Eastern Atlantic, adds that the problem is that “EU attempts to set up its own operations, security structures and even armed forces take resources away from the organisation that really protects us,” identifying Germany as the power “pushing for inexorable merger of defence...”

As we stress in our statement, “Against the national chauvinism and xenophobia promoted by both sides in the referendum campaign, the working class must advance its own internationalist programme to unify the struggles of workers throughout Europe in defence of living standards and democratic rights. The alternative for workers to the Europe of the transnational corporations is the struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe.”

It is in order to create the best conditions for consciously establishing the political independence of the working class from both reactionary camps in this referendum that we have called for an active boycott. And we warn, “The biggest political danger in this situation is the mixing of class banners on the basis of the espousal of a supposedly ‘left nationalism’...”

Let me make this absolutely clear. We do not have merely tactical disagreements with the pseudo-left groups over the referendum. We have

fundamentally opposed political perspectives, from which our opposed tactics flow.

What is the argument advanced by the advocates of a Left Leave campaign? Last June, Joseph Choonara of the SWP wrote quite frankly on the referendum: “The mainstream arguments on both sides will be unpalatable. The Yes campaign, to retain Britain’s EU membership, will be dominated by the Conservative and Labour leaderships, along with what’s left of the Liberal Democrats...”

“Meanwhile, the tone of the No campaign is likely to be set by the UK Independence Party (UKIP), some of the nastiest elements of the Conservative Party and a motley array of smaller businesses. ... There will still be a few socialists campaigning against EU membership. During the 2009 and 2014 European elections some left forces stood as No2EU. Unfortunately, its campaigns made dangerous concessions to the right over immigration, with one article on its website arguing that ‘free movement’ within the EU impoverishes workers in a race to the bottom.”

The SWP admitted from the start that the two campaigns are right-wing and the Leave campaign more nastily xenophobic. Choonara also made clear that the forces to which it is now aligned in “Left Leave,” the Communist Party and the RMT, base themselves on “dangerous concessions to the right over immigration.”

But all considerations as to the impact of supporting the Leave campaign on the working class and its political consciousness are simply brushed to one side. Choonara makes the following statement, which I was struck by:

“There are times when socialists put forward simple arguments and rally large numbers of people around them. There are other times when we have to provide clarity by making complex arguments to relatively small groups of people. The EU referendum is an occasion for the latter.

“Opposition to the EU follows from our principles. Our tactics in advancing the argument, though, flow from the overall balance of forces.”

This is very similar to points that we have made repeatedly in our campaign for an active boycott. So why does the SWP, while claiming to be animated by similar concerns, come to such completely opposed conclusions to us? Because the pseudo-left oppose the EU not as internationalists, but as defenders of the British state and advocates of national reformism.

Choonara made this clear more recently, when he insisted, “Here in Britain some people speak as if Brexit would automatically mean a shift to the right. However, if Cameron loses the referendum it will weaken the ruling class and it would almost certainly mean the end of Cameron’s own tenure as prime minister. The Tories would be in a dire state. One potential beneficiary of such a scenario is Jeremy Corbyn.

“I would welcome an election under those conditions and I would welcome a Corbyn victory—something that would open up a broader space for the revolutionary left.”

The same argument was advanced by all the speakers during the recent launch of Left Leave in London. Alex Callinicos of the SWP said, “If Leave is successful this will shatter the Tory government and take out the two central figures in that government, Cameron and Osborne.”

John Rees of Counterfire stated, “Our aim is getting rid of the Tories before 2020, while Jeremy Corbyn is still leader of the Labour Party and while the left has its best ever chance to do in the Tory government and get a better replacement.”

The basic political assertion of Left Leave, then, is that the EU is reactionary and the answer is to create the best conditions for Corbyn to come to power by deepening a political split in the Tory Party. A victory for Johnson and Nigel Farage of UKIP in the referendum therefore will be pyrrhic—merely a staging post that will create the basis for a resurgence of reformist policies under a Labour government.

Who can seriously give credence to such an assertion? Corbyn has

repeatedly shown his refusal to fight the right wing, even within his own party, and has declared himself in favour of EU membership. You can easily lose count of the times when spokespersons for Lexit state how “unfortunate” it is that Corbyn has “missed an opportunity” to mobilise a left Leave vote without an explanation ever being offered—other than the “pressure” exerted upon him.

But if Corbyn cannot oppose the demands of his right wing now, after securing a massive mandate from his party’s membership and with his opponent isolated, discredited and hated, what will he do differently after the referendum? To ask the question is to answer it.

The Tory Party is tearing itself apart. Some of the bitterest Eurosceptics have already begun drumming up support for a leadership challenge against Cameron and a Leave vote, or even a narrow vote to Remain could precipitate one. However, the pseudo-left groups never bother to explain how a political line that diminishes the significance of Cameron’s likely successors as being “not the main enemy” or their overt anti-immigrant racism as somehow less important than opposing “Fortress Europe” prepares the way for a leftward shift in politics.

There is, in fact, a long and very bitter history of attributing a progressive outcome to political initiatives dominated by right-wing bourgeois forces. And for the most part they have involved attempts by tendencies claiming to be socialist to tactically exploit nationalism.

In our campaign, we have referred to the support extended to the Nazi Party by the Stalinised Communist Party of Germany (KPD) in the 1931 “Red Referendum,” on the basis that the fall of the Social Democrats would strengthen the working class.

Also, in December 1929, a referendum was held on the instigation of the German Nationalist Party to formally renounce the Treaty of Versailles and end the payment of reparations to the victorious powers in the First World War. There was mass opposition to the terms of Versailles, but the referendum was recognised by class conscious workers as an effort to exploit this sentiment by the nationalist right, and especially Hitler’s Nazi Party. The Communist Party of Germany (KPD) correctly opposed the referendum, which helped limit turnout to less than 15 percent.

It was in the aftermath of the 1929 referendum—under instruction from Stalin and the Comintern—that a process of wholesale adaptation to German nationalism began to escalate with the adoption of the policies associated with “National Bolshevism.”

As we explain in our statement, “By 1931, the KPD’s retreat was such that it lined up with the fascists in supporting what it dubbed the ‘Red Referendum.’ Initiated by the Nazis, the referendum urged the removal of the Social Democrats from power in Prussia, Germany’s largest state, which included the capital Berlin. The KPD supported the referendum on the basis that the Social Democrats were ‘social fascists’ and were engaged in repression against the working class. Their removal, the KPD claimed, would be a step towards ‘national liberation’ and a ‘people’s revolution.’”

The political impact was devastating. The injection of nationalist poison into the German working class and the demobilisation of the overwhelming opposition to the Nazis ended in the victory of fascism and the onward march towards world war.

Yet the professional liars of the Socialist Party (SP), in order to urge a Leave vote, turn these events on their head—attributing the rise of fascism to the earlier 1929 decision by the KPD to oppose work with the Nazis and the nationalist right. Clive Heemskerk of the SP wrote:

“But, Trotsky insisted, the working class cannot abandon the field to the nationalist right, as its mass organisations—the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the KPD—did in December 1929 when a referendum was promoted by the German National People’s Party (DNVP—led by the media baron Alfred Hugenberg) to reject the Young Plan reaffirming German war reparation debts ... The Nazis’ participation with the DNVP in the referendum campaign—the first time an important section of the

capitalists had collaborated with Hitler—was a factor in their phenomenal surge from 810,000 votes (2.6 percent) in the May 1928 general election to 6.3 million (18.2 percent) in September 1930, against the backdrop of the 1929 crash.”

The SP cites Trotsky’s warning, made in a different context, only to give its tacit endorsement to Stalinism’s policy of National Bolshevism encapsulated in the infamous slogan, “After Hitler, Our Turn!”—so that it can pursue its own policy of “After Boris, Jeremy!”

To reiterate, the Red Referendum was a disastrous example of the type of political opportunism advocated by the SP. Trotsky warned then against any mixing of banners and against badly miscalculating the impact of a generally correct call—to bring down a social democratic government and fight for revolution—when this is not what the actual referendum would bring about.

In one extraordinary passage, Trotsky writes what can be seen as both a devastating indictment of the pseudo-left and a confirmation of our own approach to the Brexit referendum:

“If one could designate his party adherence on the ballots, then the referendum would at least have the justification (in the given instance, absolutely insufficient politically) that it would have permitted a count of its (the KPD’s) forces and by that itself separate them from the forces of fascism. But German ‘democracy’ did not trouble in its time to provide for participants in referendums the right to designate their parties. All the voters are fused into one inseparable mass which, on a definite question, gives one and the same answer...”

“Whether the fascists vote together with the Communists or not would lose all significance at the moment when the proletariat, by its pressure, overthrows the fascists and takes the power into its own hands ... To come out into the streets with the slogan ‘Down with the Brüning-Braun [Centre Party/Social Democratic Party] government’ at a time when, according to the relationship of forces, it can only be replaced by a government of Hitler-Hugenberg [German National Party], is the sheerest adventurism. ... Consequently, we consider the coincidence of voting with the fascists not from the point of view of some abstract principle, but from the point of view of the actual struggle of the classes for power, and the relationship of forces at a given stage of this struggle.”

The parallels are clear. In 1931, the KPD entrusted the task of dealing with the Social Democrats to the fascists. Today, the pseudo-left entrust the struggle against Cameron’s government to Eurosceptics led by Johnson and Gove.

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

The Socialist Equality Party is not an advocate of the breakup of the EU on the basis of an espousal of economic nationalism and anti-immigrant xenophobia. The European bourgeoisie has proven that it is incapable of unifying the continent on a progressive basis. Indeed, there is nothing left of the pretensions to a social democratic and peaceful Europe promised throughout the post-war period.

But the danger posed is that the collapse of the EU, without the political intervention of the working class, is preparing the way for an explosion of the very national antagonisms it was meant to have put an end to. As I explained in a recent *World Socialist Web Site* Perspective, “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 end result will be that humanity is dragged once again into the maelstrom of world war.

The pseudo-left groups, inasmuch as they acknowledge any of these political realities, exclusively blame transnational institutions such as the EU and trade treaties such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment

Partnership. Their answer is a return to the nation state so that Labour in the UK or some other party—Syriza in Greece or Podemos in Spain, for example—can once again carry out reformist measures behind a system of protectionist barriers and other forms of economic regulation.

This would represent a massive regression, posing not the rebirth of reformism but an accelerated descent into right-wing nationalist reaction.

Capitalism is based on corporate ownership of the means of production and competition between companies and states. It cannot overcome the national division of Europe, any more than it can overcome the national division of the world. What is now called “globalisation” describes a dog-eat-dog struggle to dominate the world’s markets and resources, which is why, with increasing frequency, the world faces the scourge of war.

However, the answer is not a return to the nation state. Yes, under capitalism, globalisation serves only the interests of a privileged few who grow fabulously wealthy at the expense of the impoverishment of the world’s billions. But the globalisation of economic life, with production organised across national borders, is both objectively progressive and necessary.

By massively increasing the productivity of human labour, it provides the material foundations for the development of a socialist society. To achieve this, however, the grip of the super-rich 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.

For the European working class, this means opposing the EU on its own independent class perspective—not the nationalist splintering of the continent, but the struggle for a socialist Britain within a United Socialist States of Europe that allows for planned production across national borders to meet social need.

In opposition to this perspective, no one is more convinced of the continued viability of the nation state than the pseudo-left. They are wedded to it. Consider the argument set out by Callinicos in “The internationalist case against the European Union,” in which he rejects any possibility of a unified struggle of the European working class. He states:

“Strategically, the problem is that since the 1980s, but more especially as a result of the euro zone crisis, a Europe-wide neoliberal regime is being constructed. Breaking that is most likely to happen at national level. To make successful resistance dependent on a coordinated movement at the EU level is to postpone that resistance indefinitely. The process of uneven and combined development implies that struggles are most likely to succeed at national level but can then be generalised. Dialectically, then, for internationalism to advance there have to be breakthroughs at the national level.”

There are three references insisting on struggles being waged at the “national level” in a single paragraph!

The SEP rejects all such assertions of a national basis for the development of the class struggle. In an increasingly globalised world, the class struggle too takes on an ever more openly international form.

As we meet tonight, events are unfolding in France that will have a far greater impact on the fate of the British working class than a leadership challenge against Cameron or the possibility of Corbyn’s Labour Party benefiting from such a challenge. French workers are involved in the initial stages of a bitter confrontation with the Socialist Party government of François Hollande, which is seeking to impose labour legislation expanding the normal working week to 46 hours, making it easier to sack people, and limiting the right to strike. It was pushed through parliament in the face of a wave of strikes and protests involving millions of workers and youth, which were met with brutal police repression.

A movement against similar legislation has already broken out in Belgium.

Hollande and the Socialist Party are detested. But it should be recalled that he was elected in 2012 promising leftist measures that put Corbyn and

McDonnell’s thin gruel to shame, including raising taxes on big corporations, banks and the wealthy, including a 75 percent tax on incomes beyond €1 million; creating 60,000 teaching jobs; bringing the official retirement age down to 60 from 62; creating subsidised jobs in areas of high unemployment for the young; and promoting industry by creating a public investment bank.

Instead, he introduced labour reform in 2012 making it easier for companies to fire employees and cut salaries and hours during times of “economic difficulty,” i.e., always, and pension reforms increasing contributions; sent troops into Mali; imposed a state of emergency, meaning that 60,000 troops are patrolling Paris; and now sanctions violent attacks by riot police on workers with water cannon, rubber bullets and tear gas for opposing his plans to ruin them.

The immediate beneficiary has been the fascist National Front, which describes the new labour laws as an example of the dictatorship of Brussels and calls for a “Frexit.”

But this can all change with the development of the class struggle and the entry of the working class into political life.

The pseudo-left responds to these developments by urging a return to hearth and home, with Hollande’s equivalents ruling over us in Westminster.

We have responded by urging a unified struggle against the EU and its austerity policies, insisting that the working class must now take the revolutionary road by fighting to bring down pro-austerity governments, of the so-called left and right alike, in France and across Europe.

It is a measure of the global character of political processes that the full significance of the political campaign we are waging here in the UK is made clearer still on the other side of the Channel. We offer a perspective that unites rather than divides the European working class. A Perspective written by Alex Lantier on May 26 insists:

“The indispensable ally of the French, Belgian and Greek workers in this struggle is the European and international working class. ... Workers must reject all attempts to divide their struggles along national lines.

“The European Union of the corporations and banks is a prison for the working class and breeding ground for national chauvinism, militarism and war. It must be overthrown. But a retreat behind national borders on the basis of French, German, British, Greek or any other chauvinism is no less reactionary and destructive of the interests of working people. The only progressive alternative to the European Union is the unification of Europe on a new, revolutionary and egalitarian basis through the coordinated struggle of workers across Europe for workers’ power and socialism.”

Our socialist and internationalist perspective provides the basis for a political intervention under conditions of unfolding class struggle. As yet, that political situation has not matured to the same degree here in the UK as in France, even though we have witnessed the determined struggle of the junior doctors. But we are oriented to a developing mass movement of the European working class—under conditions of an escalating crisis of rule for the British and European ruling class.

Before and after the referendum, we will orient the working class to this international development so as to prepare the ground for the eruption of the class struggle that is coming in Britain, which only the Socialist Equality Party is ready and able to lead.



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