

Chris Marsden speaks at the Humboldt University in Berlin

The Brexit referendum and the struggle for socialism

22 June 2016

Last Friday, Chris Marsden spoke at a meeting of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at Berlin's Humboldt University. The national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (UK) explained why the party is calling for an active boycott of the June 23 referendum on UK membership of the European Union.

Marsden's report met with great interest and sparked a lively discussion. When asked about the consequences for the referendum of the murder of the Labour MP Jo Cox, Marsden said, "This tragic event shows the deeply reactionary forces mobilized in this campaign." Immediately after the murder, politicians had to briefly stop the campaign. But it did not take long before the murder was politically exploited by both sides.

Marsden also addressed the question why the former Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, formerly an advocate of EU membership, has changed sides and now leads the campaign for an exit. The bankers and speculators of the City of London, who determine policy in the British capital, had profited in the past from business with the EU, Marsden said. But some believe the situation is changing. There is a significant minority sentiment of opposition to the EU, who regard it as a sinking ship. The only things still growing in Europe are problems and crises, and investors' interest is shifting from Europe to Asia.

In response to the claim that staying in the EU would counter the rise of rabid nationalism, Marsden responded that the unity of Europe was a class issue. "The unification of the European working class will take place in opposition to, and not via the EU."

It is a privilege to have been invited to speak at tonight's meeting before an audience of German students, youth and workers. Personally, of course, it is a pleasure. But I speak here from a political standpoint.

Three days ago, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held a meeting in London at which the featured speaker was my translator for tonight, Peter Schwarz, a leading member of the Partei fur Soziale Gleichheit and secretary of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

He spoke to a British audience on the political significance of the Brexit referendum for the European working class.

Now I am here to make an appeal for workers and young people in Germany to forge political bonds with working people in Britain.

I will advocate for an internationalist struggle against not only the European Union (EU), but the governments of Prime Minister David Cameron, Chancellor Angela Merkel and their counterparts throughout the continent. I will urge a rejection of all forms of nationalism, including that which dresses itself in leftist language, and call for the fight for the United Socialist States of Europe.

There is now less than a week to go before the UK goes to the polls. Each day that passes has confirmed the position taken by the SEP to argue for an active boycott. Let me explain as briefly as I can how we arrived at that decision.

The SEP is an implacable opponent of the EU.

The EU is an instrument of the ruling classes of Europe for the imposition of brutal austerity measures—most directly on the workers of Greece, of Spain, Portugal and Ireland, but also on workers in the UK, France and Germany. Our own prime minister, Cameron, has even proclaimed an "Age of Austerity" as his government imposes cuts of £210 billion, (€263 billion), equivalent to over 10 percent of Britain's GDP, at the cost of the destruction of 20 percent of all public sector jobs, millions more in the private sector and the decimation of vital services.

The EU is second of all an instrument of military aggression. It is a vital ally of NATO in its escalating conflict with Russia and China as the US and European powers seek to control all of the world's markets and resources—including vital oil and gas riches commanded by the Putin regime in Moscow and the giant production platform manned by billions of super-exploited workers led by President Xi Jinping in Beijing.

Finally, the EU is an instrument for erecting and policing Fortress Europe. It bears responsibility for the horrific treatment of hundreds of thousands fleeing the impact of wars in which the UK, Germany, France, etc., are all complicit—in Libya, Iraq and Syria—including the deaths of thousands drowned in the Mediterranean and the imprisonment, in what are effectively concentration camps, of tens of thousands more.

However, the SEP refuses to aid the efforts of right-wing capitalist politicians to exploit and monopolise legitimate hostility to the EU.

The Leave campaign articulates the interests of that section of the British ruling class that sees EU membership as a restraint on the untrammelled exploitation of the working class, the freedom of the City of London from regulation and its efforts to secure a leading role in global markets against its main European rivals, Berlin and Paris. It is headed by the most right-wing section of the Tory party, such as Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, and UK Independence Party leader Nigel Farage.

For this reason, an active boycott provides the only means available to working people to take an independent stand.

We oppose those such as Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn who have lined up behind the EU, claiming that it is a check on the Tory party, defends workers' rights and can be reformed.

Corbyn lies. He cites as his allies Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras in Greece and Francois Hollande's Socialist Party government in France.

Syriza betrayed its anti-austerity mandate and signed up to punishing new austerity measures that have brought it into open conflict with the working class, on the basis that this was the only way to maintain EU membership!

Hollande is even now mobilising riot police against workers seeking to defy his own plans to impose right-wing anti-labour measures and to push through cuts.

We also oppose those pseudo-left groups, such as the Socialist Workers Party - the co-thinkers of Marx 21- and the Socialist Party, equivalent to

the SAV/Socialist Alternative.

They argue that it does not matter that the Leave campaign is dominated by the right-wing. A Leave vote will split the Tory party and hasten the day when Jeremy Corbyn leads a Labour government that will implement anti-austerity measures.

For example, Sally Campbell of the SWP admits, “Jeremy Corbyn did a deal early on in his leadership of the party that he wouldn’t continue to argue against Britain’s membership of the neoliberal bosses’ club that he recognises the EU to be. It was an issue on which he agreed to compromise for the sake of ‘party unity’.”

Jeremy Corbyn does nothing but “compromise” for the sake of party unity! It’s what he does morning, noon and night.

But Campbell insists that this does not matter because, supposedly, “[It] seems improbable that there will be a leadership challenge to Corbyn any time soon. He is set to be the beneficiary if the Tories continue to tear themselves apart and spend the next three years mired in hidden or open leadership battles.”

This is said even as Corbyn emerges as the key figure in the Remain campaign.

We have been forced by such nonsense to make the most basic of arguments—that a vote for a right-wing position strengthens the right-wing!

Above all, we have insisted in our statement on the Brexit referendum, “The first consideration of socialists is to safeguard not only the present interests of the working class, but also its future. The biggest political danger in this situation is the mixing of class banners on the basis of the espousal of a supposedly ‘left nationalism’.”

I cannot deal exhaustively with every manifestation of the base and sordid character of both the Remain and Leave campaign. So I will centre on two issues: how clamping down on immigration has become the key issue in the referendum campaign for both these rotten alliances; and how the threatened breakup of the EU is giving rise to an outburst of national antagonisms that bring with them the danger of dictatorship and war.

Both underscore the criminal role of those who claim that the working class somehow automatically benefits from the breakup of the EU on the basis of an eruption of nationalism.

Back in April, the website of the advocates of a so-called “Left Leave” vote claimed that whereas, “Many, particularly on the left, predicted this would be a vile campaign dominated by racism and the presence of Nigel Farage and UKIP ... it hasn’t worked out like that.”

The campaign had instead been “boring.”

No claim has been disproved to such terrible effect.

Yesterday, Labour MP Jo Cox was repeatedly stabbed then shot to death by a 52-year-old man who reportedly shouted, “Britain First!”

Cox, a prominent campaigner for a Remain vote, died an hour later. Britain First is a fascist group that advocates physical attacks on Muslim Labour MPs as part of the fight against what it calls the “Islamisation of Britain.”

The man involved reportedly suffers from mental illness. But growing evidence is emerging of his fascist sympathies. This is someone who has been stewing in nationalist poison for years—linking up to South African racist websites, buying instructions on how to make a gun from fascist sites in the United States, purchasing pamphlets written by Hitler. And then in the midst of this campaign, he erupts into horrific violence.

Why now? His actions testify above all to the reactionary political climate and to the social forces unleashed by this referendum campaign.

Consider this. That same day, UKIP leader Nigel Farage was rolling out the latest poster in his Leave campaign. Accompanying a picture of a line of desperate refugees, it reads, “Breaking point. The EU has failed us all. We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders.”

Commentators published it alongside a still from a Nazi propaganda film, with an almost identical visual message. This is what the Nazi

propaganda film says as commentary:

“These are the type of Eastern Jews who flooded Europe’s cities after the last war, parasites undermining their host countries, threatening thousand year old cultures and bringing with them crime, corruption and chaos.”

The message is the same! Everybody knows. You merely have to substitute the word Muslim for Jew.

To underscore this, the previous day Leave.EU, funded by UKIP’s biggest backer, issued a cartoon depicting the EU as a ship sinking due to a “wave of immigration” and depicting Muslims as terrorists, thieves and sexual predators—with one threatening an Aryan looking mermaid masthead with the words, “Ficke! Ficke!”

As to the claim that Farage has been sidelined, it is not just that Farage is now everywhere—which he is. He’s one of the most televised politicians in Britain today. He has appeared debating Cameron on ITV, on BBC Question Time and many other programmes.

It is, as Farage himself boasts, that UKIP’s anti-migrant xenophobia is now the stock in trade of both camps. He told the right-wing Breitbart website, “Today’s front pages mark a genuine sea change in British politics. The two men most likely to succeed David Cameron as Prime Minister have both now publicly committed to an Australian-style points system for immigration. There can be no going back from these positions. Even more amazingly Boris Johnson has suggested that migrants should speak English.”

The response of the Remain campaign has been to compete with Leave over which has the best policy for curbing migration—advancing Fortress Europe as a guarantor against the arrival of hordes of refugees. And, in recent days, it has basically adopted wholesale Leave’s opposition to the right of free movement of EU citizens.

Most significant of all, it is the Labour Party that has led this campaign. Labour MP Yvette Cooper even complains that “The [Conservative] home secretary, Theresa May, has said nothing about immigration at all in this campaign... When Britain takes the presidency of the EU next year we should use it to build an agreement from the inside... to develop new kinds of controls and brakes to manage economic migration.”

Alan Johnson, Labour head of the official Remain campaign, declared, “If anyone believes that our border in Calais (France) is going to survive us leaving the EU then once again they’re in the realms of fantasy.”

Labour’s former Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls declared, “We need to press Europe to restore proper borders, and put new controls on economic migration.”

Balls was backed by other Labour MPs, including deputy party leader Tom Watson, who said, “I think a future Europe will have to look at things like the free movement of labour rules.”

Almost every single day in the *Guardian*, the newspaper of what passes for the “liberal left” in Britain, there has been an article by a leading Labourite declaring that, “We got it wrong on immigration.”

So much for the progressive impact of a Corbyn-led Labour government!

The closer we get to a vote, the more there are open statements on the part the advocates of Leave proving that this is a campaign driven by escalating national antagonisms, or warnings by Remain supporters that a Leave vote will exacerbate such animosities and lead to the breakup of the EU.

Here are just some of the statements specifically targeting Germany as a threat to the UK. Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* newspaper editorialised, “If we stay, Britain will be engulfed in a few short years by this relentlessly expanding German-dominated federal state.”

In the *Daily Mail*, Dr. Robert Lefever writes in inflammatory terms: “A federal Europe will be a German super-state... The end result—alarmingly soon—will be that Greater Germany (currently called Euroland) will be as much of a colonial power as was communist Russia in the Soviet Union...”

the belief in themselves as a master race is still alive and well in Germany. To refer to the second world war as 'Hitler's war' underestimates his popular support. Other European countries have good reason to fear German domination."

The implications of the emergence of such national tensions in a continent that has twice been the arena for world war are becoming ever clearer. They have provoked a panicked response in the bourgeoisie. A report by the Brookings Institution in the US states:

"Brexit would lead to a global fall in equity prices as investors fear the impact the vote could have on Britain's economy, and could spell the first falling domino of European Union disintegration... It is also not hard to imagine that Scotland might vote to secede from the UK, as it has tried in the past, and that it would impact Northern Ireland which has enjoyed a rare period of relative peace—in addition to setting off other European regional succession movements."

Not just the break-up of the European Union, but the fracturing and break up of nation states is posed. Angel Gurría, secretary-general of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, concurs, warning, "Brexit could threaten both the unity of the UK and the unity of the European Union."

Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, warned in yet more apocalyptic terms, "As a historian, I am afraid this could in fact be the start of the process of destruction of not only the EU but also of the Western political civilisation."

Let me stress: Brexit is not the cause of the break-up of the EU. It is the expression of an ongoing process. The national antagonisms it expresses are rooted in the inherent contradictions of capitalism. It is the product of the drive by hostile nation states to dominate global markets and resources, which is the motive force for the headlong rush towards colonial wars of conquest, towards trade war and ultimately to war between the imperialist powers themselves.

This dog-eat-dog struggle, which is waged by a fabulously rich financial oligarchy, is at the same time the key to understanding the ever-escalating offensive against the working class in every country being waged in the name of "global competitiveness."

Let me stress: The class antagonisms generated provide the objective basis for the development of a mass movement against the capitalist profit system. But this depends above all else on the socialist party of the working class exposing the "left" purveyors of nationalism: Those who urge workers to retreat back to the national soil and construct a siege economy against the evils of globalisation.

From the standpoint of the historic interests of the working class, there can be no greater betrayal than this. By reinforcing national divisions between workers, it hands the political initiative over to the likes of the National Front in France—whose leader Marine Le Pen now calls herself "Madam Frexit"—or the AfD here in Germany. Ultimately, it paves the way for fascism and war to once again wreak savagery and destruction on the peoples of Europe.

The EU is breaking apart, and many of its constituent states, including the UK, are fracturing. And it is not our task to rescue it.

But we seek its replacement on higher social foundations—through the unification of the working class across national borders in a common struggle against the ruling class and its governments. The massive productive forces of the continent could then be placed at the service of the many, not the few, and provide the basis for a rich and fulfilling life for all.

The basic choice facing working people is this:

Either nationalism, social and political reaction and war—or a turn to socialist internationalism.

We do not counter-pose rule by parliament in London or Berlin to Brussels, as if this is genuine "democracy" and even "self-determination." These high sounding phrases conceal the rule over the working class and

the destruction of the lives of millions by a super-rich elite. We know that genuine democracy is only possible when it is based on an egalitarian system free from class oppression.

We side with neither wing of the criminal parasites who have wrecked the lives of millions and who lead the referendum campaign. We insist that the ally of the British workers are the workers of Germany, Europe and internationally.

As is shown by the events in Greece, France and Belgium, the working class is now being driven once more into struggle. Mobilised under the leadership of a party which is steeled in the rich lessons of history, embodied in the programme and perspective of Trotskyism, it will prove to be the mightiest political and social force the world has ever seen.

Against the call to return to the nation state, surrounded by militarised borders, our rallying cry remains that of Marx: Workers of the World Unite!

The SEP and the PSG, European sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, offer an internationalist and socialist alternative to the working class—above all to the younger generation. I would urge you all to consider very carefully what I have said tonight and to take the decision to dedicate your lives to this life and death struggle for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact