

Rail unions declare support for UK exit from the EU

By Michael Barnes and Julie Hyland
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The Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT) and the train drivers union ASLEF have backed a Leave vote in the June 23 referendum on British membership of the European Union.

They claim that their stance offers a left-wing alternative to the official line of the Trades Union Congress, which is backing Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn and his campaign in support of a Remain vote.

Corbyn's assertion that the EU provides "jobs and protection for workers" is exposed by the devastating austerity imposed on Greece and other countries by the big business bloc, as well as its brutal treatment of refugees fleeing the wars which Britain and the other European powers have played a lead role in stoking. But RMT General Secretary Mick Cash's claim that the rail unions are standing up "for the tradition of progressive and socialist opposition" to the EU is equally bogus.

Writing in the Stalinist *Morning Star*, ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan argued that the rail unions were in favour of a Brexit because proposals from Brussels "will be bad for Britain in general and bad for the railway in particular."

This is in reference to European Commission plans to privatise large swathes of public services through legislation such as the Fourth Railway Package and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) it is negotiating with the US.

Likewise, the RMT argued that it "would be frankly ludicrous" to "support staying in a bosses' club that seeks to ban the public ownership of our railways, attacks the shipping and offshore sectors, and embraces the privatisation of the NHS and other essential services that our members depend on."

The two unions claim that continued membership of the EU would prevent a Corbyn-led Labour

government from renationalising Britain's railways. Neither attempt to square this claim with Corbyn's own statements in support of the EU. Moreover, their own opposition to privatisation is purely verbal.

The trade unions did not lift a finger in opposition to the privatisation of British Rail by the Conservative government almost 20 years ago. Instead, they diverted opposition to the measures into support for Tony Blair's Labour government, which then escalated the Tories' privatisation offensive to include track, signalling and stations and initiated a series of Public Private Partnerships (PPP). This included the part privatisation of the London Underground infrastructure, through the creation of Metronet in 2003, which collapsed—at huge public expense—in 2007.

In 2012, when the then Conservative-Liberal Democrat government adopted the McNulty report aimed at slashing jobs and wages, the rail unions were forced to organise protests. These were quickly wound down when the unions were given a consultation role with the Rail Delivery Group (RDG) staffed with company CEO's tasked to implement the cuts.

The following year the RMT was again forced to organise a 48-hour strike in the face of militant opposition from workers to the imposition of Driver Only Operations at London Overground Rail Operations Limited, which threatened the elimination of 130 safety-critical conductor jobs. The RMT went on to help organise the elimination of these posts.

This is a pattern of betrayal that has continued in the last year. In June 2015, the RMT called off a national strike by 16,000 Network Rail workers and agreed to an "Efficiency and Improvement Project" to "deliver savings."

Just weeks before announcing their support for

Brexit, the rail unions had collaborated with Conservative London Mayor Boris Johnson—who leads the right-wing Vote Leave campaign—in closing all 265 London Underground ticket offices and pushing through 24-hour Night Tube working.

Whelan’s claim that his union will “not campaign alongside, or stand on any platforms with, any of the racist, xenophobic and misogynist supporters” of the Tory and UK Independence Party (UKIP) dominated Leave campaign is worthless. Whether or not the rail unions appear in public with these forces, nothing fundamentally distinguishes their support for a Leave vote from those they nominally criticise. They oppose the EU not from the standpoint of developing a unified movement of workers across Europe against its big business agenda, but on the nationalist grounds that the interests of British capital can be better served outside.

Last month the RMT organised a campaign to protest the take-over of the Northern Rail franchise by Germany’s Deutsche Bahn, in which it attacked the Tory government from the right. Complaining that the “Union Flag waving Conservative government has just handed over the operation of the North of England railways to the German state railway,” its stunt consisted of flying the German flag over various Northern Rail stations. There was no appeal to German workers for a joint offensive against privatisation.

This is just one of a series of similar nationalist stunts. In 2009, faced with widespread job losses on the railways, the RMT initiated an anti-German campaign, accusing Deutsche Bahn of striving for “world domination.” In 2011, 1,400 jobs at the Canadian-owned global transportation manufacturer Bombardier’s plant in Derby were threatened after the then Conservative/Liberal government awarded Siemens the £1.4 billion contract to build passenger trains.

The RMT opposed a joint struggle with Bombardier and Siemens workers in the UK, Germany and throughout Europe. Instead Bob Crow, the late general secretary of the RMT, complained of the government, “It’s no good them running around with a Union Jack ... saying ‘Britain’s Best’ and then transferring the work to somewhere else.”

One of the outcomes of such nationalist divisions enabled Bombardier in February 2016 to announce 7,000 job cuts across the world: 3,200 of those will be

lost in its train division in Berlin.

Before his death in 2014, Crow had been the figurehead of the No2EU electoral coalition, involving the Socialist Party and the Communist Party of Britain (CPB), and its later incarnation, the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition. Both these organisations specialised in promoting “left” nationalism in the service of a faction of the British bourgeoisie. This had earned Crow the praise of UKIP leader Nigel Farage who boasted, “Bob and I get on remarkably well ... He is 100 percent a British patriot ...”

Writing in the right-wing Tory *Spectator* magazine Allie Renison, from the Institute of Directors, bemoaned Crow’s passing under the headline, “Eurosceptics have lost a valuable general.”

“When the time comes for an Out campaign in Britain, Bob Crow’s voice will be sorely missed,” she said. “Many on the right were counting on him to bring home votes not just from the left but from the broader disaffected working class, who neither the Tories nor UKIP could reach.”

It is these traditions—of class collaboration and nationalism—to which the rail unions really belong. Small wonder that Farage welcomed the announcement by the RMT and ASLEF, stating he was “encouraged” by their decision. He knows who his allies are.

It is in opposition to the reactionary nationalism of both the Remain and Leave camps that the Socialist Equality Party has taken the principled decision to call for an Active Boycott of the Brexit referendum.

As its statement explains, “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.”

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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