

May Day 2016: The Brexit referendum and the struggle against nationalism and war

By Chris Marsden
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The following speech was delivered by Chris Marsden, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (UK), to the International May Day Online Rally held on May 1, 2016.

The Socialist Equality Party's campaign for an active boycott of the June 23 referendum on UK membership of the European Union seeks to mobilise the working class against nationalism and war.

The EU is playing a leading role in the remilitarisation of the continent.

It participated fully in the US-backed right-wing putsch in Ukraine, used to justify the deployment of thousands of NATO troops along Russia's borders, bringing the world closer to war than at any time since 1945.

As soon as the Brexit referendum was called, 12 former heads of the UK armed forces signed a letter insisting that "Britain's role in the EU strengthens the security we enjoy as part of NATO" in combating Russian "aggression."

This month, US President Barack Obama urged a Remain vote, citing a "special relationship" forged between the US and UK "as we spilt blood together on the battlefield" of World War II.

The task for the UK as an EU member, he said, was to "roll back" the Islamic State, intervene in the Middle East, "from Yemen to Syria to Libya," and to "continue to invest in NATO" to both counter Russia and meet military commitments "from Afghanistan to the Aegean."

This is the real nature of the EU being defended by Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, some pseudo-left groups and by the Trades Union Congress.

Only this week, former TUC leader Brendan Barber issued a joint letter with Prime Minister David Cameron to argue, "For the sake of every worker in

Britain," that the unions must unite with the Tory government to support EU membership. This is a government whose brutal social counterrevolution is destroying the National Health Service, illegalising strikes and plunging millions into poverty.

The SEP is irreconcilably hostile to the EU. It is an instrument of the major European imperialist powers for conducting both trade and military war and for imposing austerity on the working class.

Under different circumstances, we would be urging a vote to Leave.

Had there been a political and social movement of the working class across Europe, invoking solidarity with the Greek masses and other victims of the EU and IMF, a vote to leave would have acquired an anti-capitalist character.

But this European-wide offensive was blocked by Syriza—the party held up by all of our political opponents as their model. Its betrayal of the struggle of the Greek working class against EU-dictated austerity handed the political initiative, for the time being, back to Europe's ruling class.

Under these conditions our central responsibility is to ensure that working class opposition to the EU is not corralled behind a nationalist campaign led by the right wing of the Tory party and the xenophobes of the UK Independence Party.

The greatest danger would be to allow the attempt by the pseudo-left groups to channel hostility to the EU in a nationalist direction to go unopposed.

The Brexit campaign has underscored the criminal political role of all these groups and their hostility to the working class.

Those who are not supporting the EU are instead aligning themselves with right-wing forces—just as Syriza did in forming a coalition with the Independent

Greeks. Whereas Barber stands alongside Cameron, former anti-war MP George Galloway embraces UKIP leader Nigel Farage and declares, “Left, Right, Left Right, Forward march!”

Their role is to deliver the working class over to the Tory right and UKIP because they are pro-capitalist formations.

Our central responsibility is to establish the political independence of the working class and to prevent at all costs the mixing of class banners.

We reject the claim by the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain, the Rail Maritime and Transport union, the Socialist Workers Party and Counterfire that they are different to Galloway and offer a genuine alternative Left Leave option.

On the Left Leave web site, we are told 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.”

This is an obscene lie.

Not only is Farage given every opportunity to spew bile, but UKIP’s anti-migrant message is also being amplified by the Tory leaders of the Leave campaign. Almost every statement they make is to demand migration be curbed.

Moreover, the pseudo-left have aligned themselves with the Communist Party and the RMT union, which both advocate immigration controls and whose propaganda centres on opposition to the free movement of labour within the EU.

The door is being opened to political reaction. Left Leave’s leading figures include author John King, who writes, “Ukip has done so well because it tells the truth about the EU. ... Most important in all this is people’s sense of identity. ... It is no shame to want to preserve your culture.”

For its part, the main complaint of the Socialist Party, which has not yet signed up to Left Leave, is that Corbyn should have reached out to “important layers of working-class UKIP voters.”

The socialist phrases employed by Left Leave are a tawdry fig leaf. The EU is a big business club, they say. It is anti-working class, anti-democratic, anti-socialist, imperialist, etc.

So what about the UK, that most blood-soaked of imperialist states? On this there is not one word!

We are told only that a return to British sovereignty and its traditions of parliamentary democracy will bring about the best of all possible worlds—the future election of a Labour government.

At the very outset of the referendum campaign, we warned that the stand taken by the pseudo-left advocates of a Leave vote echoed that of the German Communist Party (KPD) in an earlier period. The KPD supported the Nazi referendum in 1931, calling for the bringing down of the German Social Democrats as supposedly promising a national “people’s revolution.” It ended instead in the triumph of fascism, paving the way to global war.

Left unopposed, the impact of the Left Leave campaign would be no less dangerous.

The EU is breaking apart, and many of its constituent states, including the UK, are fracturing. But everywhere the beneficiaries of this decomposition are nationalist forces. Not for nothing does Marine Le Pen of the French Front National declare herself to be “Madame Frexit.”

We are taking a stand against austerity, militarism and war and pointing a way forward for the British and European working class.

An active boycott provides workers and young people with an independent socialist and internationalist policy in opposition to the noxious poison of nationalism spewed out by both the advocates of Remain and Leave in the referendum.

We want to see the destruction of the EU, but not through the nationalist fracturing of the continent. We are for the unification of the working class across all national borders in a common struggle against the ruling class and its governments.

Our rallying cry is: No to the EU and British nationalism—For the United Socialist States of Europe! Our goal is the building of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International throughout Europe.

My appeal to you today is to join us in this task.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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