

# Debate in the British Left: Part of the Union? - What should socialists argue in the EU referendum?

Wednesday 22 June 2016, by [DELISTATHI Christina](#), [HORE Charlie](#), [OWEN Rob](#) (Date first published: 20 June 2016).

**Can socialists take a principled position in relation to the EU referendum on 23 June, or should we wish 'a plague on both your houses'? Charlie Hore puts the case for a 'remain' vote, Christina Delistathi to 'leave' and Rob Owen for a 'radical abstention'**

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## Campaign to remain

There's no dispute that the EU is a bosses' union: racist, neoliberal and pro-austerity. The attacks on Greece, and the 'Fortress Europe' walls set up against refugees show the real nature of the institution. But when attacks on refugees and the right to migrate are increasing, does it help to reinforce borders across Europe? Won't we just be swapping Fortress Europe for Fortress Britain?

There's no ready-made answer, and we have to think through what the referendum will mean in practice for British politics, and for the working class. And for me that means voting to remain, for three main reasons:

### **Whose referendum? Not ours**

Cameron conceded the referendum as a sop to the racist right of the Tory party; it's never been a demand of the left. And it's happening now because of a defeat for the left - Cameron winning the election last May. UKIP have been central to articulating the demand, but it's more importantly about the rifts in the Tory party.

Given its origins, inevitably immigration and arguments about numbers have dominated the campaign so far. Cameron's negotiations with the EU centred on restricting migrant workers' rights, and the criticism from the Tory right is that he wasn't harsh enough. However bad Cameron's attacks, the Tories pushing to leave want to go further.

This is quite different from Scotland - the left and the working class could shape the Scottish referendum because the impetus for independence came from an anti-Tory groundswell. The

opposite is true of the EU referendum.

## **Why the left is divided**

The EU hasn't been a focus of the left's campaigning for decades, largely because successive British governments have been more right-wing and neoliberal than the EU, so it is hardly surprising that many activists don't see it as the main enemy. But there have also been more fundamental shifts that we should pay attention to.

In the labour movement there has been a sea-change in attitudes, with many who once opposed the EU, now seeing it as a shield against the Tories. That is in part a reaction to decades of defeats, but it is also true that the EU has produced real reforms that the Tories opposed, in particular over workers' rights and the environment. When Eurosceptics talk about a 'bonfire of regulations', those gains are what they have in mind.

There have also been deeper shifts in social attitudes – over issues such as racism, sexism and homophobia – and views on Europe are part of that. Those changes were fought for, and are still contested, as current attacks on refugees and migrants show. But we have not lost all the ground gained, however fierce the right's attacks. The anti-racist reaction that so many young people have against UKIP and the Eurosceptic right is a healthy one, and we should back it.

## **The changing working class**

There are close on three million EU citizens here, with equal rights to housing, work, and health care. It is migration that has mainly fuelled the right's demand for the referendum, meaning that in Britain the issue of the EU is about migration in a way that isn't true in other European countries.

Leaving the EU would threaten those rights. Exactly how that would play out isn't really the issue – the point of leaving the EU, for most of those pushing it, is to make migrants' lives more precarious. And we only have to look at the USA to see how a society can be dependent on migrant workers, and yet deny them basic rights.

## **The way forward**

Of course there are principled socialists who are arguing for an internationalist exit from the EU. But they are a minority of a minority. The balance of forces is overwhelming with the right, with too many on the left making concessions to the idea that the free movement of labour harms British workers.

Our arguments on the referendum need to centre on defending migrants and refugees, and the right to migrate. And we need to make common cause with those arguing for an exit who also put those at the centre of their politics, and see divisions on the vote as a secondary issue. We will have far more in common with each other than we will with most of those campaigning for either outcome. 'In or out, workers have to fight' was a useful slogan in the early 1970s, and it seems to have become apt again.

How you vote should be the end of an argument, not the beginning. But it seems to me that a position grounded in anti-racism and defending workers' rights leads to one logical conclusion: the road to defending and extending the right to migrate cannot go through restricting existing migration rights, which would be the practical outcome of a vote to leave the EU.

**Charlie Hore**

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## **Left Exit - not just a vote**

The referendum to stay in or leave the EU is ripping the Tories apart, but has also opened up an intense debate on the Left with many people arguing to vote to stay. They fear that the leave vote is mobilising racists, that the end of free movement will make it harder for migrant workers from poorer EU countries to move freely through Europe, and that an exit will signal an assault on our rights currently protected by EU legislation.

Yet both the 'leave' and 'stay' sides involve racist and nationalist arguments. UKIP's role in the leave campaign is obvious, but the 'stay' side includes Cameron and Theresa May with her despicable plan to cherry pick 'deserving' refugees. Unless the radical Left articulates a clear anti-capitalist campaign with demands that unite migrants and non-migrants, there is a real danger that anti-racists will be tied behind Cameron's chauvinist rhetoric or Corbyn's calls for a reformed EU—a strategy which was tried by Syriza in Greece and failed so spectacularly.

Many also argue that the free movement of labour among EU states, which has allowed people to build a better life in another country, fosters internationalism. The free movement of labour shouldn't blind us to the fact that it applies only, and unevenly, to EU citizens. Whichever way the vote goes, the EU remains a fortress of ever-tightening border controls against refugees and migrants fleeing war and poverty. Fortress Europe is responsible for the thousands who drown in the Mediterranean or face razor fences and walls. Internationalism is not strengthened by accepting the right of free movement only for one group of workers. We need to remind ourselves that the only way to beat xenophobia is to defend the rights of all, migrant and non-migrants alike, and to consider the working class, our class, in unity across all borders.

### **EU promotes privatisation**

The EU is not a defender of our rights. It's a bosses' institution and protects the bosses' rights. The most recent action to defend the NHS came from junior doctors, whereas the push towards NHS privatisation is aided by EU trade rules that insist companies across Europe can tender for all contracts. The only reliable defence of our rights comes from our struggles. It took just two days of talks before EU leaders accepted Cameron's demands to limit child benefits and tax credits for migrant workers, plunging them deeper into poverty and opening the door for more benefit cuts for us all.

To suggest then that the EU is what makes things better for working class people, is to accept to sacrifice the rights of one section of the working class—those without an EU passport—in the hope of keeping the rights of the rest. It does not prevent the ruling class from singling out vulnerable groups of migrant workers, undermining our class unity. Migrant and non-migrant workers have repeatedly fought together to secure social rights, welfare benefits and pensions. Think of the cleaners of the living wage campaign, who have fought and won. The only way to safeguard our rights is to ensure that they are available to all.

### **What kind of campaign?**

A Left 'out of the EU' campaign has to do more than expose the EU as a capitalist and racist institution. The starting point of our campaign should be to use the referendum to strengthen our

class, so it cannot end with a vote.

Many argue that a left exit position would have too small a voice to impact on the debate, suggesting that socialist ideas are irrelevant. Yet Corbyn's victory, which came from campaigning against austerity and for a fairer society, has shown that an audience for a left alternative exists. Last summer, tens of thousands demonstrated in London in solidarity with refugees and many have organised regular trips to Calais. There is a sizable audience for our arguments and this makes it all the more urgent to organise such a campaign. We must give voice to anti-racists and steer the debate to the left. Recently, a number of trade unionists and activists launched a Left exit campaign. This is a very positive step.

We need to confront both faces of racism: islamophobia and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Our campaign must fight for the rights of the largely Muslim Syrian refugees and also have specific demands that safeguard the rights of migrants already here, such as equal access to benefits, welfare, health and education, and working rights. We must prepare a campaign in the unions to fight against austerity and protect everyone's rights. We must also take on the argument that tighter border controls and fewer migrants will make life better for working class people.

Fears that an exit from the EU may trigger an assault on migrants' rights are well founded. That's why it's important to go on the offensive now. We must combine our 'no' vote with a campaign that goes beyond the 23<sup>rd</sup> June, articulates an alternative to austerity, organises with migrant workers and defends everyone's rights. We shouldn't fear having a small voice in this moment—we should rather fear the long term consequences of failing to articulate the interests of the whole of our class from all corners of the globe.

**Christina Delistathi**

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## **A plague on both houses**

2008 exposed the EU's shaky foundations. Its structures were placed under tremendous pressure by financial tremors emanating from the USA. The attempt to manage the resulting crisis laid bare the debt relationships that underpin the common market and exposed the brutally undemocratic heart of the EU.

Despite its hegemonic role, German capitalism has shown itself both unable and unwilling to resolve the problems underpinning the crisis when the interests of the eurozone conflict with its own immediate interests - particularly ensuring repayments on loans from debtor nations within the EU. The most extreme example was the crushing austerity measures demanded of Greece in exchange for further loans, despite warnings from the other major eurozone economies that it would leave no path to recovery for the Greek economy; an economy previously absorbing billions of dollars' worth of German exports a year.

British capitalism has consciously placed itself on the fringes of Europe and EU membership has had little bearing on left-wing or working class politics domestically. The referendum has been driven and continues to be shaped by a crisis on the right of British politics. A crisis where both sides are equally committed to deepening austerity and have collectively driven an agenda several steps to the right of anything emanating from Brussels. Their division, notionally over questions of "sovereignty,"

is over whether Britain is best placed as a neoliberal outlier within the EU (with greater access to Eurozone markets). Or if the city and British firms could better exploit global markets if freed from the “protectionist” instincts and red tape of Europe. Socialists have no side in this split but it doesn’t mean we can’t exploit divisions to our advantage.

### **Opportunities for the left?**

We have largely ignored the question of Europe for decades as successive governments, Thatcher, Blair then Cameron have driven forward agendas to the right of mainstream European politics. Slashing of services, growing insecurity and austerity have all been driven by Westminster. For most working class people the only impact of EU membership (bar cheaper holidays) has been an increase in European economic migration and “red tape” regulations on workplace rights. In most communities the only people arguing enthusiastically in opposition to the EU have been closet racists and right-wing Tories.

In an attempt to generate support both camps have pitched narratives unfavourable to the left. The remain camp has focused on economic viability and scare mongering around the financial uncertainty of exit. While the Brexit camp has built upon a dog whistle campaign hostile to the idea of mass migration from Eastern Europe and the idea of “Britishness.” A significant section of the wider left takes opposition to the racism of this postcolonial idea of Britishness as a starting point and combines it with illusions that the EU can be reformed to represent a more progressive anti-nationalist “Europeanism.” This reflects the sense amongst working class communities that a large Brexit would be a vote against the increasingly multicultural life of our cities.

In this context revolutionaries have to put out propaganda exposing and explaining the neoliberal nature of the EU in a dialogue with those voting to remain and attempt to organise the anti-racist sentiment into active solidarity with migrants. Emphasis on the latter is essential if we are to counteract the most likely consequence of the referendum – an increase in anti-migrant legislation and the confidence of those most hostile to multiculturalism.

### **Don’t lend our votes to the right**

Unless a recurrence of the Greek crisis upsets the dynamic of the referendum “left exit” arguments will prove unable to shape the debate beyond the far left and certain unions. If we can’t shape the wider debate then votes to remain are lent in support of Cameron and votes to leave are adding to the numbers in support of a more openly racist, nationalistic conservatism.

The only good outcome on 23 June is a low turnout that demonstrates neither section of the right has gained traction over the question of Europe. The radical left should patiently explain our anti-capitalist critique of the EU and fight where we can win – in solidarity with junior doctors, building the solidarity and combativity of our side.

**Rob Owen**

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**P.S.**

\* This article was originally published in the rs21 magazine. June 9, 2016/16:  
<https://rs21.org.uk/2016/06/09/part-of-the-union-what-should-socialists-argue-in-the-eu-referendum/>