

# Britain “in or out” the European Union: What position should the Left take on the EU referendum?

Wednesday 15 June 2016, by [THORNETT Alan](#) (Date first published: 9 June 2016).

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Following the election and Cameron’s pledge to the right, there will be an in out referendum on Britain’s membership of the EU at least by the end of 2017, and possibly in 2016. This article will examine the role and character of the EU, the implications of the referendum itself, and consider how the left should vote.

For the British capitalist class the referendum raises a major strategic issue in terms of Britain’s place in the world—europeanism or atlanticism. This is something they have grappled with, and been bitterly divided over, for over 40 years.

Michael Heseltine famously walked out of Thatchers cabinet in 1986 over the purchase of US rather than European helicopters. Heseltine and the pro-Europe wing of the Tory party looked towards the European market while Thatcher—despite her signing of the Single European Act of 1986—looked across the Atlantic to the USA and world markets.

This reflects a long standing divide between manufacturing on the one hand, which tends to look first towards the European market, and the City of London that looks towards the USA and a world role. Such atlanticism has long been a cause célèbre of the Tory right because it feeds into British nationalism and the loss of Empire.

For Cameron, however, the issue is less about the strategic location of British capitalism and more about the management of the way this division is reflected in the Tory party—which has become increasingly toxic— and the need to deal with the rise of UKIP.

The referendum was a pre-election pledge to win UKIP voters over. Whether he would have made such a pledge had he realised he might get a Tory majority we will never know. What we do know is that it is a high-risk strategy that could split the Tory party whichever way the vote goes.

Nothing that Cameron has any change of getting from the EU elites will placate the Tory xenophobic right—the ‘bastards’ as John Major famously called them. They want real change in terms of British

sovereignty and the free movement of peoples within the EU—which is not going to happen. They have little interest in restricting a few benefits to EU migrants, however reactionary that might be, and regard the ‘negotiations’ as at best a charade.

They suspect (and they are right) that Cameron’s real agenda is to play for time and use the referendum to endorse continued membership. Whatever ‘concessions’ he gets from the EU he will claim as an historic victory and then call for a Yes vote with governmental resources behind it—and with government ministers bound by the line. Cameron (unlike Osborne) has always avoided saying that he would call for exit in the event of failure.

This growing reality has led in recent days to the main strands of the xenophobic right—UKIP and the Tory right-wing—breaking cover to set up the No campaign before Cameron’s negotiations have even started. In the Tory Party unity has only lasted a month.

The first move on this was from Farage who called for a campaign to be set up as soon as possible. Then the Tory right set up a campaign called For Britain in order to start the campaign for a No vote. It has the initial support of over 50 Tory MPs and is led by the likes of Owen Patterson, Bernard Jenkins, and John Redwood.

It is chaired by Tory MP Steve Baker, who warned that unless Britain regains sovereignty over its own laws and power to trade freely in the world they will campaign for a No vote. It appears to have the potential to at least double its membership once the campaign gets off the ground.

This means that the shape of the main ‘official’ No campaign is already clear. Its central components will be UKIP and the Tory right who will compete for the leadership role within it.

As things stand, of course, the most likely outcome of the referendum is the Yes vote that Cameron recommends. This is far from guaranteed, however. It will depend on events at the time and how Cameron plays his hand.

### **How democratic will the referendum be?**

The first thing to say about the referendum itself (as set out in the Referendum Bill) is that it is deeply undemocratic in at least two important ways.

It excludes from the vote of over 2 million EU citizens living in the UK. EU citizens who have the right to vote in British local elections as well as European elections. This is a big issue, in London in particular, where a quarter of disenfranchised people live. This is clearly a concession to the Tory right rather than something Cameron would want himself. The right would be in open revolt had EU citizens been allowed to vote.

In the Scottish referendum all those living in Scotland were given the right to vote—as were the 16-17 year olds who are also excluded by the Referendum Bill. In Scotland, of course, including everyone in the vote suited the outcome Cameron wanted.

Labour supports these exclusions having reversed their opposition to the Referendum Bill and voted for it. The SNP are strongly opposed to them. Labour has made it clear that they will campaign to stay in the EU whatever the result of the ‘renegotiations’.

The other issue to which the SNP is strongly opposed is the UK-wide nature of the referendum vote, which could drag Scotland, and indeed Wales, out of the EU against their will. Nicola Sturgeon is

(rightly) demanding individual votes in the four nations of the British state and is warning that a No vote could trigger a second independence referendum in Scotland.

## **The role and nature of the EU**

The fundamental nature of the EU is determined by the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 (with its single currency) and the Nice Treaty of 2001. This is to act as a supra-national authority charged with ensuring that the member states comply with the neo-liberal agenda, which is at the heart of the EU, in order to increase the rate of exploitation and compete more effectively in world markets.

The implementation of this agenda involved huge attacks on living standards and welfare across the EU, and was met by five years of remarkable mass struggle in the 1990s:

- 1994 saw strikes and demonstrations in Italy and Greece and mass strikes and huge demonstrations in France against cuts in education.
- 1995 saw a huge confrontation in France, which shook the government to its foundations. Millions of workers struck and demonstrated in a wave of action, which in some ways exceeded the events of May and June 1968. There were mass strikes in Italy, Portugal, Belgium, Greece, and in Germany—where the government was forced to retreat.
- 1996 saw the biggest wave of struggles in Europe for 20 years. There were mass strikes in Italy, Portugal, Belgium, Greece and Spain.
- 1997 saw millions of workers in action across the EU, mostly against the introduction of the single currency.

It was the outcome of these battles—in the end the single currency was established— that shaped the real nature of the EU as the austerity imposing welfare busting machine that we see in operation in Greece and elsewhere today. These mechanisms impact most directly in the Eurozone but not only in the Eurozone since neo-liberalism is fundamental to the whole of the EU.

Maastricht and Nice also deepened the democratic deficit that had existed since the early days of the European project. Today the EU is in fact it is less democratic than its member states where government can be removed and replaced by elections from time to time—however inadequate these elections might be.

This is not the case within the EU as an institution. Every constitutional treaty since the Single European Act of 1986—Maastricht, Amsterdam, Nice and Lisbon—have degraded democracy further. The European Parliament was established to give an impression of democracy which does not exist.

Power in the EU lies with the Council of Ministers and the Commission—neither of which are elected bodies but both of which are dominated by the biggest and most powerful member states. All this means that internal reform is impossible.

## **TTIP**

On top of this we have the prospect of TTIP (the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership), currently being negotiated in secret between the USA and the EU. There will be no vote on TTIP in

any of the member states. It has been agreed in the European Parliament's trade commission and will come before the European Parliament later in June.

TTIP would mean that the countries covered by it would become one big market for big corporations, that public services like the NHS would be fully open to competition. Companies would be able to sue governments if those governments' policies cause a loss of profits.

It is similar to other free trade agreements in place or being negotiated elsewhere across the globe. If Britain were to leave the European Union then the Tories would undoubtedly be negotiating a bilateral trade deal with the US—and this could easily be just as reactionary as TTIP.

## **Greece**

Today the real face of the EU is the Troika—a tripartite enforcer mechanism comprised of the European Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the IMF.

The brutal role of the Troika in Greece over the past 6 years— which has been to use Greece as a test bed for extreme neoliberal measures which have imposed pauperisation on the Greek working class for the first time since World War I—is therefore entirely consistent with the role the EU under the Maastricht Treaty and the single currency.

The banking crisis of 2008 compounded the contradictions within both the EU and the Eurozone and threw them into an existential crisis. The response of the elites was austerity and then more austerity - and as a result the EU as a whole has remained in stagnation ever since.

Since Greece elected an anti-austerity government led by Syriza earlier this year, the Troika has been dedicated to destroying it as quickly as possible, and in the most humiliating way, in order to warn others what will happen if they take the same anti-austerity road.

In fact it has been the reluctance of the Syriza government in Greece to contemplate leaving the Eurozone (and probably therefore the EU) that has handed the initiative to the Troika and allowed them to dictate terms—although this is far from a completed process. At the moment the Syriza government is trapped between maintaining Greece's EU/Eurozone membership and sticking to their anti-austerity policies—a contradiction that they will have to resolve.

Although prior to the election Syriza stood on 'no sacrifice for the Euro' (a correct position) they have not subsequently been consistent on this.

## **The struggle against Maastricht in Britain**

The Tory Government of John Major backed the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, though it was split down the middle over it.

In Britain there were two campaigns against the Maastricht—from the opposite ends of the political spectrum. One comprised the bulk of the left, led by Tony Benn. The other comprised the Tory right.

The rightwing campaign was based on national sovereignty, the defence of the pound, and a strategic alliance with the USA.

The left campaign called for 'a different Europe, a Europe of the people and not of capital', and had

a big public resonance. Benn argued that Maastricht was about “the liberation of capital and the enslavement of labour. We have to have a programme, he argued, for the control of capital and the liberation of labour—and it has to be done on an internationalist basis.

The Communist Party of Britain (CPB) was a part of these campaigns but its politics were significantly different. It focused on the defence of national sovereignty and even the defence of the pound—which reflected its support for the nationalist Campaign against Euro-Federalism.

The International Socialist Group (ISG), as we were at the time, was a part of these campaigns both against Maastricht and the single currency. The Fourth International (FI) was very much a part of them at the European level and was central to the European Marches against the single currency.

The weakness of the left campaign was the unions. At the time of Wilson’s referendum in 1975 the bulk of the unions had been against membership of the EEC (as it was then). The defeats of the 1980s, and the rise of Blairism, however, brought a big change. The TUC invited Jacques Delors, President of the European Commission to address its 1988 Congress and fully supported European integration under Maastricht. Many individual unions followed suit.

This was partly because they hoped that the Social Chapter would give them a few crumbs without the need to fight for them. Its provisions, however, were pitifully weak. It included the right to strike, for example, but in Britain this was subordinate to the Tory anti-union laws and therefore worthless. The British government secured exemptions from key elements of the Social Chapter, and took many years to phase in the Working Time Directive’s restrictions on weekly hours of work for staff in the NHS.

## **The British Left and the EU**

The left in Britain (in its broadest sense) is more pro-EU today than at any time since Britain joined the project. This has been due, at least in part, to the fact that politics here in Britain have shifted to the right to the extent that some aspects of EU policy are progressive in relation to it.

The Green party in England has always been pro-EU, though it opposed the Maastricht Treaty in the 1990s. Today it is more strongly pro-EU than ever.

The SNP—which is not part of the left but well to the left of Labour—supported a No vote in the 1975 referendum, but switched as long ago as the late 1980s to being strongly pro-EU—as did Plaid. Both Scotland and Wales (as nations) see themselves as beneficiaries of EU regional development assistance, which has been more accessible to them than investment from Westminster.

Part of the SNP and Plaid’s motivation seems to be the need to appear more internationalist than the ‘Westminster parties’, though the danger of independent Scottish and Welsh states facing ever increasing centralisation within Europe sits uneasily with opposition to centralisation within the British state.

What is more surprising, however, given the current role of the Troika in Greece, is that the trend on the radical left has been the same. It is harder today, amongst the radical left, to argue that the EU is a bosses club than it has ever been. And even where this is accepted, as in Left Unity for example, there is probably a majority against exit under any circumstance—leaving the current referendum aside.

Some ultra-left groups such as the CPGB and Workers Power have long held similar positions. They

have argued that EU membership –rather than international solidarity – was the best way to unite the European working class. They argue the same against Scottish independence—that it would disunite the working class.

The Scottish Socialist Party has recently published a pamphlet on the referendum that not only calls for a vote to stay in, but argues that it is right to be in the EU per se and (specifically) that the task is to reform it from within.

It is true that austerity in Britain since 2010 has not been driven by the EU institutions but by a Tory-led government with its own hard line neo-liberal agenda. It is an agenda, however, that coincides with the EU's own framework of austerity. If Britain elected a government that broke from austerity to any degree (or failed to implement it effectively) it would be a very different matter, the EU would be down on it like a ton of bricks.

It is also true that the free movement of peoples within the EU is something socialists should support. This, however, has to be seen against the racist Schengen 'fortress Europe' policy—which is to have free movement internally but to erect increasing strong barriers around the perimeters of the EU, against immigrants and asylum seekers who attempt to get in. The reality of this is being played out as tens of thousands of people drown in the Mediterranean trying to get to European shores as they flee persecution and starvation.

Taking all this into account, regarding the EU as in some way progressive as against the member states or against the British state, can seriously disorientate the movement.

It is often argued that whilst it is true that the EU is a bosses club, the British state is also one. This is true but it misses the point. EU membership gives you two bosses clubs, one at the domestic level and the other at the supra-national level which backs up the national government against the working class when support is needed and pushes it to attack the working class harder under conditions where it is holding back.

### **How should the left vote in the referendum?**

We can say with confidence when it comes to the referendum campaign itself that it will reach new heights (or plumb new depths) in terms of xenophobia, nationalism and racism. It will be a carnival of reaction. Most (if not all) of the 'reforms' being demanded by Cameron (to the extent that he has been prepared to reveal them) are reactionary demands. They involved putting barriers up to foreign workers or depriving them of benefits.

The main No campaign will be totally dominated by UKIP and the Tory right wing. This poses something of a dilemma for those on the left (like ourselves) who see the EU as a reactionary institution designed to ensure that the national governments impose the austerity agenda and increase the rate of exploitation more effectively but have no wish to be associated with the right in any form it might take.

SR has not yet taken a view on this. In my opinion, however, the right way to vote in this referendum will be Yes.

This could change over the next two years—we don't know what is going to happen to Greece for example—but given the xenophobic politics that will dominate the main No campaign it is difficult in my view to do otherwise as things stand today. Any No vote is going to be seen as lining up with the racist elements that will be demanding this. It will be very difficult to avoid this.

A left -wing Yes campaign, under these conditions, should be based on a strong statement that recognises the real nature of the EU and explains why it is necessary to vote Yes under these conditions.

The conditions for a progressive and credible No campaign (i.e. on the basis of socialist and working class politics and significant forces) do not exist in Britain today.

With previous struggles around the EU—the introduction of the Maastricht Treaty and the single currency in the 1990s for example—it was possible to be part of broad left wing No campaign that was based, at least to some extent, on socialist and working class principles and represented something significant. It did not imply any alliance or common “national” interest” between British workers and “British” capital: while resisting global ambitions of capital it also resisted spurious notions of a common interest in British “sovereignty”.

Those times were very different. The fact that a progressive campaign for a no vote was possible then does not mean it is possible now. Today the political conditions and left forces that created such campaigns no longer exist and the xenophobic right —the Tory right and UKIP—are very much stronger.

There will be a left-wing No campaign, of course, but it is likely to comprise the same forces as No2EU: i.e. the SP and the CPB (and maybe a few from the Labour left) and it will have the similar politics based on national sovereignty. It will also be drowned out and marginalised. We could not be a part of such a campaign.

The 1975 referendum was completely different. Then there was a majority Labour government with left wing ministers like Benn and Heffer, a powerful grassroots in the party and a youth section led by the left. More importantly the trade unions had over 13 million members and controlled the majority of votes at Labour Party conference and we’re overwhelmingly anti - EEC.

Not everything about the No campaign in 1975 was good of course. Whilst it was significant because it embraced the bulk of the left and the unions, had also had reactionary nationalistic elements including immigration and import controls.

In terms of today, however, defining the EU as a reactionary anti-working class institution does not mean that we are obliged to vote for exit whatever the circumstances and whatever the consequences. We need to be guided by what best serves the interests of the working class in terms of creating the best conditions to build the fight back against austerity and win some much needed victories. Nor is it the end of the matter, or mean that we would not vote for exit under conditions where it would strengthen working class struggles.

A Yes vote in the coming referendum would be consistent with positions SR has taken for some time regarding EU exit: i.e. not to make this an agitational demand. This was one of the reasons why we refused to join the No2EU campaign last May because it advanced it exit as an immediate agitational demand. The other reason - which would have excluded us anyway - was because No2EU was also based on national sovereignty and opposition to the free movement of people in the EU.

There is also the rather important matter of the consequences of a vote for exit at this time and under these conditions—and this is clear. It would strengthen both the Tory right and UKIP and could even bring about a dangerous realignment between them. It would be taken as a mandate for the introduction of a range of new restrictions on immigration and not just from the EU.

The Tory right, in the form of the ‘free market’ Institute for Economic Affairs, have already published scenarios that they would expect a Tory government to follow after British exit. These scenarios



involve realignment of the UK state with the other major reactionary elements of the international bosses clubs – the World Trade Organisation, NATO, the European Free Trade Area (EFTA), the EU Customs Union and the European Economic Area (EEA).

The Tories would repeal the Working Time Directive that limits (however inadequately) workers' hours and remove the EU restrictions on introducing genetically modified crops, as first steps in a long series of reactionary policies. Reactionary Free Trade Agreements would be negotiated and the possibility of signing the UK's own version of TTIP or even joining the USA in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is proposed.

Today we need an internationalist, not a nationalist opposition to the EU: one based on resisting the strengthening of British, European and multinational capital, resisting austerity and opposing racist barriers to access and migration. We need an alliance not with British capital or the right wing fringe of UKIP, but with workers and working class organisations in Europe and beyond. And we need to revive and strengthen working class and socialist organization in Britain to ensure that we have the basis to challenge austerity at home as well as its imposition on other countries.

**Alan Thornett**

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**P.S.**

\* Socialist Action. June 09, 2015:

<http://socialistresistance.org/7499/what-position-should-the-left-take-on-the-eu-referendum>

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