



## TUSC and the EU referendum – initial proposals

With the EU Referendum Bill now beginning its passage through parliament, and with speculation that sections of the government are looking at a referendum as early as summer 2016, it is necessary for the TUSC national steering committee to begin a discussion on what position TUSC might adopt in the referendum and the campaign around it, and how decisions on this matter will be reached.

### Current TUSC policies on the EU

The current core policies of TUSC (see <http://www.tusc.org.uk/policy> on the TUSC website), which prospective candidates commit to when they make their application to be a candidate and which were finalised for this year's general election at the TUSC conference in January, includes explicit reference to the EU in the section headed, 'Solidarity Not War', namely the bullet point supporting:

- An independent foreign policy, based on international solidarity – no more being a US poodle, no moves towards a capitalist, militarist United States of Europe. No to austerity and anti-working class policies, whether from the EU or Britain.

In addition, there is the explicit reference to oppose the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) being negotiated between the EU and the US, "and all secret austerity treaties". Arguably, other TUSC core policies are also relevant in that the EU treaties that voters will be asked to take a position on in the referendum legally 'prohibit' them.

These include the core policies on bringing privatised public services, industries and utilities back into public ownership, including transport, Royal Mail, the NHS, and the justice system; defending the right to asylum and opposing racist immigration controls; and democratic public ownership of the banks and major companies.

This would suggest that, with its current policies and faced with a binary choice in the referendum, TUSC should declare in favour of a No vote.

### Legislation on referendum campaigns

The legislation surrounding referendums places restrictions on campaigning unless an organisation – including political parties and trade unions – registers as a 'permitted participant' with the Electoral Commission, declaring "the outcome for which the party proposes to campaign" (Political Parties, Elections and Referendum Act 2000, section 106). There are further issues involved such as the designation by the Electoral Commission (under section 108) of 'official' Yes and No campaigns who are eligible for public funding, Freepost communications, the use of rooms free of charge, referendum broadcasts and media access.

TUSC would have to take a position on whether it would participate in the official No campaign after that campaign had been selected by the Electoral Commission.

Before then, however, if a No position is agreed by TUSC, there would be an opportunity for a TUSC campaign on the lines of 'Who should be the voice of No? Trade unionists and socialists, or bankers, Tories and ex-Tories?' The Electoral Commission is not actually legally obliged to designate any 'permitted participant' as the official campaign if there are competing claims. So

why should the ordination of reactionary pro-austerity politicians as the representatives of No voters be allowed to go unchallenged?

There would be no opportunity for such a campaign – with all the establishment parties bar UKIP backing Yes – in the unlikely event that TUSC were to advocate a Yes vote, although, of course, it would attempt to distinguish itself from the official Yes campaign in its normal campaign activity.

## **Reaching consensus**

Referendums, as even Margaret Thatcher conceded, are usually “the device of dictators and demagogues” and, by presenting a binary choice, don’t allow all the issues involved to be properly discussed. But a referendum is what we are faced with and the logic of TUSC’s position as a working class, anti-austerity socialist alternative suggests that TUSC should declare in favour of a No vote.

However, as has already been indicated in previous discussions, there will be those participating in our coalition who will not draw this conclusion and who will argue for a Yes vote or abstention.

While this is almost certainly a minority position we have to find a way to keep TUSC together as we deal with this issue.

The relevant TUSC rules (see <http://www.tusc.org.uk/16861/14-11-13/How-TUSC-Functions>) are the consensus rule – both in relation to existing policy and new policy, as taking a position on the referendum would be; the role of conferences in debating policy, but with final decisions being made by the national steering committee; and the rights of organisations participating in TUSC to produce their own public campaign material with their own position. If the referendum is held on the same day as the 2017 scheduled council elections the rule that individual candidates are responsible for their own campaign and its content outside the agreed core policy statements would also come into effect.

Concretely this could mean that TUSC as an organisation takes no position at all on the EU referendum question, Yes or No?, but constituent organisations and individual members campaign on their own position. Possibly, those in a minority on this issue could agree to TUSC adopting a formal position for No but exercise the right to present their own position as TUSC constituent organisations, members and candidates. All options need to be explored. And that means how a discussion on the issue is organised is very important.

## **Organising the discussion**

There are, as acknowledged, real differences on how to vote in the referendum although, at the same time, as the core policies show, there is high degree of unanimity on the neo-liberal, pro-austerity character of the EU etc.

The best way to proceed must be by a discussion on the political issues involved as well as the practicalities of how to reach a position, if it is possible to do so.

I would propose that a debate on the EU and the referendum – with speakers from the four constituent organisations – be the main afternoon session at the TUSC conference in September. Before then an e-bulletin of articles from the constituent organisations should be produced and made available on the website. In addition an A3-folded brochure should be printed with a statement agreed by the steering committee on the EU and austerity but opening a discussion on the referendum issue, with again (but obviously more abridged) statements on where they stand carried from the constituent organisations.

And, of course, that this issue and how the debate is progressing, including monitoring to ensure that the rights of minority viewpoints are guaranteed, is an agenda item at every steering committee meeting at least until a position is arrived at.

Clive Heemskerck  
TUSC National Agent  
17th June 2015