



The EU referendum

Report on the TUSC campaign

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The TUSC national steering committee first considered the EU referendum at its meeting in July 2015, where proposals were agreed on how to reach a TUSC position on the issue.

TUSC was established in 2010 around a platform of core policies (at <http://www.tusc.org.uk/policy>) but these did not include a specific commitment on the question of EU membership.

The steering committee acknowledged that there was unanimity within TUSC on the neo-liberal and anti-worker character of the EU. But it also recognised that there were real differences on how to vote in a binary referendum in the specific conditions in which it would be held.

Consequently, the July meeting agreed that a debate on the referendum, with speakers from the constituent organisations of TUSC, should be the main afternoon session at the TUSC conference on September 26th and that a TUSC position – Leave, Remain or Abstain – would be decided at that stage.

TUSC conference debate

The debate took place – with platform speakers representing the RMT, the Socialist Party, the SWP, and the Independent Socialist Network – and the conference duly agreed the resolution below, with 5% of the conference attendees voting against:

“The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition agrees to register with the Electoral Commission as a ‘permitted participant’ in the EU referendum to enable it to conduct an independent campaign against EU membership.

“We further agree that TUSC should not participate in any officially designated exit campaign that is headed by reactionary racist and pro-austerity politicians but should campaign on the basis of its own core policy platform of opposition to austerity and support for socialist policies, while being prepared to work with other working class and socialist organisations who take a similar stance.

“TUSC recognises that there are participants within our coalition who will want to support EU membership or argue for abstention and, as a coalition, guarantees their right to present their own position publically as TUSC constituent organisations, members and candidates”.

This resolution was confirmed at the steering committee meeting following the conference, on October 7th, along with the text of a press release announcing that TUSC would register as a ‘permitted participant’ for Leave (see <http://www.tusc.org.uk/17132/08-10-2015/socialists-to-challenge-ukip-for-exit-eu-crown-says-ex-labour-mp>).

The release also included an announcement of TUSC’s intention “as part of our campaign against EU membership” to challenge “any attempt by the Electoral Commission to allocate public money, the free use of rooms, TV broadcast rights etc to any of the current ‘Out’ campaigns”.

The purpose of this campaign, it explained, was so that “working class voters who oppose the EU are not forced to line up behind the reactionary racist and pro-austerity politicians who are being promoted in the mainstream media as the only exit voices”.

The ‘Don’t fund UKIP and Tory outers’ petition

To action this campaign the TUSC national steering committee, at its next meeting in November, agreed a petition to the Electoral Commission under the heading ‘Don’t give taxpayers’ money to UKIP and Tory EU campaigners’. The text approved was as follows:

“We the undersigned call on the Electoral Commission not to give taxpayers’ money and other public resources to either the Vote Leave or Leave.EU campaigns [the latter was effectively subsequently subsumed into Grassroots Out, with the same donors etc – CH], or any amalgam of them, in the forthcoming EU referendum.

“There are millions of trade unionists, young people, anti-austerity campaigners and working class voters generally, whose opposition to the big business-dominated EU would not be represented in the referendum by these organisations.

“The Electoral Commission has the power to choose who shall be the ‘official’ Remain and Exit campaigns in the referendum. These organisations will then receive substantial public funding, free postage for leaflets, the use of rooms free of charge, and TV and radio time for referendum broadcasts – potentially millions of pounds of public resources.

“But the Electoral Commission does not have to choose an official campaign if there is not one organisation that adequately represents those supporting a particular outcome to the referendum.

“We condemn the mainstream media for promoting UKIP, Tory and other pro-austerity and racist establishment politicians and organisations as the only exit voices. We call on the Electoral Commission not to follow their lead and instead recognise that a significant proportion of those who will vote against the EU support basic socialist policies of workers’ rights, public ownership, and opposition to austerity and racism”.

The purpose of the petition was self-explanatory. It did not commit signatories to support a leave vote but to put pressure on the Electoral Commission not to designate a right-wing dominated exit organisation as the ‘official’ leave campaign, with the political ‘legitimacy’ – and public resources and media access – that would bestow.

The meeting agreed to collect ‘founding signatories’ from trade unionists at a national officer or national executive committee level ready to launch a campaign around it in the new year.

The draft petition was circulated widely and we were able to launch the petition in the new year with the signatures of two national union presidents, two national vice-presidents, and 26 union national or sectional executive committee members (see <http://www.tusc.org.uk/17170/04-02-2016/dont-give-taxpayers-money-to-ukip-and-tory-eu-campaigners>).

TUSC and the ‘official designation’ process

Following the announcement that June 23rd would be the date of the referendum, the February meeting of the TUSC national steering committee discussed the next stage of our EU campaign.

A draft leaflet was agreed for printing under the heading, ‘Vote Against the EU – But don’t give taxpayers’ money to UKIP and Tories’ (see <http://www.tusc.org.uk/txt/367.pdf>) to help step up the collection of petition signatures.

It was agreed to review progress on this campaign and to try and arrange a formal meeting with the Electoral Commission to hand in the petition at the end of March or early in April. This would be an opportunity for TUSC to explain to the Commission the reasoning behind our request that they use their legal power not to designate any organisation to be the official Leave campaign.

It was also suggested at this point that if the Electoral Commission refused to meet TUSC it may become necessary to apply for ‘official campaign status’ ourselves, or in alliance with others who may be interested. This would enable TUSC to use the provisions to interview applicants in the designation assessment process to compel the Commission to address our arguments.

A week later the PCS civil servants’ union national executive committee agreed to write to the Electoral Commission calling on them not to give political authority and taxpayers’ money to UKIP and Tory ‘outers’, boosting the campaign.

The March meeting of the TUSC national steering committee took place on Wednesday 23rd, eight days before the deadline for applications to be received for lead campaign designation.

A draft of a letter to the Electoral Commission had been circulated before the steering committee asking for a formal meeting with the Commission before it reached its decision on designation on April 13th (see <http://www.tusc.org.uk/txt/381.pdf>). But the letter also stated that, “if it is not possible for you to guarantee that we will have a hearing for our arguments, we will submit our own application for lead

campaign designation for the Leave outcome [by the March 31st deadline], to ensure that the points we wish to make are properly considered by the Commission”.

The letter was approved and sent to the Electoral Commission on March 24th, with the expectation that a meeting date with the Commission would be agreed and that steering committee members would be “informed, a delegation agreed by e-mail, and press work organised” (Minutes of the TUSC Steering Committee, March 23rd).

The Commission refuses meeting – so an application is submitted

The Electoral Commission acknowledged receipt of our letter on March 24th. But it was not until the afternoon of March 29th that Tom Hawthorn, the Commission’s Head of Policy responsible for the designation process, formally replied.

The reply failed to answer any of the arguments made in the TUSC letter, on the statutory position that the Commission was not obliged to make a designation, or on the political considerations that the Commission would have to address in its designation decisions.

To our request for a meeting it stated, without explanation, that “it would not be appropriate for the Electoral Commission to meet any other individuals or organisations, including TUSC”, as part of the designation process. But it did concede, however, that “it is of course open for TUSC itself to submit an application for lead campaigner status”.

This response is in itself extraordinary. Without exaggerating what TUSC is, its constituent organisations include an 80,000-strong trade union and it includes other trade unionists in an individual capacity who represent further thousands of workers. It is a fact that TUSC has been the sixth-biggest presence on ballot papers in elections for the last four years, polling over 350,000 votes since our formation in 2010. In Liverpool, Britain’s eighth biggest city, TUSC has outpolled both the Conservatives and UKIP in the last two mayoral elections. Yet the unelected Commissioners peremptorily rejected a simple request from TUSC for a meeting.

Consequently, in accord with the decision of the March 23rd steering committee meeting, an application form for lead campaign designation was completed, the draft circulated by e-mail to the committee for approval on March 30th – with a 20-hour timeframe for objections or amendments to be received – and submitted to the Commission before the expiry of the March 31st deadline.

And so TUSC became one of three organisations, alongside the UKIP-dominated Grassroots Out campaign and the Tory-led Vote Leave, to submit applications to be the ‘official’ Leave campaign.

There was only one application to be the official Remain campaign, from Britain Stronger in Europe, which was headed by the Tory peer Lord Rose but organised from Downing Street. It should be noted that no attempt was made by Remain supporters in the labour movement to challenge the reactionary, cross-class leadership of the Remain campaign in the same way that TUSC challenged the reactionary Leave organisations.

‘A blatantly political decision’

The Electoral Commission announced on April 13th that it had chosen the Vote Leave organisation to be the designated Leave campaign without any further communication with TUSC. The meeting that agreed this was attended by five of the nine Commissioners, two of the nine having recused themselves because of clear conflict of interest. Of the five Commissioners who did participate, three made declarations of interests, including Trusteeship of an organisation receiving EU funding in one case, and a directorship of a company whose clients included European Commission staff in another. It is a moot point whether two Commissioners would have constituted a quorum.

In response to the announcement TUSC issued a press release denouncing “a blatantly political decision” by the Commission (see <http://www.tusc.org.uk/17217/19-04-2016/press-release>), which had “positively chosen to give political authority and substantial public resources to what is effectively a wing of the Tory party” when they had no legal obligation to make any designation at all.

The TUSC steering committee reviewed the outcome of the designation campaign at its next meeting on April 20th. The text of a further press release on the issue, circulated before the meeting, was agreed (see <http://www.tusc.org.uk/17219/21-04-2016/press-release>). This included comments on the “torturous” response of the Electoral Commission to the TUSC argument that Vote Leave did not pass the statutory test that it “adequately represented” leave supporters.

The Electoral Commission, the press release argued, “admitted that the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA) does not define ‘adequately represents’ so they used a dictionary definition that it could mean ‘sufficient, satisfactory (often with the implication of being barely so)’.

The release went on: “Given that official designation confers political authority and substantial taxpayers’ resources to the chosen campaign it would be interesting to know what could have led the Commission to consider Vote Leave to less than ‘barely represent’ the working class constituency that will vote for exit in June!”

The official designation process holds important lessons that should be discussed in the wider labour movement, including its impact on the subsequent character of the EU campaign and what else could have been done to prevent its domination by reactionary campaigns, for both Leave and Remain.

But for TUSC, this aspect of our EU referendum campaign effectively closed at this point and the steering committee went on to discuss the priorities for the nine weeks that remained.

The Socialist Case Against the EU ‘20-city tour’

The March meeting of the TUSC steering committee had agreed to organise a ‘20-city tour’ of public meetings under the heading, ‘The Socialist Case Against the EU’. These would be meetings hosted by TUSC but they would not be exclusive meetings, with platforms limited to TUSC supporters. There would be speakers from the TUSC constituent organisations, but invitations to participate in the tour would also be issued nationally to trade unions that had taken a Leave position and other left-wing Leave campaigns.

Further details were discussed at the April steering committee, including dates for the first thirteen public meetings. A draft leaflet circulated before the meeting was agreed for printing (see <http://www.tusc.org.uk/txt/378.pdf>) and it was agreed that Trade Unionists Against the EU (TUAEU) and Lexit: The Left Leave Campaign and their constituent organisations would be invited to participate in the tour with platform speakers, along with ASLEF and BFAWU.

In the event 25 meetings were organised under the ‘20-city tour’ banner, in Derby, Leicester, Gateshead, Carlisle, Bristol, London, Coventry, Peterborough, Birmingham, Leeds, Salford, Southampton, Cardiff, Aylesbury, Paisley, Dundee, Liverpool, Warrington, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Portsmouth, Stoke, Oxford, York and Sheffield.

TUAEU provided platform speakers for seven of the meetings, including the London FBU regional secretary Paul Embury and the general secretary of the General Federation of Trade Unions, Doug Nicholls, while BFAWU president Ian Hodson spoke at the Leeds meeting. But despite two invitations sent to the Communist Party of Britain (on May 3rd and May 26th) no speaker was provided to represent that organisation at any of the meetings.

There was no reported case of any speaker from a TUSC constituent organisation being denied a place on a meeting platform, which is another testament to how the federal character of TUSC fosters an open, inclusive approach.

Working with other campaigns

The September 2015 conference that discussed TUSC’s position on the referendum had agreed that, while TUSC “should campaign on the basis of its own core policy platform of opposition to austerity and support for socialist policies”, it should also be “prepared to work with other working class and socialist organisations who take a similar stance”. This approach was followed by the steering committee throughout.

As explained, founding signatories were sought widely for the 'Don't fund UKIP and Tory outers' petition and efforts were made to interest other left Leave campaigners to take up the campaign to block official designation being given to a reactionary Leave organisation.

The March 23rd TUSC steering committee was followed on the same evening by a meeting organised by the Communist Party of Britain (CPB) and Counterfire, which also included representatives from two of the three TUSC constituent organisations, the SWP and the RMT, who raised the issue there.

Out of this meeting a new organisation was established, Lexit: The Left Leave Campaign, which produced its first leaflet for the April 16th Peoples' Assembly demonstration against austerity and organised its first public meeting on May 18th.

The RMT did not eventually affiliate to Lexit while the third TUSC constituent organisation, the Socialist Party, was not invited to the foundation meetings at all and, at subsequent public meetings organised by Lexit, was excluded from the platform.

Despite these difficulties it was still possible to ensure that the TUSC '20-city tour' meetings, most of which had been booked before the formation of Lexit, did not clash with the meetings organised under the Lexit banner.

And, as explained above, every effort was made to ensure that working class and socialist organisations supporting a Leave position who wanted to speak at the TUSC-hosted public meetings were given the opportunity to do so.

Media coverage

The TUSC campaign against the EU generated more media coverage than our election campaigns for the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, and the English local councils, which ran concurrently until the May 5th polling day.

A letter based on the petition, 'Don't give taxpayers' money to UKIP and Tory EU campaigners', was printed in The Guardian the day after the official declaration of the EU referendum date (see <http://www.tusc.org.uk/17182/22-02-2016/tusc-letter-in-the-guardian-now-sign-the-petition>). The campaign around the designation process was picked up again when, on April 1st, the BBC website carried an item on what it called 'a surprise bid' by TUSC to be the 'official' Leave campaign (see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-35941945>), explaining not inaccurately that "TUSC's original intention was to call for neither group to be chosen" [Vote Leave or Grassroots Out] but that "it had submitted a 'serious application' after concluding its concerns would not be addressed".

When the Electoral Commission made its decision to designate Vote Leave as the official campaign, TUSC was interviewed on RT News (see <http://www.tusc.org.uk/17214/14-04-2016/tusc-on-rt-news-for-a-socialist-campaign-against-the-eu>) and also made the front page of the Financial Times (April 14th).

Other publicity included Dave Nellist appearing on Sky News, after Jeremy Corbyn's unconvincing confirmation that he was backing a Remain vote (see <http://www.tusc.org.uk/17222/23-04-2016/dave-nellist-on-sky-news-jeremy-corbyns-eu-stand-doesnt-convince>); Dave debating with Frances O'Grady on the Daily Politics programme (<http://www.tusc.org.uk/17258/19-05-2016/the-eu-is-thatcherism-on-a-continental-scale-tusc-chair-debates-tuc-general-secretary>); and Dave on Any Questions on May 20th (<http://www.tusc.org.uk/17260/24-05-2016/tusc-on-any-questions-the-highlights>), on the same panel as Andrea Leadsom.

But of course the limited media impact of TUSC's and other left wing and trade union campaigns could not cut across the narrative that the capitalist establishment was trying to create, that only racist reactionaries opposed the EU.

The press release approved by e-mail by the steering committee after the murder of Jo Cox, which pointed out that "the consequences of framing the debate in this way were all too predictable" (see <http://www.tusc.org.uk/17286/20-06-2016/press-release>) was not picked up by any media outlet outside the socialist press.

The post-referendum situation

TUSC now needs to discuss the role it can play in the post-referendum situation. This must include how to approach the coup developing in the Labour Party to depose Jeremy Corbyn from the leadership, which is intrinsically linked to the capitalist establishment's attempt to regroup politically after the blow they suffered from the EU referendum result.

In the obverse of Jeremy Corbyn's call that 'negotiations on Britain's relationship with the EU cannot be left in Tory hands', the capitalist establishment is saying – and this includes their supporters in the Labour Party – 'negotiations on Britain's relationship with the EU cannot be left in Jeremy Corbyn's hands'. This is the angle from which TUSC can intervene – for a socialist, internationalist exit from the EU treaties – linked to a defence of Jeremy Corbyn and opposition to the pro-capitalist PLP majority.

The TUSC core policies can still form the basis of this approach, particularly those identified for the EU referendum campaign as incompatible with the rules, directives and laws set by the EU treaties. To recap, these were, in the wording agreed at the April steering committee meeting for the text of the 'The Socialist Case Against the EU' TUSC leaflet:

- Re-nationalise all rail, bus and ferry services to build an integrated, low-pollution public transport system.
- Hands off our NHS – for a high-quality, free National Health Service under democratic public ownership and control.
- Reject the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) treaty being negotiated between the EU and the US, which will significantly increase corporate power and its ability to take over our public services.
- Take Royal Mail back into public ownership to guarantee our postal services.
- Bring the privatised public utilities, including the energy companies, back into public ownership. Invest in renewable energy – publicly-owned and controlled. No fracking.
- Stop the moves towards a capitalist, militarist United States of Europe – the EU's so-called Common Security and Defence policy. No to a new generation of nuclear weapons, aircraft carriers or eurofighters – convert arms spending into socially useful products and services.
- Defend the right to asylum. Oppose all racist immigration controls.
- Tax the rich. For progressive tax on rich corporations and individuals and an end to tax avoidance.
- For a democratic socialist society run in the interests of people not millionaires. Bring the major companies and banks that dominate the economy into democratic public ownership, so that production and services can be planned to meet the needs of all and to protect the environment.
- No to racism, austerity and anti-working class policies, whether they come from politicians in the EU or Britain.

These may well need to be re-formulated and certainly added to in the new situation, with obvious examples being a guarantee of permanent residence to all citizens of EU member states currently living or working in Britain, and maintaining public funding of all EU regional and social development fund programmes.

Overall, because TUSC adopted a clear, principled Leave position and made no compromises with reactionary Leavers – while allowing constituent organisations, members and candidates to present their own position publically if they supported a Remain vote – our coalition is well positioned to participate in the debates developing on the character of post-referendum labour movement politics.