

Tories and Labour compete to scapegoat migrants for British social crisis

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The political elite in Britain is attempting to whip up anti-immigrant sentiment on an unprecedented scale. Representatives of the Conservative and Labour parties have spent the last weeks seeking to outdo each other in their movement ever further to the right.

Last week, former Prime Minister John Major spoke in Germany, warning it was likely the UK would eventually withdraw from the European Union, unless it was able to limit migration from member states, in negotiations set to be held after next May's UK general election.

Addressing "my friends in Germany", Major claimed the UK had accepted "one of if not the largest population movement in peacetime European history", and that the "sheer scale of the influx has put strains on our health, welfare, housing and education services". This meant there was a "serious possibility that our electorate could vote to leave the EU", he said.

While Major demanded limitations on the freedom of movement for workers within Europe, he made clear there must be no restrictions on capital, insisting that the UK shared "with Germany a belief in an open trading system".

His remarks were endorsed by Prime Minister David Cameron who said it was necessary to "address Britain's concerns about immigration inside the EU".

Major's remarks were framed as a rebuttal to the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). The right-wing, pro-business party is leading demands for British withdrawal from the EU and a clamp-down on immigration.

It has made serious inroads amongst Conservative supporters, including a number of the party's own MPs. This week's by-election in Rochester and Strood was caused by the defection of one such MP, Mark Reckless, to UKIP with others expected to follow.

Reckless had suggested Polish plumbers and other EU migrants could be asked to leave Britain if his party were in government, forcing UKIP to issue a statement that it was not its policy to "round up EU migrants and put them on a boat at Dover and send them back to wherever they came from".

The possibility of UKIP winning a second MP is being used by all the bourgeois parties to claim they must take a harsher line against immigrants to prove they are listening to people's concerns.

This is a fraud. The coalition government, with the support of Labour and the media, have deliberately built up UKIP. Their aim is to scapegoat immigrants for the social crisis caused by the most severe austerity measures since the 1930s. All the parties support austerity and have made clear that, whatever the complexion of the next government, even greater cuts are to follow.

In inflammatory language reminiscent of former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, Defence Secretary Michael Fallon told a BBC current affairs show, "whole towns and communities" were "being swamped by huge numbers of migrants". They were "under siege, [with] large numbers of migrant workers and people claiming benefits".

Defence Secretary Fallon was forced to retract his lying and politically self-serving statement but not before his claims were praised by former Labour Party home secretary David Blunkett. "There has been, mistakenly in my view, a perception that mainstream politicians have engaged in a conspiracy of silence on the immigration issue," Blunkett asserted.

The common refrain now is that migrants are responsible for the shortages in education, welfare and health care. The massive cut-backs in teacher places and the ongoing privatisation of the National Health

Service do not rate a single mention in official discourse.

A Conservative Party leaflet in the Rochester by-election claimed that local people “sometimes struggle to access the services we need because of uncontrolled immigration. Others don’t feel safe walking down the high street of our town.”

The anti-immigrant stance is not only a matter of rhetoric. It is being used to further curtail the democratic and social rights of working people as a whole.

The recent decision of the European Court of Justice [ECJ] to allow national governments to exclude EU migrants from welfare benefits is a case in point.

The *Economist* lauded the decision with an article headlined, “Benefits tourism not OK.” It denounced welfare benefits “tourism,” even though it was forced to acknowledge that it is a fallacy. It wrote, “In general, employment and wage differentials are far bigger motives for migration than welfare. Moreover Britain has a lower unemployment rate among EU migrants than for its native population. Indeed, most welfare recipients in Britain are also in work.”

The decision creates a significant precedent. As the Murdochs’ *Sun* tabloid trumpeted, “Essentially, it [the ECJ] said that if you’ve no job and no money, you have no right to live in an EU country other than your own.”

Labour is determined not to be outflanked by UKIP and the Tories. Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary Rachel Reeves, in an article published in the *Daily Mail*, noted for its unending stream of anti-immigrant diatribes, claimed the UK welfare state “was never designed for the levels of migration we are now seeing”.

Reeves said Labour would extend the period for which EU migrants are prevented from claiming out-of-work benefits from three months to two years. The policy is more draconian than any proposed by the Tories. Labour’s Home Secretary Yvette Cooper intervened to support Reeves, stating, “low-skilled migration is too high, overall migration from the EU is too high”.

Labour’s largest financial backer is the Unite trade union. Unite general secretary Len McCluskey told the *Financial Times* immigration posed “genuine concerns and we need to deal with them”. McCluskey said “[Labour leader] Ed Miliband has got to be seen as

being on people’s sides and he has got to talk to people in a way that they get the message.”

McCluskey asked, “Is it true that migrant workers are undercutting pay? Yes. Who’s to blame for that? Not the migrant workers but the greedy bosses who are allowed to get away with it.”

McCluskey’s line about greedy bosses is a throwaway. The Unite union has no intention of mounting any fight against the assault on pay and conditions mounted by the government and employers. In one of the few “fight backs” mounted by Unite, it made its real position clear—championing the slogan, “British jobs for British workers.”



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