The class issues in the Brexit referendum

Chris Marsden 7 April 2016

The following is an amended version of a report delivered March 26 by Chris Marsden, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (UK), to a party aggregate in Sheffield.

This meeting is an opportunity to discuss in detail our statement "For an Active Boycott of the Brexit Referendum." I welcome the participation of our German comrades because the issues raised have burning relevance for the European work of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

We meet under conditions of a militarisation of world politics the likes of which has no parallel since 1945, of which the war in Syria is only one expression. The main line of development in the Middle East and internationally is towards a conflict between the US, Russia and China.

This resurgence of militarism and war will inevitably meet a response from workers and especially young people that we have set out to provide with the necessary political leadership and programme. Moreover, the working class is being driven inexorably into struggle by the growing crisis of the British, European and world economy. I will draw your attention to just one indication as to how the implications of this crisis are understood within ruling circles.

Allister Heath in the *Daily Telegraph* makes an apocalyptic warning that "The world can't afford another financial crash—it could destroy capitalism as we know it."

He states baldly that "no developed nation today could possibly tolerate another wholesale banking crisis and proper blood and guts recession. We are too fragile, fiscally as well as psychologically. Our economies, cultures and polities are still paying a heavy price for the Great Recession; another collapse, especially were it to be accompanied by a fresh banking bailout by the taxpayer, would trigger a cataclysmic, uncontrollable backlash.

"The public, whose faith in elites and the private sector was rattled after 2007-09, would simply not wear it. Its anger would be so explosive, so-all encompassing that it would threaten the very survival of free trade, of globalisation and of the market-based economy. There would be calls for wage and price controls, punitive, ultra-progressive taxes, a war on the City and arbitrary jail sentences."

We must draw yet more far-reaching and revolutionary political conclusions from what is clearly an existential crisis of the capitalist world order. It is in these circumstances that a political realignment of the working class internationally must now take place. Indeed, it is one that has already begun. In country after country, governments are in the grip of a palpable crisis. They have no legitimacy in the eyes of millions due to the brutal austerity measures they have imposed and the militarist policies they pursue.

Yet the bourgeoisie wants more of the same. Consider the fact that in the last months two European countries—Spain and Ireland—have had elections that did not provide the basis for a functioning government and one—Portugal—could form one only with the assistance of the pseudo-left Left Bloc and the Stalinists.

To this point, right-wing parties of reaction have been able to exploit social discontent, as evidenced in the emergence to prominence of such movements as the Front National, the UK Independence Party and the

Alternative for Germany. But this is not inevitable. Indeed, the outbreak of class struggles can rapidly change this situation in favour of the working class, provided that these are politically prepared and led.

That is why we have launched a political offensive against the pseudoleft forces such as Syriza in Greece and those seeking to channel social protest behind Bernie Sanders in the United States and Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn here in the UK. These are the forces that are responsible for the growth of the right due to their role in politically paralysing the working class.

The political situation in Britain is extremely volatile. The Brexit referendum was called only because the Cameron government was incapable of regulating the deep divisions within its ranks on fundamental issues of strategy in any other way. But having done so, the UK has been placed centre stage in a generalised crisis of European capitalism and the European Union that threatens its break-up and disintegration.

Under these conditions, the importance of our campaign for an Active Boycott of the Brexit Referendum cannot be overstated. The SEP has set out to define the independent political standpoint of workers and youth through which they can demarcate their independent class interests from those of the opposed camps of the bourgeoisie. In so doing, we have charted a course for the entire European working class.

Our discussions on the June 23 referendum from the outset involved comrades internationally. It proceeded from the understanding that what was required was a concrete analysis of the present political situation, the balance of class forces, and how this impacts our tactical approach.

We insisted on making an objective estimation of the issues at stake for the working class, beginning from the understanding that the threat of Brexit is only one expression of the ongoing breakup of the EU under the twin impact of escalating national and social antagonisms.

In light of the gravity of the situation facing the working class, we examined carefully each of the possible options on the ballot—to Remain or Leave—from the standpoint of the concrete circumstances in which the ballot was being held: that is, a referendum called by Prime Minister David Cameron in which the opposition is dominated by the right-wing of the Tory Party and the UK Independence Party.

We concluded that neither option could be endorsed. It was not permissible to call for a vote for the EU on the supposed basis of opposing nationalism, because the EU is an instrument for the subjugation of the working class across the continent to the dictates of the financial markets and a forum in which the European bourgeoisie seeks to fight its economic competitors internationally and well as each other. This is most clearly shown in the EU's role as the mechanism for brutalising migrants and remilitarising the continent for war against Russia.

This is underscored by the deal struck by Cameron with the EU as the terms for the referendum, which include an "emergency brake" on EU migrants claiming in-work benefits and other anti-migrant policies, as well as measures to protect the speculative and criminal activities of the City of London.

However, to support a Leave vote under existing conditions is to politically line up behind the xenophobia and jingoism of the official Leave campaign.

In appraising our standpoint, we examined various historical precedents. In 1975, there was a referendum on whether Britain should remain in the European Community after Conservative Prime Minister Ted Heath took the UK in through a parliamentary vote on January 1, 1973. In the 1975 referendum, the Workers Revolutionary Party, then the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, had urged a vote to leave.

However, this position at the time had the support of a significant layer of workers who were involved in militant class struggles. They correctly regarded EC membership as a means through which the British bourgeoisie was seeking to open up a second front that could be used to undermine their struggles for social reforms and demands for nationalisation, which many saw in terms of the struggle for a socialist Britain.

Even so, it was necessary at that time to sharply delineate a socialist opposition to the EC from the Stalinist and Bennite Labour left's nationalist defence of "national sovereignty" and British capital, which saw them share a common platform with the notorious right-wing Tory Enoch Powell and, in the case of the Communist Party, with the fascist National Front

It would be false and disorienting to take 1975 as a political template for today, as do, for example, the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party. Given the rightward evolution of the Labour Party and the trade unions, no faction of the bureaucracy gives even a confused or partial expression to socialist and left-wing sentiment amongst broad layers of workers and especially the youth. While many are rightly hostile to the EU because it is associated with austerity, militarism and anti-democratic measures, no faction of the bureaucracy is calling for a socialist opposition to the EU—of even the palest reformist stripe—outside of the occasional rhetorical flourishes of the pseudo-left groups. Rather, the Stalinist- and pseudo-left-staffed trade unions that are backing a Leave vote are loyal adjuncts of the official Leave campaign and fully endorse its reactionary nationalist political agenda.

In any event, our approach to history, and the history of the socialist movement in particular, in determining our standpoint in this referendum is of a far more serious and comprehensive character than the pseudo-left's selective citations of Lenin and Trotsky, which are made solely to justify their latest opportunist political gyrations.

We understood from the more recent history of the ICFI that there was an alternative course to take—that of an Active Boycott. This was the standpoint the IC adopted in the 2002 French elections, which made clear our refusal to go along with the spurious "lesser evil" claim made by the pseudo-left in the presidential runoff between National Front candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen and right-wing President Jacques Chirac.

The April 26, 2002 statement of the IC should be studied. It explained, "An active policy, in the form of an organized boycott, is needed to unite the working class and open a new road of struggle that will contribute to the construction of a genuinely independent, mass socialist movement...

"Against the national chauvinism, xenophobia and protectionism promoted by Le Pen—and echoed by large sections of the so-called left—the working class must advance its own internationalist program to unite the struggles of workers throughout Europe in defence of living standards and democratic rights. The alternative for workers to the Single European Market of the transnational corporations is the struggle for a United Socialist States of Europe."

As a result of this international discussion, we returned to the call for an Active Boycott. In doing so, our statement offers a clearly defined and independent position on the referendum. It does so through an examination of strategic historical experiences of the working class that raise issues of fundamental political perspective.

The most important political consideration shaping our discussion centred on the recognition that, against the background of escalating militarism, trade tensions between the major powers and the degrading treatment meted out daily to refugees by the EU, the most dangerous error we could make was to in any way blur the lines between an internationalist and socialist opposition to the EU and any form of "left nationalism."

David North urged in this regard that we study carefully Trotsky's 1934 essay "Nationalism and Economic Life" and his 1931 critique of the position taken by the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) in supporting a Nazi-inspired vote against the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), which the KPD dubbed the "Red Referendum."

As we note in the Brexit referendum statement, Trotsky described as "the basic tendency of our century... the growing contradiction between the nation and economic life," and posed the question, "How may the economic unity of Europe be guaranteed, while preserving complete freedom of cultural development to the people living there? How may unified Europe be included within a coordinated world economy? The solution to this question may be reached not by deifying the nation, but on the contrary by completely liberating productive forces from the fetters imposed upon them by the national state."

This was our essential premise in urging a struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe as the strategic axis for the political development of the working class, and which is central to our political struggle against the pseudo-left.

Indeed, the first significant polemic we engaged in was against the former Respect MP George Galloway, who joined UKIP leader Nigel Farage in launching the *Grassroots Out* campaign in support of Britain leaving the EU.

We began our campaign by warning that a mixing of class banners was the worst political crime and that Galloway's stance "does not merely muddy the class line. It obliterates it," with his infamous declaration, "Left, right, left, right, forward march."

Not just the Red Referendum, but the lessons of the 1929 referendum in Germany have also proved to be extraordinarily relevant in defining a correct position in the upcoming referendum.

Our statement explains how the 1929 referendum was held on the instigation of the German Nationalist Party against honouring reparations dictated by the Treaty of Versailles. It explains, "There was mass opposition to the terms of Versailles, but the referendum was recognised by class conscious workers for what it was—an effort to exploit this sentiment by the nationalist right, and especially Hitler's Nazi Party, which used it to establish its national presence."

The statement notes that the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) at the time correctly opposed the referendum and how this position was subsequently reversed under instruction from Stalin and the Comintern. The result was that the KPD made a wholesale adaptation to German nationalism—supporting the Red Referendum and enabling Hitler to take power without a shot being fired.

These issues, which are central to our campaign, provide a devastating exposure of the stance taken by the pseudo-left, which essentially mirrors that of the KPD.

Our call for an Active Boycott, moreover, draws upon the position advocated by Lenin in 1905 in relation to the reactionary constitution drafted by the Russian minister of the interior, Alexander Bulygin. This was an attempt to divert a gathering revolutionary upsurge of the working class behind harmless constitutional changes.

Lenin distinguished the active boycott from "passive abstention" by stressing that it should imply "increasing agitation tenfold, organising meetings everywhere, taking advantage of election meetings, even if we have to force our way into them, holding demonstrations, political strikes, and so on and so forth...."

The SEP is not in a position to emulate these tactics today. Lenin was writing from the standpoint of urging an insurrection in Russia at a time of

strike waves, peasant unrest, military mutinies and the first manifestations of "dual power" expressed in the formation of the St Petersburg Soviet, which came under the leadership of Trotsky. But the essence of Lenin's position was the struggle to secure the political independence of the working class from the bourgeoisie—through exposing the role of the constitutional monarchists.

As the Brexit statement stresses, "The SEP's call for a boycott is not made lightly and has nothing in common with political abstention of an anarchist character. Nor is it advanced as a timeless principle... The SEP conceives of an active boycott not as an individual protest, but as a means of beginning the political clarification of the working class and countering the disorientation created by the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and its pseudo-left apologists. We will utilise the active boycott campaign to provide workers and youth with a conscious political orientation and leadership."

What we are explaining is that the *active component* of the boycott is above all of a political character. That is, we are utilising the referendum campaign not to stage a series of protests, but to cut through the confusion created by the pseudo-left, educate the advanced workers and youth, and strengthen the influence of the party as the sole advocate of revolutionary socialist internationalism.

I would urge comrades in this regard to read carefully the two-part article, "The pseudo-left's nationalist 'Leave' campaign in the UK Brexit referendum." It closes with remarks directed against Neil Davidson, formerly of the Socialist Workers Party, and his article, "A socialist case for leaving the EU."

The polemic focuses on Davidson's hailing of the supposed reformability of the nation state, which he contrasts to the un-reformable "supra-national" structures of the EU. He argues that capitalist states "can adopt different policies according to the political parties or coalitions which oversee the apparatus at any time... In fact, behind the façade of continuity, the British state has been one of the most flexible and adaptive states in the history of capitalism and always concedes reforms when forced to, which is one reason why it has managed to survive for so long."

Besides Davidson's parliamentary cretinism, also of note in his position is that he makes the case for a Leave vote in direct opposition to the call for an Active Boycott.

He writes: "It is certainly true that the radical left cannot join either of the highly fragmented 'official' camps, both of which espouse anti-working class politics of one variety or another. But refusing to take a side is also untenable. Abstention will simply mean invisibility and, consequently, irrelevance... We have to approach this situation, not as bystanders, observers or commentators, but as participants who can help determine whichever outcome looks most likely to open up a dynamic advantageous to the left—providing, of course, the left is capable of recognizing the possibilities and acting on them."

Neither Davidson nor, indeed, any other of our critics can explain why a refusal to take sides in the faction fight within the ruling class condemns us to "invisibility" or "irrelevance." Nor does he spell out why a nationalist exit from the EU will "open up a dynamic advantageous to the left," as opposed to parties such as UKIP and the Tory right that are its most prominent advocates.

To do so, he would have to admit that he views such a stand as impermissible because it cuts the pseudo-left off from support for the bourgeoisie and the type of rotten political alliances they are seeking to build. This is underscored by his reference to the campaign by the pseudo-left in support of Scottish nationalism in the 2015 referendum on independence for Scotland, the victory of Corbyn as Labour leader, and support for Bernie Sanders as expressions of the "speed with which positions can shift in quite unexpected ways."

For us, in contrast, isolating ourselves from such forces, or, to be more precise, differentiating ourselves from them, is the essential political route to the working class.

It is to defend his own rotten politics that Davidson spends such great effort belittling any political concerns over the Brexit campaign's rightwing character and any threat being posed at all by the far right. Consider the accumulated political impact of the following statements:

"...the arguments for remaining in the EU most commonly expressed on the radical left are essentially negative. This perspective begins from the correct observation that the main drive for withdrawal from the EU has historically come from the hard right... Now, the hard right is certainly our enemy, but in this context at least, it is not the main enemy...

"There is a problem with some left analyses of the hard right and its farright component in particular, which is the assumption that it represents the 'real' face of capitalism unmasked. In fact, in the developed world at least, it is only in very rare situations of dire extremity—and usually after facing the kind of threat from the labour movement that has unfortunately been absent for several decades—that capital has ever relied on the far right to solve its problems...

"...It is a fixation with the hard right and its policies on migration to the exclusion of virtually everything else that has led sections of the left to embrace the problematic notion of the 'lesser evil'—regrettably, since it has not proved to be a particularly successful tactic in the past."

Davidson's aim is to dull the political faculties of his readers and make out that it is possible to advance a "progressive" nationalist policy, miraculously unsullied by any association with the right. His venom is reserved instead for the struggle to win the working class to an internationalist policy, which is referred to only in terms of calls to reform the EU, which are, in fact, the polar opposite of a genuinely socialist alternative.

"In any event," he proclaims, "it would be easier to achieve reforms in Westminster than in the EU, where it requires winning unanimity in the Council, and there is more possibility of simultaneous revolutions in all 28 member states than of this happening... Instead of invoking imaginary battalions of workers organized at a European level, it would more useful to begin building where we are."

It could not be clearer. The struggle for socialism is a chimera. Better by far to fight for "reforms" to be granted by the UK state—not for the working class, but in the interests of the petty-bourgeois forces represented by the pseudo-left in Scotland.

The difference between the pro-Leave pseudo-left and the pro-Remain groups at one level is that the latter place a plus where Davidson places a minus. They stress that the EU must be preserved as a guarantor against fascist reaction, a means of checking the right-wing excesses of the Tory government and the—albeit imperfect—vehicle for unifying the continent and its peoples. Nevertheless, the open embrace of the EU by the bulk of what passes for the "left" and its readiness to work to that end with literally anyone confirms the counterrevolutionary character of these tendencies.

The Remain camp is an alliance between the pseudo-left groups—led by Greece's Syriza, which has made the leap to become the bourgeois party of government, as well as governmental parties such as Die Linke in Germany and the French Communist Party—with other representatives of the European bourgeoisie in both Conservative and social democratic parties.

In the Brexit referendum, it takes the form of an alliance stretching from Cameron and the Conservatives, through the main business groups, to the Labour Party, Trades Union Congress and the Scottish National Party, the Plaid Cymru and the Greens.

The pseudo-left advocates of a Remain vote are just as surely tied to this bourgeois front as the Leave advocates are to UKIP and the Eurosceptic Tory right. They too occasionally cite socialist phraseology to legitimise their defence of the EU—they are against nationalism, the failed project of building socialism in a single country, etc.

Typical is the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), which states:

"The events in Greece reinforce the argument that 'socialism in one country' is impossible in the 21st century globalized world... However, the reaction to this cannot be to run away, we must instead fight to position ourselves to provide genuine support for the next country to take on the EU" and to the "ongoing struggle across the continent to democratize the EU's institutions" supposedly being waged by Syriza, the Left Party and others.

Citing Syriza, which betrayed the Greek working class precisely in the name of maintaining EU membership, gives the lie to such fake socialist rhetoric. The real motive force for the SSP aligning itself with the EU is its defence of the strategic interests of the Scottish bourgeoisie and the perspective of securing capitalist "independence" within the EU espoused by the Scottish National Party. As the SSP states, "A final crux of the matter is that it would be entirely laughable for the SSP to support a pro-EU Scottish Independence Referendum if we had just campaigned to leave the EU."

The bourgeois character of the pro-EU campaign is exemplified by the leading role played by the Party of the European Left (EL).

The EL brings together various Stalinist and pseudo-left groups in the European parliament and is led by Pierre Laurent of the French Communist Party (PCF) and his vice president, Alexis Tsipras of Syriza. In 2014, the EL was busy denouncing the EU as "unreformable" and a "neo-liberal project," but it now publishes a statement, "Yes to a United Social Europe! Against the chauvinist anti-EU left!"

It calls for "a different EU" and for the "left" to act as "partner" to "the feminist, ecological, and peace movements, in order to be recognised as an actor capable of influencing and changing European politics."

The European Left, it continues, "defends the social state, and renews it, as well as redistributes wealth, power, and influence..."

The perspective outlined here is for a redistribution of power and influence through the mechanisms of the EU to the privileged upper layers of the petty-bourgeoisie represented by these parties.

John Palmer, a prominent figure in the Remain campaign, a former state capitalist and European editor of the *Guardian*, makes this clearer still in an interview with Britain's RS21 group republished by the International Socialist Organisation in the US. He argues:

"The starting point, I think, for any serious discussion about the European option has to be the recognition that national states everywhere are in decline. Their capacity even to negotiate with more powerful economic forces operating is steadily and, seemingly, irreversibly weakening. Small and medium-sized states tend to be reduced to supplicant status in relation to major powers at the global level. Neoliberal ideology acknowledges this reality. That is to say: unless you are ready to break with the global system entirely (whatever that means), you have to live at least to some extent on its terms."

What Palmer is saying is that the only way to defend national interests in the small states of Europe, in the face of the economic and military power of the US and China, is as part of the EU. To this end, he urges his former comrades to seek alliances with the bourgeoisie. He points to the political possibilities opened up by the crisis of the EU for the pseudo-left, writing:

"I do think that the neo-liberal project cannot be sustained in its full ferocity without doing unacceptable collateral damage to the main political constituents of the ruling class. Politically and sociologically the ruling class is not simply an aggregation of big finance and big capital. It is a far more complicated alliance of social forces comprising even large chunks of what we used to consider the middle class."

"The damage done to the economic and social environment by deskilling, de-professionalisation and all that has gone with the neoliberal project is undermining the hegemony of the conservative right," he concludes, creating the political space necessary for the pseudo-left to

secure a piece of the action for themselves. "My instinct is that around the Greek discussion there may still be at the end of the day a retreat by the EU and some—however marginal—tailoring of the loan terms," he writes.

All previous opposition to the EU from these layers has been ditched, precisely because the stability of European capitalism is now at stake. The EL's think tank, Transform, makes this clear in a position paper, under the heading "The point of departure." It warns, "However, the fact is that the EU itself has now been called into question." For this reason, they add:

"The radical Left must reject the false dichotomy of European integration versus national self-determination. It is indeed so that under conditions of globalised capitalism, national self-determination can only be exercised where space is created for it by democratically institutionalised, transnational cooperation... A broad alliance for a democratic and transparent EU has therefore been proposed."

To state this more clearly, the defence of the national interests of their own bourgeoisie is inseparably bound up with the EU's preservation as a trade, political and military bloc.

The "broad alliance" advocated by the EL already exists. A key player is Tsipras's former finance minister Yanis Varoufakis and his DiEM25 movement. Varoufakis openly proclaims that his defence of the EU is not based upon socialism, but is rather a democratic movement that must cut across the "left/right divide" and bring on board both liberals and conservatives. His is above all an appeal on the part of the Greek and southern European bourgeoisie to Germany, France and the EU core countries for certain economic concessions.

To this end, the DiEM25's appeal, suitably launched in Berlin, is framed in entirely national terms. Varoufakis writes, "Democracy is not (and cannot be) a luxury afforded to creditors while declined to debtors... No European nation can be free as long as another's democracy is violated. No European nation can live in dignity as long as another is denied it. No European nation can hope for prosperity if another is pushed into permanent insolvency and depression."

Varoufakis advocates "a surge of democracy." This centres on his key complaint that "Europe's immediate crisis is unfolding simultaneously in five realms: Public debt, Banking, Inadequate Investment, Migration and Rising Poverty," which are "currently left in the hands of national governments powerless to act upon them."

Varoufakis wants to "Europeanise all five" by "re-deploying existing institutions (through a creative re-interpretation of existing treaties and charters)..."

What does this mean? Greece and other weaker states will cede governmental powers to the EU—and support its existing institutions—in return for some measures to guarantee their financial viability. This is a pledge to impose austerity in return for such favours, not to oppose it.

The British arm of the "left" Remain vote is tied to these forces internationally and to Labour under Jeremy Corbyn here in the UK. The main pseudo-left body is "Another Europe is possible," which includes as signatories Caroline Lucas, MP for the Green Party; Cat Smith, MP and Labour shadow minister for women; Clive Lewis, MP and Labour shadow minister for energy and climate change; and Owen Jones of the *Guardian*. Its pretence at radicalism is not helped by the endorsement of Neal Lawson, the head of Labour's right-wing Compass think tank.

Left Unity, headed by Alan Thornett's Socialist Resistance, is a supporter, as is Workers Liberty, led by Sean Matgamna. Thornett, back in June, first mooted a shift to support for a Remain vote in an article that is a masterwork in political cynicism. It declares in caustic terms that "the real face of the EU is the Troika," whose "brutal role... has been to use Greece as a test bed for extreme neoliberal measures," after which it baldly declares, "In my opinion, however, the right way to vote in this referendum will be Yes."

The politics of the pseudo-left, on both sides of the referendum debate,

is bourgeois and not socialist, nationalist and not internationalist.

Our intervention in the Brexit referendum is of decisive significance and will play a part in clarifying workers far beyond the UK by exposing the pseudo-left as right-wing apologists for reaction. Destroying the political influence of the pseudo-left is how we free the working class from its subordination to the bourgeoisie—which has always occurred through the mechanism of a petty-bourgeois ideological offensive against socialism.

This is the only way that the working class can begin to define its independent class standpoint.

We stress that the working class can oppose the threat of austerity, militarism and war only by transcending the nationalist division of Europe and the world through socialist revolution. The United Socialist States of Europe is the only conceivable form through which the working class can exercise its rule, under conditions of the integrated character of production across the continent and globally. But this cannot emerge either through the reform of the EU or as a by-product of its nationalist fracturing. It requires above all the conscious political unification of the working class under the leadership of the ICFI.

Our campaign is in turn a component part of an international political offensive being waged by the IC. We are making an appeal to the most advanced workers and young people on the highest political level—so that they can understand the gravity of the situation they face, but also the necessity to act and the fact that the means through which to do so is the building of the ICFI.

The ICFI has emerged with ever greater clarity in the eyes of growing numbers of class conscious workers internationally as the sole revolutionary force on the face of the planet. The expanding readership of the *World Socialist Web Site* testifies to this fact.

We do not look on the crisis facing the bourgeois order with dread and seek its rescue as do the pseudo-left. Rather, we are arming the working class for the struggles to come, above all by familiarising working people with the historic struggle for socialism embodied in the Trotskyist movement.



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