

The way forward after the Brexit referendum

Statement by the Socialist Equality Party (UK)

27 June 2016

The outcome of the referendum on UK membership of the European Union (EU) is a cataclysmic event in British, European and world politics that heralds a period of immense instability and political turmoil.

It is quite clear that neither Prime Minister David Cameron in instigating a referendum, nor those promoting a Leave vote, had given any serious thought as to the consequences of a vote to exit the EU. Now, in the aftermath of the vote, the British bourgeoisie is staggering about as it tries to pick up the pieces while the situation spirals out of control.

The scale of the crisis is indicated by the remarks of the *Financial Times*' chief economic commentator Martin Wolf, who wrote, "This is probably the most disastrous single event in British history since the second world war." His colleague, Gideon Rachman, warned that "the full scale disintegration of the EU is now a real possibility."

Not only the EU, but the UK itself is in danger of breaking apart. With a majority Remain vote in Scotland, the Scottish National Party is pressing for a second independence referendum and seeking talks with Brussels and EU member states. In Northern Ireland, where the referendum vote was polarized along Republican and Unionist lines, the most severe crisis since the formal end of the civil war in 1998 is looming.

The Leave vote has not only precipitated a leadership contest in the Conservative Party, but also a right-wing rebellion by the Blairites in the Labour Party, who have called a "no confidence" vote, backed by 11 resignations from the shadow cabinet, aimed at removing Jeremy Corbyn as party leader. Both parties could split, amid speculation of a snap general election.

In Europe, the fear is of "contagion." Leading figures such as Martin Schulz, president of the European Parliament, insist there must be no delay in Britain invoking Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty to formally initiate exit proceedings, so as to limit financial damage and impose a harsh settlement on Britain that will serve as an example to others. Far-right forces are now demanding

referenda in their own countries, including the National Front in France and similar parties in Slovakia, Poland, Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark and elsewhere.

Geopolitical relations have been destabilised. Without Britain anchored in Europe, relations between France and a far more powerful Germany will deteriorate. Equally, relations between the EU and the United States—for which Britain provided a bridge—will be thrown into flux.

There is widespread shock and anger at the Brexit outcome in the UK, even among some who voted for leaving the EU. Amid dire warnings of economic catastrophe and the boost the referendum gave to right-wing, anti-immigrant nationalists, millions fear for the future. A petition is circulating that has gained some three million votes for another referendum to be held.

Within hours it became apparent that Leave voters had been sold a bill of goods, with UK Independence Party (UKIP) leader Nigel Farage and leading right-wing Tory Leave campaigner Iain Duncan Smith admitting that their promise to funnel EU funds into Britain's National Health Service was a lie.

The only certainty in this situation is that the assault on the working class will be intensified, as the ruling elite demand greater sacrifices in the "national interest."

Anger at the result is most pronounced among the younger generation, who voted overwhelmingly to Remain. Like many thoughtful workers and middle-class professionals, they did so not because they are part of an "out of touch elite," but because they were repelled by the xenophobia of the Leave leaders and the encouragement they provided to the extreme right, as exemplified by the political assassination of Labour MP Jo Cox just one week before the ballot.

Their entirely healthy belief that a broader European community, guaranteeing freedom of movement, is more progressive than "Little Englander" chauvinism is now being exploited by leading Labourites and Tories with calls for the result to be overturned by various mechanisms.

However, those politicians and media pundits beating

their breast over the Brexit vote cannot explain why the EU project proved so vastly unpopular. They are unable to do so because the Remain campaign, in its depiction of the EU as a force for good, was no less dishonest than its Leave opponents.

The Leave vote was a cry of social distress, particularly from the poorest layers of workers, who know that the European Union has been no less ruthless in its attacks on the working class than the Tories in Britain, above all in its destruction of Greece. The Remain campaign's eulogies to the EU, citing the authority of world leaders and bankers, could never attract support among those who have suffered most from years of austerity and unemployment.

The result is not simply or primarily the outcome of a political miscalculation by Cameron, or the reactionary propaganda of Farage, Boris Johnson and company. More fundamentally, it emerges out of the failure of the post-war project of European unification.

Integration was an attempt by the ruling classes of the continent, with the support of the United States, to prevent a new eruption of national conflicts that had twice plunged the world into all-out war. However, "unity" within the framework of capitalism could never mean anything other than the domination of the most powerful nations and corporations over the continent and its peoples.

The fracturing of the EU along national lines that is now taking place is once again driving inexorably towards world war. But the EU cannot be put back together again. The Brexit result has made manifest a broader crisis that is insoluble within capitalism because it is rooted in the fundamental contradiction between the integrated character of the global economy and the division of the world into antagonistic nation states based on private ownership of the means of production.

Europe must be united. However, this cannot be done on a progressive basis through efforts to preserve the moribund institutions of the EU or other bureaucratic mechanisms. The progressive and democratic unification of Europe can be achieved only from below, through a revolutionary struggle for socialism across the continent led by the working class.

The urgent task is the unification of the European working class in the struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe.

The Socialist Equality Party advocated an active boycott of the referendum, explaining that neither the Leave nor Remain camps spoke for the working class. The Labour

Party and the Trades Union Congress lined up behind the EU, while the advocates of a "Left Leave" vote sided with the ultranationalists of the Tory right and UKIP. It was this comprehensive political betrayal that allowed the right wing to dominate opposition to the EU.

The most important challenge taken up by the SEP was to oppose the purveyors of "left" nationalism. The Socialist Party, Socialist Workers Party and other pseudo-left groups did everything they could to chloroform the working class as to the dangers from the right. They advocated a Leave vote on the spurious grounds that a split in the Tory Party would lay the basis for Cameron's replacement by Johnson and hasten the election of a Corbyn-led Labour government. It has taken less than 48 hours for this scenario to fall apart, with Corbyn's endless capitulations to the right wing ending in an attempted palace coup.

A particular warning must be taken from the role played by George Galloway, who allied openly with UKIP and declared his opposition to the free movement of labour within Europe. His proclamation of June 23 as Britain's "Independence Day" is a crossing of the Rubicon. Not just Galloway, but an entire section of the pseudo-left is making its passage into the camp of nationalist reaction.

The full significance of the stand taken by the SEP will become ever clearer. Based on a concrete analysis of the balance of class forces, informed and guided by historically derived Marxist principles, the SEP expressed the position that a politically conscious, independent working-class movement must take.

In doing so, we laid down a marker for the future and helped open a new political road for the working class. The campaign for an active boycott must now be developed into a positive policy—through the struggle for a socialist and internationalist perspective in Britain and throughout Europe and the building of Socialist Equality Parties as sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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