

After Brexit: The struggle for socialism in Britain

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The following is a speech delivered by Chris Marsden, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (UK), at public meetings held this month in London and Sheffield.

We are at a turning point in the political life of the UK. The June 23 referendum vote to leave the European Union (EU) has provoked, or rather accelerated, an economic, political and social crisis, not just here, but throughout Europe and internationally.

In the space of just one day, global markets lost two trillion dollars. Former US Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan said Brexit would prove to be more serious than the financial crashes of 1987 and 2008.

A July 1 article in the *Financial Times* quoted an anonymous political strategist at one of the world's largest hedge funds, stating, "A eurozone break-up is inevitable. I have met very few people who don't think [the eurozone is doomed]. It is just when and what will trigger it.

"Brexit might be enough to throw [the eurozone] into recession. I would be very surprised if [the economic bloc] lasted another recession. Be very scared... [Investing in Europe is like] locking your money in a box inside a house on fire."

Jerome Booth, of New Sparta Asset Management, adds, "I believe the EU is seriously damaged and very likely to blow up. In a year's time we will be thinking, 'Thank goodness we left the EU', because it will have broken up. Politics moves fast."

There will, of course, be various gyrations on the money markets, but these tendencies towards the breakup of the EU are what must be clearly recognised.

I could list many articles and speeches by leading politicians and military figures, who are concerned at the impact of Brexit on NATO and on US war plans against Russia and China. But I will only draw attention to the *World Socialist Web Site* Perspective, written by Johannes Stern on "Brexit and the return of European militarism."

Stern notes how Germany is leading demands within the EU for "the militarization of the continent and buildup of its internal security forces."

A paper by EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini argues that the EU must become an aggressive world power, capable of intervening militarily and waging war independently of NATO and the United States "if and when necessary."

Stern cites Robert D. Kaplan, architect of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, warning in the *Wall Street Journal*, "The returning geopolitical chaos is akin, in some respects, to the 1930s. ... Brexit has undermined a key goal of British geopolitics going back hundreds of years: preventing any one power from dominating the Continent. Yet now Germany is empowered to do just that.

"Germany could strike a separate bargain with Russia or turn inward toward populist nationalism. ... Great Britain should reinvigorate its alliance with America. Acting together, the two nations can still project power on the European mainland up to the gates of Russia."

Here in Britain, politics is racing at breakneck speed. We have had a Conservative Party leadership contest that was aborted to install Theresa

May as an unelected prime minister. This seems almost civilised, however, compared with the ruthless and anti-democratic effort to depose Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party.

Both these events are linked to the existential crisis that has opened up for the British capitalist class. Before addressing it, I must first recall the political line for which the Socialist Equality Party fought in the referendum. After all, anyone claiming to offer leadership to the working class should be tested on what they have said on the key questions faced by millions.

Brexit was a test that the SEP, alone, successfully passed. We urged workers and young people to mount an active boycott of the referendum—a tactic that flowed from our strategic appraisal of the EU and of the forces advocating support for and opposition to it.

We wrote, "The Remain and Leave campaigns are both headed by Thatcherite forces that stand for greater austerity, brutal anti-immigrant measures and the destruction of workers' rights. Their differences are over how best to defend the interests of British capitalism against its European and international rivals under conditions of economic slump and the escalation of militarism and war.

"There can be no good outcome of such a plebiscite. Whichever side wins, working people will pay the price. It is not a question of choosing the 'lesser evil'—both options are equally rotten."

We declared ourselves to be implacably opposed to the EU. We said it was a weapon of the European ruling class for imposing austerity on the workers of the continent, as had been so cruelly demonstrated in Greece, and that it conducted military operations against Russia and throughout the world in alliance with NATO.

For this reason, the support of the Labour Party led by Corbyn, and of the majority of the trade unions for Remain, was of necessity based on lies—that the EU was a check on the actions of the Tories, a defender of progressive labour laws, etc. We stressed that those who cited "freedom of movement" as the basis for supporting the EU, ignored both the deal struck with Cameron to restrict the rights of EU migrants, and Fortress Europe's murderous policies towards those fleeing imperialist wars in Africa and the Middle East.

We explained that none of this imparted a progressive character to the Leave campaign. Opposition to the EU in Britain was organised, not from the left—from the standpoint of the independent political interests of the working class, but from the right—by extreme nationalist elements within the Conservative Party, in alliance with the anti-immigrant UK Independence Party.

The Leave campaign's leaders attracted reactionary petty-bourgeois, pseudo-left elements such as George Galloway. We warned that the biggest political danger was any mixing of class banners on the basis of the espousal of a supposedly "left nationalism"—to claim, as Galloway did, that workers and some bosses and bankers, left and right, had a shared interest in opposing the EU. Their role was to subordinate the working class to an initiative aimed at shifting political life along a nationalist

trajectory, strengthening and emboldening the far-right in the UK and across Europe.

We concluded, “Given today’s specific circumstances, an active boycott provides the only means through which workers and young people can express an independent class standpoint.”

Everything we said has been confirmed.

In contrast, let’s examine, first of all, what was said by the advocates of what they called a Left Leave vote, or Lexit. Their argument was summed up by Joseph Choonara, of the Socialist Workers Party, who wrote:

“Here in Britain some people speak as if Brexit would automatically mean a shift to the right. However, if Cameron loses the referendum it will weaken the ruling class and it would almost certainly mean the end of Cameron’s own tenure as prime minister. The Tories would be in a dire state. One potential beneficiary of such a scenario is Jeremy Corbyn. ... I would welcome an election under those conditions and I would welcome a Corbyn victory—something that would open up a broader space for the revolutionary left.”

Sally Campbell, of the SWP, exercising the full powers of her own foresight, later wrote:

“[It] seems improbable that there will be a leadership challenge to Corbyn any time soon. He is set to be the beneficiary if the Tories continue to tear themselves apart and spend the next three years mired in hidden or open leadership battles.”

This needs no comment.

After the referendum, the “Lexiteers” are busy portraying the Brexit vote in the most progressive terms. They are forced to acknowledge many of the negative impacts of the vote, but only then to dismiss them.

Socialist Party leader Peter Taaffe writes:

“It is totally false to draw the utterly pessimistic conclusions which some small left groups have done that this result could lead to a ‘carnival of reaction’ in Britain and encourage right-wing forces in Europe and elsewhere.”

Hannah Sell makes clear that they are advocating a purely nationalist programme—a defence of sovereignty and of parliament, stating:

“The political situation would have been transformed if Jeremy Corbyn had stuck by his own historic position of opposition to the EU because, as he said at the time of the Maastricht Treaty: ‘It takes away from national parliaments the power to set economic policy and hands it over to an unelected set of bankers’ ...”

The SWP, too, nails the flag of national reformism to its mast, writing:

“The leaders of the labour movement bear a very heavy responsibility for their failure to offer a critique of the EU from the left—not necessarily an internationalist and anti-capitalist one: the left reformist critique developed by Tony Benn would serve quite well.”

Continuing its espousal of nationalism, it declares:

“The referendum result has opened up the possibility of another vote on Scottish independence ... Socialist Worker supports the breakup of the British state but we don’t share Sturgeon’s ‘passionate belief’ in the EU bosses’ club. That’s why we say yes to independence, no to the EU.”

Counterfire, a splinter from the SWP, goes further still, with Chris Bambery urging, as his response to Brexit:

“Corbyn should give up on Scotland: announce he’s scrapping the position of Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland and call on Cameron to do the same, tell Scottish Labour supporters to go for independence and reach agreement with the SNP MPs so they would support an economic programme for growth. Together they could work on how England and Wales exits the EU, how Scotland exits the UK, and how Scotland can forge co-operation with its southern neighbours to the benefit of all...”

Think about this. He wants England and Wales to exit the EU, and Scotland to stay in it, in order to “forge co-operation with its southern neighbours to the benefit of all,” based upon SNP support for “an economic programme for growth.” There is nothing vaguely socialist in

any of this. It is a bourgeois programme—a nationalist response to the crisis facing British imperialism that will lead to a deepening of every possible division in the working class.

The Leave forces identified themselves with the most nakedly reactionary sections of the bourgeoisie, enabling them to exploit and utilise social disaffection for their purposes. They bear political responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

What of their claim that a Leave vote would, by dealing with Cameron and Chancellor George Osborne, somehow strengthen the working class, whichever right-wing figure initially benefitted? At the time, it appeared it would be Boris Johnson, but turned out to be May—with Johnson and other Brexit supporters placed in leading roles.

May has been chosen as PM, not only because she is considered best placed to manage the fallout from Brexit in her own party and in negotiations with the EU, but to deal with social and political opposition in the working class. Her cynical phrases about defending the many, not the few, are a smokescreen. Her job is to defend the interests of the ruling class, by imposing billions more in cuts and mobilising the full force of the state. As Home Secretary, her political life for the past six years has been spent meeting with the police and security services, scheming against the democratic rights of the working class. That, more than anything else, is what brought her into Number 10.

If anything, the passage of the pseudo-left advocates of a Remain vote, such as Left Unity, into the realm of bourgeois politics, is more overt still. During the referendum campaign, they lined up behind the EU, David Cameron, Barack Obama and the City of London. They joined Another Europe is Possible, a political alliance with sections of Labourites, the Liberal Democrats and Greens. Now they are playing a significant role in efforts to exploit the confusion generated by the Leave campaign to push for a new popular front movement—centred on a call for the UK to Remain in the EU.

These Remain advocates are attempting to exploit illusions in the EU, especially among a younger generation of students who are repelled by the ‘Little Englander’ chauvinism of the Leave campaign, and who fear that measures such as the clampdown on “freedom of movement” will impact negatively on them.

A movement in support of reversing the referendum is being explicitly mobilised, by directing the anger of these layers towards the millions of working people, routinely described as “stupid” and “racist,” who voted Leave.

In the vote’s aftermath, Left Unity’s executive committee wrote that the Leave outcome of the EU Referendum came “from pressure from the far right—driven by anti-immigration sentiment, fuelled by racism.” Socialist Resistance, the Pabloite group that is the real leadership of Left Unity, wrote that *all* of those “who voted for Brexit did so because they accepted the argument that the worsening of living standards and public services were caused by immigration...”

We drew particular attention, in a recent article, to Phil Hearse, who used the results of a post referendum survey by Lord Ashcroft to denigrate as reactionaries all those who voted Leave. He wrote, “people who tended to have left or progressive views voted Remain, while those with socially conservative or right wing views voted Leave. With the exception of ‘Globalisation’ and ‘Capitalism’ (50 percent of both Leave and Remain viewing capitalism negatively), every other significant category like Immigration, Feminism, the Green Movement and Multiculturalism was viewed negatively by Leave voters.”

Hearse dismisses the extraordinary fact that half of all voters are hostile to capitalism as secondary, in order to support feminism and environmentalism, etc. This is what we wrote in response:

“Hearse is calling for a cross-class Popular Front alignment of the metropolitan areas, such as London, behind a pro-EU movement by insisting that cultural mores rather than class are the basic division in

society. What matters, he stresses, is a shared commitment to feminism, multiculturalism and reducing your carbon footprint!

“This is a focused appeal to upper layers of the middle class—those who have benefited from the shift of societal wealth away from the working class and who believe they share a common lifestyle, whether they support Labour, the Greens, the Liberal Democrats or even the Tories. ... Cushioned by rising property and share prices, they see the EU as a force for maintaining their privileges against the threat from the ‘uneducated,’ ‘ignorant’ masses.”

Another Europe is Possible is now urging its supporters to “Write to your MP and ask them to back the Early Day Motion calling for a new referendum once an outline of the terms of exit has been negotiated.”

We explained:

“There is a political logic to such positions. This is a call that upholds the authority of Parliament, of the state apparatus, and its right to dictate events—on the basis that millions of working class people have endangered the economic and strategic interests of the UK. This is the same argument cited for opposing strikes in vital industries, for clamping down on free speech and for every other authoritarian measure and right-wing dictatorship ever imposed.”

The most extraordinary feature of the campaign to reverse the referendum vote, and which has much broader significance, is the insistence that the authority of parliament must be upheld—not because it reflects the will of the people, but against the will of the people.

Consider the implications of these statements, which argue for the overturn of the referendum vote:

“In our democracy parliament is sovereign—we do not have government by referenda or plebiscite,” writes David Lammy, Labour MP for Tottenham.

“Parliament is sovereign and the guardian of our democracy ... At this time of profound constitutional, political and possibly social and economic crisis, we look to them to fulfil the responsibility placed upon them,” states Philip Kolvin, QC.

“Our democracy does not allow, much less require, decision-making by referendum. That role belongs to the representatives of the people and not to the people themselves. Democracy has never meant the tyranny of the simple majority, much less the tyranny of the mob...” says Geoffrey Robertson, QC.

What does this signify? In the aftermath of the referendum, all democratic avenues for the working class are being closed down—in the name of opposing the far-right and xenophobia; in the name of “progress” and based upon the insistence that the authority of parliament must be reasserted. What an extraordinary demonstration this has proved to be of the real character of bourgeois democracy as a veil for the rule of capital.

The ongoing move to destabilise, take over or destroy the Labour Party is the high point of this process. With the Tories committed to Brexit, this leaves the Scottish National Party, the Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru (Party of Wales) pledged to keeping the UK in the EU. But they, alone, do not constitute a viable alternative to the Tories. For this the Labour Party is required. But it must be insulated from any popular control or pressure and committed, without reservation, to austerity, the EU and to NATO.

To this end, the Blairite wing of the party, led by the old war criminal himself, secured the backing of over 80 percent of Labour MPs for a no confidence motion in Corbyn. He was accused of betraying the fight for a Remain vote and being unable to win a general election on a pro-EU ticket. Their intention is either to establish their unchallenged control of the party, or to split and form a new party in alliance with the Liberal Democrats and others.

As we have reported, the *Mail On Sunday* has revealed that a breakaway party is being discussed in secret, involving up to 150 Labour MPs, who would align themselves with the eight MPs of the Liberal Democrats in a

pro-European party of the “progressive centre,” in the event of a Corbyn victory. The name “Continuity Labour” is being suggested by Stephen Kinnock MP, the son of former Labour leader Neil Kinnock, in discussions with former Lib Dem leader Paddy Ashdown.

The United States views UK membership of the EU as a vital element in ensuring the stability of Europe, of the world economy and the success of NATO operations against Russia and China. It is intimately involved in this political skulduggery. US Secretary of State John Kerry indicated as much when he said, “I think there are a number of ways” to “roll back” the referendum. “I don’t, as secretary of state, want to throw them out today. I think that would be a mistake. But there are a number of ways.”

One way, at least, is the victory of Owen Smith, now the sole challenger to Corbyn after Angela Eagle dropped out. Smith is pledged to a second referendum on EU membership.

Corbyn was elected with overwhelming support by hundreds of thousands of new members and supporters just 10 months ago. He is under sustained attack by around 170 parliamentarians and a few hundred apparatchiks. Their plot has involved trying to prevent him from standing, by demanding he secures the support of the very MPs who voted to remove him. Failing in this, Blairite National Executive Committee members ruled that no one who has joined the party since January—130,000 people so far—will be allowed to vote, and neither will new trade union member affiliates to the party.

All Constituency Labour Party members have been banned from meeting, and two CLPs have been suspended on the basis of unfounded accusations of “intimidation.” The most disgusting libels are being hurled around by Corbyn’s opponent—that his supporters are a mob of “thugs”: anti-Semites who spend their days posting anonymous threats to kill or rape women MPs.

Labour members’ online accounts are being trawled for evidence of the use of words such as “traitor,” as the basis for expelling a target of 50,000 members.

In justifying the move against Corbyn, the witch-hunter and betrayer of the 1984 miners’ strike, Neil Kinnock, also cited the authority of parliament over the “mob”—this time of Labour Party members. He spoke to MPs of the founders of the Labour Party:

“In 1918, in the shadow of the Russian revolution, they made a deliberate, conscious, ideological choice—that they would not pursue the syndicalist road, that they would not pursue the revolutionary road—it was a real choice in those days. They would pursue the parliamentary road to socialism...”

“Because we are a democratic socialist party, committed to a parliamentary road to power, it is vital, essential, irreplaceable, that the leader of this party has substantial—at least substantial, if not majority—support from those who go to the country and seek election to become lawmakers, the way chosen by the people who established the Labour Party.”

Kinnock is telling a partial truth. The Labour Party and its MPs are neither representatives of party members or of working people. They are representatives of the capitalist class; state people, who have always acted, in alliance with the trade union bureaucracy, as policemen of the working class and guardians against the spread of socialist and revolutionary sentiment in the working class.

But Kinnock also lies. Today, Labour no longer maintains even the pretence of seeking the socialist transformation of society through reforms. Under Blair and Brown, it followed the path taken by similar parties the world over, in response to the development of globalised production: junking reformism and committing itself to the free market, privatisation and the systematic undermining of workers’ wages and working conditions in the name of achieving international competitiveness.

That is why, in the aftermath of the June 23 referendum vote to leave the

EU, the clique around Blair put into operation a predetermined plan to get rid of Corbyn. Their paymasters within ruling circles had decided that Corbyn's leadership of the party could no longer be tolerated. The target of the operation was not merely Corbyn, but the working class as a whole.

Whether or not it is possible to reverse the referendum result is a moot point. Political decisions have consequences. Germany and France are insisting that Brexit must proceed, because they fear that a prolonged delay will only heighten the danger of the EU breaking up. More importantly, breakup is a real possibility. There may soon not be an EU to rejoin!

Those making calculations about a reversal of the Brexit vote never seem to factor into their equations the reality of the EU today. During the referendum campaign, we noted that France was under a permanent state of emergency. This has worsened in the aftermath of the Nice terrorist atrocity—an event that will strengthen the far-right National Front (FN) and provide fuel for its anti-Muslim, anti-EU nationalist agenda. Now we have the attempted coup in Turkey, which poses the threat of civil war in a NATO member state that could destabilise the whole of Europe.

One thing is certain: the crisis facing British imperialism will demand further austerity and a deeper turn to militarism, which Labour, as much as the Tories, will be called upon to impose.

I want to bring my remarks to a close by explaining what we believe must now be done.

First, Brexit is not the cause of the breakup of the EU, but an expression of it. It marks the end of the process of European integration, launched in the aftermath of World War II, intended to build political institutions that would make a new world war impossible. It demonstrates that the capitalist class is incapable of overcoming the fundamental contradictions within capitalism—between globally organised production and the division of the globe into antagonistic nation states.

We know that workers who are opposed to the EU have every reason. We described the Leave vote as “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.”

But, against both the advocates of nationalism and those who are now calling for the EU to be saved, we stand for the unification of Europe through the revolutionary mobilisation of the working class. This is the only basis on which workers can take and retain power in the era of globalisation, and implement the socialist measures required to end austerity, militarism and war.

Genuine European unity must come from below, not above—through the overthrow of the EU and all its constituent governments and the establishment of the United Socialist States of Europe.

Second, there is no possibility of opposing any of the attacks on the working class through the Labour Party. Once again, the pseudo-left groups are intent on placing the fate of the working class in the hands of Corbyn. The most telling statement comes from John Rees of Counterfire.

He writes:

“Much more than the future of the Labour Party rests on what happens to the Labour leadership. ... The generation or more long war on the poor would go on, the housing estates sink further into decay, more core jobs would be lost only to be replaced by even more McJobs, the NHS and other essential services face further demoralisation and under funding. The boiling anger of working people would find no political representation other than populist demagogues. And the spike in racist attacks that we currently see would become institutionalised and permanent.”

He concludes:

“Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of Labour, alongside mass campaigns like the People's Assembly and the trade unions, is the only chance the left has of reaching out to the core working class constituencies that so

obviously detest the political elite and everything it stands for ... For this to happen a second victory for Jeremy Corbyn is essential. All else, including the continued success of all left campaigns, depends on it.”

For Rees and his ilk, there is either a Corbyn victory or blackest reaction—with the working class prey to fascist demagogues, no way for the “left” to reach the working class and no future for “all left campaigns.”

This is a great weight to place on Corbyn's politically rather slim shoulders—on those of a man who has spent the last 10 months constantly retreating in the face of the right wing and who, even now, insists that party unity will be restored after the leadership contest is over.

The pseudo-left are, in reality, the last and most unalloyed cheerleaders for a failed reformist perspective, which they now associate with the person of Corbyn.

We insist that the central lessons that must be drawn from the bitter experiences of Corbyn's period in office are that Labour cannot be reformed, and that Corbyn—the latest in a long line of “lefts” claiming otherwise—cannot provide the leadership required by the working class. A new party is needed, capable of mobilising the working class, not just here in Britain, but all over the world, in a common struggle against capitalism. That party is the International Committee of the Fourth International, of which the Socialist Equality Party is the British section.



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