

Guardian columnist Will Hutton rants against the Brexit “mob”

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“It was the mob that took us out of the European Union... We, the people, must stand against the mob.”

This was only a small part of an extended and sometimes vulgar rant by economist, former *Observer* editor and *Guardian* columnist Will Hutton.

Hutton delivered his verdict on the outcome of the Brexit referendum on June 23 at a conference earlier this month of the trade union think tank, the Centre for Labour and Social Studies (CLASS). He spoke alongside Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, fellow *Guardian* journalists Paul Mason and Owen Jones, Unite union General Secretary Len McCluskey and other erstwhile left/liberal notables.

An atmosphere of despondency permeated the proceedings, as another opinion poll showed the Labour Party trailing behind the Conservatives. Hutton summed up the panic with a string of phrases: “We are in a mega deep pit.” “It’s the biggest post-war crisis. It’s existential. It’s a civil war.” “A constitutional quagmire.” “A legal quagmire.” “An economic quagmire.” “Parties on the verge of splitting.” “A calm before the storm.”

For Hutton this is all the fault of the “mob.” He regaled the well-heeled CLASS audience with how a chef working in the same restaurant kitchen as his son declared following the Brexit vote, “I can say this now. I can’t stand coons,” before he asserted, “In hundreds of pubs, bus queues, all around the country, people are saying things they couldn’t before June 23rd ...misogyny, anti-Semitism, racism.”

Hutton seized on the High Court ruling two days prior to the conference that the Conservative government cannot trigger Article 50 and start Brexit negotiations with the European Union (EU) without consulting parliament.

“There’s an opportunity to contest the whole bloody

thing,” he declared. He all but screamed at his audience, “Why are we conniving with the idea that the noble EU project is an ignoble project” before demanding another referendum is held “to go back in.”

Hutton’s outbursts are part and parcel of the reactionary project of a leading section of the ruling elite to overturn the result of the Brexit referendum. To safeguard British membership of the EU, he and others are urging that the Labour Party is either refashioned into the main pro-EU, anti-Brexit party or incorporated into some sort of “progressive alliance” government that can unite, in Hutton’s words, “the centre and left--and the best of the conservative tradition.”

This is seen as all the more urgent now that Brexit forces dominate the Conservative Party and Donald Trump has been elected US President. Immediately after the Brexit referendum, Hutton was complicit in the coup launched by Labour’s Blairite wing aimed at removing Corbyn as leader--accusing him of ambivalence towards the EU and opposition to nuclear weapons and war. Hutton lambasted the “wretched Labour campaign” headed by “one inadequate man”—Corbyn—who “has come to personify all the perennially unresolved contradictions in left politics that cripples it politically.”

Making the ludicrous claim that Corbyn sought to “overthrow” capitalism, Hutton called for “a well-led Labour Party with a crafted cluster of policies to secure a better capitalism.” Hutton sees the recent relaunching of the Fabian group of Labour MPs as “a new movement to make the case.”

Hutton’s appeal is directed to upper middle class layers who have benefitted from the EU, young people fearful for their own future and that of the UK, and the identity politics crowd. At the CLASS conference he called for “a substantial reform of capitalism,”

“remaking” the unions and collective bargaining, “reframing” social security so that it “really becomes a cradle to grave entitlement,” a “proper” Constitution and a federal Britain.

If Hutton were remotely serious about such reformist nostrums, it would put him to the left of Corbyn and render his vitriol incomprehensible. But Hutton has spent nigh on three decades churning out such purely rhetorical prescriptions—from the publication in 1986 of “The Revolution That Never Was: An Assessment of Keynesian Economics” through “The State We’re In,” “The World We’re In,” “The Writing on the Wall” to last year’s “How Good We Can Be: Ending the Mercenary Society and Building a Great Country.”

Hutton’s promotion of the myth of a benevolent capitalism will intensify the dangers posed by the growth of right-wing movements such as the UK Independence Party. To encourage illusions in a political and economic system that is committed to austerity—impoverishing vast sections of the working class—and brushing aside the resulting hardships, only legitimises UKIP’s demagogic posturing as the voice of the “people” against “the elites” and helps cement dangerous divisions in the working class.

Hailed as the “New Keynesian” guru for his arguing against the excesses of neoliberal capitalism and for greater state intervention, Hutton has by turns extolled the virtues of various “benevolent” capitalist models—before the 1990s asset price collapse, Britain under New Labour, and the German social market before Chancellor Angela Merkel—covering up the reality of the situation facing working people under these “benevolent regimes.” He has then watched them crumble one after another and give way to yet more right-wing regimes in the face of capitalism’s escalating crisis.

Today, especially in the aftermath of the 2008 crash, economies throughout the world are based upon ever escalating attacks on the working class in order to feed the rapacious demands of the banks, major corporations and the super-rich. Austerity, which Hutton claims to oppose, is a class policy, not just an economic programme.

At the CLASS conference, other speakers also attempted to present a new “vision” for Labour. All claimed to be aimed at making capitalism more humane and all are in reality recipes for economic, social and

political reaction. All were based on demands for the working class to rally behind their capitalist exploiters against workers in other countries.

Mason declared the crisis was so deep that alliances had to be made with “all sorts.” To placate the mob, “a significant, temporary retreat from freedom of movement” of EU citizens had to be undertaken.

Jones declared that the divisions in the Labour Party were “overestimated” and that it had to “focus on what unites us.” The leadership had to create a “vision” backed up by “message discipline.” Banging the same nationalist drum, he boasted, “We are the real patriots” and urged that a new social movement based on this central idea be created.

This was a theme taken up by McCluskey, who also declared free movement of labour to be a “utopia... which all socialists must recognise.” Without shame, he invoked Karl Marx to provide a benediction for his own insistence that immigrants were a threat to British workers due to their being a source of cheap labour. Marx’s answer to all such efforts to exploit national divisions in the working class was to demand “Workers of the world unite!” in the struggle to overthrow capitalism and establish socialism. McCluskey’s answer is for a political alliance with the employers based on the demand, “Workers of the world fight each other! British jobs for British workers!”



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