

UK: Labour says free movement in Europe must be curtailed post-Brexit

Julie Hyland

17 December 2016

Labour's Keir Starmer has said the party's support for the right of people to live and work in any European Union (EU) country is no longer sustainable and "The rules must change."

Starmer is Labour's Shadow Brexit Secretary, responsible for detailing the party's standpoint on the UK quitting the EU following June's referendum. His support for limiting the free movement of people within Europe was made in the same speech in which he vigorously demanded that British capital must have unrestricted access to the continent and its markets.

Addressing a meeting of Labour members at Bloomberg's headquarters in central London earlier this week, Starmer said the party had to shape "the battle of our times."

On December 8, parliament voted 461 to 89 in favour of a Labour motion for the Conservative government to publish its plans for leaving the EU before beginning formal negotiations over the UK's exit. This was after Labour accepted a Conservative amendment that Article 50 of the EU treaty—triggering the start of withdrawal—would be invoked by the end of March. Labour also overwhelmingly agreed not to challenge the result of the referendum, and that publication of the government's plan for exit would contain nothing likely to undermine its stance in negotiations.

Starmer's speech was intended to set out Labour's stall as the party of the "national interest." Unlike the Conservative government, he claimed, Labour would not simply stand up for the 52 percent of those who voted to Leave the EU but also the 48 percent who voted to Remain.

This portrayal underscores how the bourgeoisie are utilising the referendum vote to polarise official politics entirely around the issue of for or against Brexit, for the most reactionary ends. According to official discourse, the Leave vote was motivated solely by anti-immigrant

sentiment while those voting Remain were defending the neo-liberal model on which the EU is based.

On these grounds, Starmer claimed that the "national interest" dictated that Labour must support immigration controls, while fighting to maintain the right of corporate and financial interests in the UK to access the European Single Market. This would enable Labour to build a "national consensus on Brexit," he claimed, with freedom of movement restrictions central to negotiations.

May's government was guilty of setting "aside the national interest once again by serving the interests of just one side of the divide," he said, pursuing a "hard Brexit" in which Britain would lose access to the Single Market. May's problem, he suggested, it that she was "extrapolating the view of a group *within* the 52%, who were seriously concerned about freedom of movement and immigration" and had prioritised this "over jobs, the economy and living standards."

Labour could not support the Liberal Democrats, however, who have said they will block exit from the EU, because that would mean "abandoning" those who voted to Leave. But, Starmer went on, it would not give the government a "blank cheque" over the terms of departure, and would seek to amend any parliamentary bill on triggering Article 50 if it believed it was necessary.

Starmer claimed that Labour's concern over immigration levels was driven by the need for "strong, cohesive communities." It was "striking that the referendum results showed that those areas in the country with the highest levels of immigration voted most strongly to Remain, but the areas with the highest pace of change voted most strongly to Leave," he went on. "That tells me that the British people are open and tolerant; but that they also expect change to be managed, rather than simply allowing the free market to rip through communities."

The "highest pace of change" is meant to indicate areas

with traditionally low or negligible levels of immigration that have seen an increase over the last period. Starmer associates this rise with the “free market” ripping through “communities.” He is essentially mimicking the claim that “globalism” (which is never defined) equals immigration, equals social devastation—the mantra of every nationalist and of the far right.

Similarly, Labour Greater Manchester mayoral candidate Andy Burnham asserted, “There is nothing socialist about a system of open borders that allows multinationals to treat people as commodities and to move them around Europe to drive down labour costs and create a race to the bottom.”

Burnham, who stood against Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn in the 2015 leadership contest, has never been concerned before about what constitutes socialism. Like Starmer, his aim is to blame migration, rather than capitalism, for creating a “race to the bottom.”

Such statements by leading Labour politicians are intended to scapegoat migrants for the catastrophic decline in services and living standards that are the direct and deliberate result of government-imposed austerity. In this way, the bourgeoisie seeks to divide the only social force capable of mounting a serious challenge to the capitalist profit system—the real source of poverty, inequality and war—the international working class.

Meanwhile, Starmer demands for Labour a “soft Brexit” model that “ensures that any new regulatory frameworks do not add bureaucratic burdens or risk harmful divergence from the EU market and a model that protects the competitiveness of our services and manufacturing sectors.”

Starmer’s speech was headlined as a challenge to Jeremy Corbyn and Labour’s Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott, who have complained about “divisive” anti-immigrant rhetoric. But according to the *Independent*, “a source close” to Abbott stressed that all she “has never called for open borders... all Diane has proposed is sensible and progressive immigration policies that benefit Britain and its economy...”

Corbyn was silent on Starmer’s remarks. However, asked to comment on whether Burnham or Abbott expressed Labour’s stance on immigration, Corbyn’s close ally and Labour Chancellor, John McDonnell, said, “They’re both speaking for Labour, because if you listen to them, what they’re saying is if we want to protect our economy, the negotiations around freedom of movement are going to come onto the table. What we’ve got to do is negotiate the best deal.”

Starmer too made clear that his primary concern about restricting free movement was that the EU will retaliate by imposing unfavourable trade terms on the UK. Declining to define what he considered as “reasonable” controls, Starmer said, “The direction of travel needs to be downwards, as I have said, but I don’t think setting arbitrary targets is the way forwards.”

This was especially important as the practical problem was evaluating areas of shortage in the UK labour force, he said.

While there remain deep divisions within the bourgeoisie over Brexit, Labour is working hard to shape a consensus on the fundamental interests of British capital.

Starmer’s considerations were echoed yesterday by David Davis, the Conservative government’s Brexit Secretary, before a parliamentary cross-party Brexit select committee. Davis was a key figure in the hardline Leave camp during the referendum. He told the committee that returning control of immigration policy to British ministers, from the EU, would enable decisions to be made in the “national interest.” This would affect “all levels of skill” based on “a judgement as what is necessary for universities, business and fruit picking.”

The nominally liberal and anti-Brexit *Guardian* is increasingly a mouthpiece for calls for migration controls. Writing earlier this week, supposedly in opposition to Burnham, Zoe Williams suggested the solution would be to make immigration a “devolved issue”: “Leave aside for the time being the practicalities of having internal regional borders, and imagine how this debate would go. How many immigrants do you want in your constituency, or county?”

In London, unskilled labour could be agreed upon “where it was part of a mutually agreed zone for free movement,” she wrote. Meanwhile, Lincolnshire could determine its requirements in debate with the requirements of “farmers who rely” on migrant labour, while in Yorkshire, should “people with ‘concerns’” over immigration discuss the issue and decide they would not accept refugees in the region, then “so be it. That’s what devolved democracy is about.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)