

Socialism and defence of the free movement of labour: Part one

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This is the first part of a two-part series on the British pseudo-left's support for immigration controls.

Britain's pseudo-left groups have all condemned US President Donald Trump for his anti-Muslim travel ban, denouncing the assault as reactionary, discriminatory, divisive and racist. Yet, when it comes to the issue of the free movement of labour, there is little to distinguish between the far-right oligarch in the White House and the supposedly liberal or "socialist" left in Britain.

From the Labour Party and the trade unions to the Socialist Party, the Stalinist *Morning Star* and others, all are united in their demand to reinforce border controls in the UK. Support for restricting immigration exists irrespective of these organisations' standpoint on Britain exiting the European Union.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who campaigned for a Remain vote in the referendum last June and who supports continued access to the European Single Market, has accepted restrictions on free movement, supposedly out of respect for the Leave vote. "Labour is not wedded to freedom of movement for EU citizens as a point of principle," he has said.

His stance was welcomed by leading Remain campaigner Paul Mason. Free movement is not "a principle of socialism," he argued in the *Guardian*. "It has undermined social justice and must be modified," he added, calling for a "temporary suspension of free movement" within the EU for 10 years.

Labour must recognise that what "drives opposition to free movement among progressive, left-minded people" is that, in addition to suppressing "wage growth at the low end, it says to people with strong cultural traditions, a strong sense of place and community (sometimes all they have left from the industrial era) that 'your past does not matter.'"

Mason elaborated on the theme that immigration restrictions are necessary to foster respect for "culture," "community" and traditions. This is an argument that could have come straight out of Trump's mouth, proving that fake-left opportunists who denounce the US president for their own ends today will not have to travel far to align themselves with an overtly right-wing programme tomorrow.

As for the pro-Brexit pseudo-left, in the referendum they sought to provide "socialist" window dressing for a Leave campaign spearheaded by neo-Thatcherites from the Conservative Party and the UK Independence Party (UKIP). The Socialist Equality Party warned at the time that behind their efforts to give nationalism a "left" twist, "[T]hey are subordinating the working class to an initiative aimed at shifting political life even further along a nationalist trajectory, thereby strengthening and emboldening the far right in the UK and across Europe while weakening the political defences of the working class. Having helped release the genie of British nationalism, they are politically responsible for its consequences."

Their unpardonable toying with "left populism" as a supposed antidote to the right has now hardened into outright support for anti-migrant restrictions.

Former Labour MP George Galloway notoriously joined platforms with Nigel Farage in the Brexit referendum. He praised the then-UKIP leader as his ally and authored the slogan "Left, Right, Left, Right, forward march to victory..."

Farage is now the favourite Briton of Trump, who describes his own "America First" agenda as "Brexit plus, plus, plus."

Nowadays, Galloway spends his time attacking the "idea that, in a capitalist society, it's some kind of principle that we should allow as many workers to join the queue for a declining number of jobs," or baiting the pro-Remain Scottish National Party for believing "we have more in common with Bulgaria and Romania than with Britain."

The Stalinist Communist Party of Britain provides the political hymn sheet from which the "left" nationalists attempt a pose of theoretical legitimacy. The *Morning Star* has run a series of articles on free movement, mostly berating the "left" and young people, in particular, for defending it.

Typical was an article by columnist Julian Jones, who wrote, "By being so positive towards EU free movement, sectors of the left are naively, or willingly, falling into a trap of their own making..."

Defence of free movement "is not, and should not be, the position of the organised left," he continued, complaining of "the young, in particular" who "have been duped into thinking that free movement of people is a near-socialist principle."

Jones cynically uses the fact that many young migrants working in the UK have effectively been forced out of their countries by EU austerity to claim that border controls are in their own best interests, as well as that of "low-skilled workers" in the UK.

The Unite union's general secretary, Len McCluskey, in an op-ed on December 16 made a feint of opposing "impractical" demands to "pull up the drawbridge" on migrants. But his bottom line was that "we are well past the point where the issue of free movement can be ignored."

"Let's have no doubt: the free movement of labour is a class question," McCluskey wrote.

He continued: "Karl Marx identified that fact a long time ago. 'A study of the struggle waged by the British working class,' he wrote in 1867, 'reveals that in order to oppose their workers, the employers either bring in workers from abroad or else transfer manufacture to countries where there is a cheap labour force.'"

McCluskey's article is typical of the rank dishonesty that characterises the pseudo-left's attack on free movement. His citation of Marx is taken from an 1867 statement of the International Workingman's Association, under the heading "On the Lausanne Congress."

McCluskey omits what comes immediately after his citation, where Marx states, "Given this state of affairs, if the working class wishes to continue its struggle with some chance of success, the national organisations must become international."

The distortion of Marx's position is not accidental. McCluskey writes that "of course, all socialists must ultimately look forward to a day when

people can move freely across the world and live or work where they will.” He goes on: “But that is a utopia removed from the world of today, and would require international economic planning and public ownership to make a reality.”

McCluskey is an opponent of the working class as well as the class struggle and socialism. He has no intention of attaining a world where people “can live or work where they will.” His sole concern is to justify the existing capitalist “reality,” which means recognising the exigencies of labour “supply and demand.”

What is required, he argues, is a “straightforward trade union response” to the issue of immigration such as Unite has proposed, whereby “any employer wishing to recruit labour abroad can only do so if they are either covered by a proper trade union agreement, or by sectoral collective bargaining.”

The same line is taken by the Socialist Party, formerly Militant. Welcoming the Leave vote as a working class revolt, their *Socialism Today* argued: “The socialist and trade union movement from its earliest days has never supported the ‘free movement of goods, services and capital’-- or labour--as a point of principle, but instead has always striven for the greatest possible degree of workers’ control, the highest form of which, of course, would be a democratic socialist society with a planned economy.”

Taking trade union cretinism to extremes, they compare support for immigration controls to the trade unions’ previous support “for the closed shop, whereby only union members can be employed in a particular workplace, a very concrete form of ‘border control’ not supported by the capitalists.”

Like McCluskey, the SP’s reference to a future socialism is window dressing for their accommodation to the requirements of capital in the here and now. They insist that it is impermissible to defend the right to free movement because it would “alienate the vast majority of the working class, including many more long-standing immigrants, who would see it as a threat to jobs, wages and living conditions.” It was on this basis that they notoriously backed protests at the Lindsey oil refinery in 2009 demanding “British jobs for British workers.”

Karl Marx and socialist internationalism

These efforts to transform Marx and the socialist movement into border guards--trade union members, of course--cannot be allowed to stand.

These organisations have nothing in common with the founder of scientific socialism. Their support for immigration controls is the outcome of their perspective of national economic regulation under capitalism, which is diametrically opposed to the perspective of revolutionary socialist internationalism.

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels explained the revolutionary character of capitalist production which, in its drive to constantly expand the “market for its products, chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe.” Through the creation and exploitation of a world market, they explained, the bourgeoisie “has given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country.”

In words that could have been directed against McCluskey et al, the great revolutionaries continued: “To the great chagrin of Reactionists, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood... In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations... National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and

local literatures, there arises a world literature...”

The truly revolutionising character of capitalist production was expressed in its creation of the international working class--the gravedigger of the bourgeoisie. “The proletarian is without property; his relation to his wife and children has no longer anything in common with the bourgeois family relations; modern industrial labour, modern subjection to capital, the same in England as in France, in America as in Germany, has stripped him of every trace of national character. Law, morality, religion are to him so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests.”

The working class has “nothing of their own to secure and to fortify; their mission is to destroy all previous securities for, and insurances of, individual property... The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority.”

The watchword of the socialist workers movement for Marx and Engels was, “Workers of all Lands, Unite!” This perspective flowed from the scientific analysis of capitalism that was developed by Marx on the basis of historical materialism.

The pseudo-left cite Marx’s analysis of the “industrial reserve army” or “relative surplus population” to justify their support for border controls. But once again, they distort this analysis beyond all recognition.

For Marx, this phenomenon was not a temporary aberration, but intrinsic to capitalist accumulation. This is because capitalist industry consists of two parts--machinery and workers--the ratio between which is called the “organic composition of capital.” The number of workers in employment is “variable.” It is dependent on whether or not it is profitable for the capitalist to employ workers to run the machinery, the “constant capital.” And this, in turn, is affected by the growth of technology, which requires a smaller number of workers to produce greater quantities of goods, as well as the state of competition within an industry. [For detailed analysis, see *Capital Volume 1*, Chapter 25].

Marx wrote, “The labouring population therefore produces, along with the accumulation of capital produced by it, the means by which it itself is made relatively superfluous, is turned into a relative surplus population; and it does this to an always increasing extent. This is a law of population peculiar to the capitalist mode of production.”

For Marx, “Every labourer” belonged to the surplus/reserve army of labour “during the time when he is only partially employed or wholly unemployed.”

In a devastating critique of modern-day calls for immigration controls, Marx insisted that this problem was not to be solved by “the folly... now patent of the economic wisdom that preaches to the labourers the accommodation of their number to the requirements of capital.”

In fact, “The greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and, therefore, all the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productiveness of its labour, the greater is the industrial reserve army.”

The solution, Marx insisted, was cooperation between workers to protect their common class interests in combination against the bourgeoisie. In the inaugural address of the International Working Men’s Association (the First International) in 1864, Marx concluded, “Past experience has shown how disregard of that bond of brotherhood which ought to exist between the workmen of different countries, and incites them to stand firmly by each other in all their struggles for emancipation, will be chastised by the common discomfiture of their incoherent efforts.”

Praising the struggle by the Lancashire cotton textile workers who, against their own bosses and the British Empire, and on pain of starvation, agitated in support of the North in the American Civil War and for the abolition of slavery, he continued, “If the emancipation of the working classes requires their fraternal concurrence, how are they to fulfil that great mission with a foreign policy in pursuit of criminal designs, playing

upon national prejudices, and squandering in piratical wars the people's blood and treasure?"

It was the duty of the working classes "to master themselves the mysteries of international politics; to watch the diplomatic acts of their respective governments; to counteract them, if necessary, by all means in their power; when unable to prevent, to combine in simultaneous denunciations, and to vindicate the simple laws or morals and justice which ought to govern the relations of private individuals, as the rules paramount of the intercourse of nations.

"The fight for such a foreign policy forms part of the general struggle for the emancipation of the working classes.

"Proletarians of all countries, unite!"

To be continued



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