

# Socialism and defence of the free movement of labour: Part two

Julie Hyland  
10 February 2017

*This is the conclusion of a two-part series on the British pseudo-lefts' support for immigration controls. Part one was published on February 9.*

## Marx on Ireland

Britain's pseudo-left distort Karl Marx's analysis of the "industrial reserve army" or "relative surplus population" in order to smuggle in a racial and nativist criterion that, in fact, belongs to the far right.

This is underscored by the fact that, in support of their position, they frequently cite Marx on the issue of Irish migration to England in the 19th century, quoting from a letter in which he wrote, "Ireland constantly sends her own surplus to the English labour market, and thus forces down wages and lowers the material and moral position of the English working class." [Marx letter to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt, April 9, 1870]

The divisions cultivated between Irish and English workers were notorious and by no means confined to the 1800s. Many people today remember only too well the "No Irish, No Blacks, No dogs" signs that frequented rented accommodation in the UK right up to the 1960s.

Once again, the pseudo-left omit the remainder of Marx's letter, which excoriates the backwardness of the English worker, who "regards himself as a member of the *ruling* nation and consequently he becomes a tool of the English aristocrats and capitalists against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination *over himself*."

Marx continues: "He cherishes religious, social, and national prejudices against the Irish worker. His attitude towards him is much the same as that of the 'poor whites' to the Negroes in the former slave states of the USA... The Irishman pays him back with interest in his own money. He sees in the English worker both the accomplice and the stupid tool of the *English rulers in Ireland*."

"This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short, by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. *This antagonism* is the secret of the *impotence of the English working class*, despite its organisation. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And the latter is quite aware of this... It is the special task of the Central Council [of the First International] in London to make the English workers realise that *for them* the *national emancipation of Ireland* is not a question of abstract justice or humanitarian sentiment, but the *first condition of their own social emancipation*."

For Marx, prejudice amongst English workers against their Irish brothers and sisters was the occasion for a ruthless political struggle to establish their common class interests against the British bourgeoisie—not, as with the pseudo-left today, an excuse for justifying nationalist reaction.

## Lenin and the fight against opportunism

Far from opposition to border controls not being a "socialist principle," the controversy over this issue was to take on life and death dimensions within the Second International.

The issue of immigration restrictions arose in the run-up to the 1907 Socialist Congress in Stuttgart, the Seventh Congress of the Second International. The US state was targeting Chinese and Japanese workers. Congress had passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, halting the entry of Chinese immigrants into the country. In 1908, Japanese immigration into the US was also banned.

On behalf of the US Socialist Party leadership, Morris Hillquit and Victor Berger proposed a resolution calling for a campaign against "the willful importation of cheap foreign labor calculated to destroy labor organizations, to lower the standard of living of the working class, and to retard the ultimate realization of socialism."

This stance was opposed by the left wing within the Socialist Party, with Eugene Debs attacking it as "utterly unsocialistic, reactionary, and, in truth, outrageous."

The Stuttgart Congress rejected the resolution. Lenin, who attended the congress as one of the Bolshevik party delegates, welcomed the defeat. Support for immigration restrictions represented an "attempt to defend narrow, craft interests" and was the outcome of the "spirit of aristocratism that one finds among workers in some of the 'civilised' countries, who derive certain advantages from their privileged position, and are, therefore, inclined to forget the need for international class solidarity." [Lenin *Proletary*, No. 17, October 20, 1907, The International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart]

Lenin returned to the issue of "Capitalism and Workers' Immigration" in his article of that title in *Za Pravdu*, October 29, 1913. "Capitalism has given rise to a special form of migration of nations," he wrote, forcing hundreds of thousands of workers to "wander hundreds and thousands of versts" for employment.

"There can be no doubt that dire poverty alone compels people to abandon their native land, and that the capitalists exploit the immigrant workers in the most shameless manner. But only reactionaries can shut their eyes to the *progressive* significance of this modern migration of nations. Emancipation from the yoke of capital is impossible without the further development of capitalism, and without the class struggle that is based on it. And it is into this struggle that capitalism is drawing the masses of the working people of the *whole* world, breaking down the musty, fusty habits of local life, breaking down national barriers and prejudices, uniting workers from all countries in huge factories and mines in America, Germany, and so forth..."

Noting that the most backward countries of the world were thrust into the "ranks of the advanced, international army of the proletariat," he wrote, "The bourgeoisie incites the workers of one nation against those of

another in the endeavour to keep them disunited. Class-conscious workers, realising that the break-down of all the national barriers by capitalism is inevitable and progressive, are trying to help to enlighten and organise their fellow-workers from the backward countries."

The anti-migrant proposal was indicative of the growth of opportunism within the Second International, in which the trade unions were to play a particularly significant role.

Opportunist elements also argued in favour of colonialism, on the grounds of its "civilising role." Most notably, several delegates raised the demand to support working class "national defence" in times of war.

Though defeated at the 1907 Congress, these tendencies were to plunge the working class into a fratricidal slaughter in 1914. This betrayal of socialism by most of the leaders of the Second International, Lenin wrote, "has been mainly caused by the actual prevalence in it of petty-bourgeois opportunism, the bourgeois nature and danger of which have long been indicated by the finest representatives of the revolutionary proletariat of all countries."

Lenin continued: "The opportunists had long been preparing to wreck the Second International by denying the socialist revolution and substituting bourgeois reformism in its stead, by rejecting the class struggle with its inevitable conversion at certain moments into civil war, and by preaching class collaboration; by preaching bourgeois chauvinism under the guise of patriotism and the defence of the fatherland, and ignoring or rejecting the fundamental truth of socialism, long ago set forth in the *Communist Manifesto*, that the workingmen have no country; by confining themselves, in the struggle against militarism, to a sentimental philistine point of view, instead of recognizing the need for a revolutionary war by the proletarians of all countries, against the bourgeoisie of all countries; by making a fetish of the necessary utilization of parliamentarianism and bourgeois legality, and forgetting that illegal forms of organization and agitation are imperative at times of crises." [Lenin, *The tasks of revolutionary Social-Democracy in the European War*, 1914]

In opposition to the capitulation of the Second International, the Bolshevik Party, under the leadership of Lenin, came out against the war and launched the fight for a new Third International. This was to be built on the basis of an uncompromising struggle against the opportunist national chauvinist tendencies that had revealed themselves as the agencies of imperialism within the workers' movement.

This was the critical preparation for the revolutionary eruptions that were signified by the outbreak of imperialist war and the breakdown of the nation state system. It was on this basis that Lenin, alongside Leon Trotsky, was able to prepare the Bolshevik Party and the most advanced sections of workers and youth for the seizure of power in October 1917 and the establishment of the first workers' state in the world.

Lenin returned to the issue of border controls at the height of the war in a November 1915 letter to the Socialist Propaganda League (SPL), a left-wing formation within the US Socialist Party that broke with the Socialist Party after the October Revolution to form the US Communist Party.

Lenin wrote, "In our struggle for true internationalism and against 'jingo-socialism,' we always quote in our press the example of the opportunist leaders of the SP in America, who are in favour of restrictions of the immigration of Chinese and Japanese workers (especially after the Congress of Stuttgart, 1907, and *against* the decisions of Stuttgart).

"We think that one cannot be internationalist and be at the same time in favour of such restrictions."

### The pseudo-left: the modern day "jingo-socialists"

The global integration of capitalism has reached an unprecedented level since Marx and Lenin's time. In combination with the spectacular developments in science and technique over the last 30 years, it has made possible a rationalisation of production and facilitated the ability of the bourgeoisie to drive down wages and conditions to an ever-diminishing global benchmark.

However, the cause of this process is not the globalisation of production, as the national opportunists would claim, but capitalism itself. The tremendous achievements to be derived from the progressive unification of the globe and its resources are perverted by private ownership of the means of production and the division of the world into antagonistic nation states.

In Europe, the bourgeoisie seized upon the 2008 financial crash as the pretext to turn the clock back centuries through the imposition of austerity. From Greece to Spain to Britain, social democracy, the trade unions and their pseudo-left apologists have played a key political role in this process.

As a result, thousands of workers, especially young workers, are forced to move around looking for work. But once again, this migration is not the cause of low wages in the UK, or anywhere else. The cause is the subordination of the world economy to the profit interests of the corporate and financial elite.

Even in the surveys routinely cited by the right wing, supposedly revealing the impact of EU migration on wages in semi-unskilled employment, the impact is minimal—calculated at between 0.5 percent and 1.0 percent. Yet wages fell by 10.4 percent in the UK between 2007 and 2015, a drop equalled only by Greece within the countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

This fall is the result of a deliberate political strategy on the part of the bourgeoisie to pauperise the working class, one in which the Labour Party and the trade unions play the key role.

These organisations are completely incorporated into the bourgeois and corporate state apparatus, enforcing austerity, wage freezes and wage cuts. Their justifications for this are the same as those they employ in favour of border controls: Nothing can be done to alter the scarcities created by the monopolisation of global wealth by a tiny financial elite. Instead, the working class must make sacrifices, especially the migrant workers who are to be told there is no place for them.

This accounts for the grotesque spectacle of Labour and the trade unions spouting forth on the need for immigration controls so as to "protect" labour standards, even as they collaborate with the government and corporations to destroy these standards in order to make British capital more competitive.

The pseudo-left are an integral part of this labour bureaucracy and constitute the bulk of its leadership. From Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn to the heads of numerous unions to the Syriza government in Greece, the pseudo-left function as a special anti-working class detachment of the bourgeoisie.

While Trump declares for "America First," Corbyn demands import controls against China and similar protectionist measures, while the pseudo-left repeat the specious claim that strong national borders, economic protectionism and tighter immigration laws will benefit the working class. Their support for the strengthening of the nation state is wholly reactionary. As history has proven, it leads to the intensification of the attacks on the working class at home and support for imperialist war abroad.

Against the national chauvinism of the pseudo-left, the absolute principle of socialist-minded workers and youth must be to oppose the efforts to divide native-born and migrant workers. The right of all workers to live and work in the country they choose, with full and equal rights, is not for sale.

Only in solidarity with its class brothers and sisters—irrespective of

colour, language, religion and nationality—can the working class successfully struggle against globally mobile capitalist corporations and advance its own independent solution to the world economic crisis: the reorganization of the global economy to meet social needs, not the drive for private profit.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**wsws.org/contact**