

May Day 2017

The class issues in the British election

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This speech was delivered by Chris Marsden, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (UK), to the 2017 International May Day Online Rally, held on April 30.

Every general election necessarily unleashes a torrent of lies.

That is because parties that speak for the ruling class must portray themselves as the guardians of the national interest, and even friends of working people.

Such has been the nature of the campaign since Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May called a snap general election for June 8.

She claimed that Britain, despite supposedly “coming together” since Brexit, and with “economic growth that has exceeded all expectations,” needs “strong leadership.”

May said she wants to negotiate the terms of Britain’s leaving the European Union with a large majority, won by crushing the “saboteurs” in parliament. But events have confirmed that the Socialist Equality Party was correct to insist that May wants a de facto elected dictatorship to push a much broader agenda of austerity, militarism and war.

Brexit is the product of growing antagonisms between the major European powers, which provoked strident Tory demands for an end to the UK’s EU membership, in order to free City speculators to exploit relations with the United States and penetrate the more vibrant markets of China and India.

Instead, far from appearing strong, May has proved how far the rot eating at the vitals of British capitalism has gone.

In the name of “taking back control,” she has made her government even more dependent on an alliance with the Trump administration—which also came to power committed to the brutal assertion of national

interests.

For her pains May has been kicked in the teeth by Trump, who has made clear that a trade deal with the EU is more important than one with Britain.

At the same time, German Chancellor Angela Merkel has led the EU states in insisting that the UK will be treated like any other third country, with “illusions” to the contrary “a waste of time.”

This much could have been anticipated by anyone not blinded by the naked propaganda that passes for news coverage in the UK. What will have surprised many is the degree to which June 8 has been transformed into a virtual “war election.”

Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn is no longer denounced merely as a saboteur of Brexit, but as a threat to national security!

In the past two weeks, Defence Secretary Michael Fallon called him a stooge of President Vladimir Putin for opposing the build-up of NATO troops on Russia’s borders.

This week, after Corbyn refused to publicly commit to the renewal of Trident and pledge to trigger a nuclear attack, Fallon made the unprecedented declaration that Britain would use nuclear weapons “as a first strike.”

Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson has said that if asked by the US, Britain would say “yes” to war in Syria, including using “submarine-based cruise missiles in the Med.”

He added that there would likely be no parliamentary vote, and going to war would be “for the prime minister to decide.”

To underscore the gravity of the threat now emerging, this week saw the launch of the Royal Navy’s new giant 7,400-tonne £1.5 billion nuclear submarine, HMS Audacious. It is the third of seven such subs commissioned as part of the £200 billion Trident/Cruise

missile renewal programme.

Russia's response to all of this was chilling. Military expert Konstantin Sivkov said of Fallon's first strike threat, "If this is so, it means that the world is standing on the edge of a nuclear war."

Frants Klintsevich, deputy head of Russia's Committee for Defense and Security, said, "The UK, which doesn't have vast territory, will be literally wiped off from the face of the earth with a counterstrike."

Russia has 33 times more warheads than the UK—7,000, with 4,500 deployed or stockpiled. The most powerful of these, the 40 megaton Satan 2 missile, carries up to a dozen warheads and can level an area the size of the UK in one hit—slaughtering, in the process, 65 million people.

The US, for its part, has 6,800 warheads, with 4,000 deployed or stockpiled.

This is meant to ensure what was once described as Mutually Assured Destruction, before a deranged ruling elite began to consider the possibility of a winnable nuclear war.

With trade and military war comes the attack on wages, working conditions and the destruction of essential services necessary to make workers pay for this insanity.

May's post-Brexit "land of plenty" is a social nightmare for millions, in which the richest one percent—634,000 people—own more than 20 times the wealth of the poorest 20 percent—13 million.

Wages have fallen by 11 percent in real terms since 2007, a historic fall, so that a third of the population is now below the poverty line. Millions more are kept afloat on a sea of personal debt, with the average household now owing £13,000, excluding mortgages, and total unsecured debt at an all-time high of £349 billion.

Under such circumstances, May's plan to secure a 200-seat majority could yet blow up in her face—especially under conditions of a rise in strike activity for the first time in decades.

The SEP sympathises with those workers and young people who want to see an end to Tory rule and the election of a Corbyn-led government. But our responsibility, at this dangerous point in history, is still to tell the truth.

Corbyn has won support because he, at least verbally,

opposes austerity and militarism. But his own actions have proved time and again that you do not change the character of the Labour Party by putting someone with vaguely left and progressive ideas in charge of it.

Corbyn opposes cuts, but Labour councils implement them. He opposes Trident, but Labour supports it. He refuses to say he will use the nuclear deterrent, only for his Shadow Defence Secretary Nia Griffiths to insist that Labour "are prepared to use it."

Griffiths insisted in the same interview, "This is not a Presidential election, it's about who's in government."

In this, she is right.

By virtue of its entire history and programme, Labour is a party of austerity and war, just as much as the Tories.

Even if Corbyn won on June 8, the political record proves that he would either capitulate to the demands placed on him by the party apparatus or be forced from office.

If May is re-elected, then workers face the fight of their lives. They must defy not only the government, but also the Labour Party and the trade unions—who will do everything possible to sabotage any and all resistance. And Corbyn, whose loyalties are to the labour bureaucracy, will never lead such a struggle.

This is the time for decisive political action, not half measures and evasions.

Workers are in the middle of an undeclared class war. They face being dragged into a real shooting war—against Syria, North Korea, even against Russia and China—while told to rely on the moral conscience of one man to protect them.

This situation cannot be allowed to continue. Workers and young people need their own genuinely socialist and internationalist party, the Socialist Equality Party, and they must commit themselves to building it. That is my message to you on May Day.



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