

The class issues in the UK snap election

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (Britain)

22 May 2017

It is critical for working people and youth to understand the real reasons for the calling of the June 8 snap general election and the class issues that are at stake. Only in this way can the working class prepare for what will follow the election and determine how it must respond.

Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May claims that an early poll is needed to ensure “strong and stable leadership” against “saboteurs” seeking to undermine the UK’s national interests in negotiations over leaving the European Union. Yet she had previously won an overwhelming vote in parliament to trigger the Brexit process, with the backing of the Labour Party, and had ruled out an early election. She heads a party, moreover, that introduced fixed-term parliaments just seven years ago.

The resort to an election two years earlier than expected indicates that the decision-makers standing behind May, the financial oligarchy and the military-intelligence apparatus, have determined that they cannot afford to wait. On the back of Labour’s crisis, they hope to install a government with the veneer of majority support to impose policies that add up to a massive escalation in the drive for austerity, dictatorship and war. This is a program for which there is no genuine democratic mandate.

The closest historical precedent is February 1974, when Tory Premier Edward Heath called an early election. Revolutionary convulsions had shaken world capitalism, beginning with the French General Strike of May-June 1968. In the United States, President Richard Nixon was mired in the Watergate scandal, which would result that summer in his resignation under threat of impeachment. In Britain, amid an eruption of working class militancy spearheaded by a miners’ strike, Heath said the election was to decide, “Who runs the country?”

Heath lost. In the aftermath of the 1974 crisis, the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy played the essential role in restabilising British capitalism. Having unexpectedly won the snap election, Labour made temporary concessions to workers to bring the situation under control before agreeing to International Monetary Fund demands for massive cuts in public spending and wages, paving the way for the victory of Margaret Thatcher in 1979.

This was the start of a decades-long suppression of the class struggle. Since the betrayal and defeat of the 1984-85 year-long miners’ strike, fully 32 years ago, the ruling class has had a free hand to do as it pleases. The result has been a disaster.

The crisis facing British and world capitalism today is more profound and all-encompassing than at any point since the 1930s. Its epicentre is the United States.

The bitter conflict raging in Washington is of a historic character, with explosive consequences for the entire world. The presidency of Donald Trump signals the rise to executive power of fascistic, gangster elements that pose grave dangers to the American and international working class. However, the moves by the Democratic Party against Trump have no progressive content. The Democrats act solely in the interests of the industrial-military complex, which regards Trump’s erratic and unrestrained pursuit of personal enrichment as a threat to America’s

global standing. The hysterical McCarthyite campaign accusing Trump of being a “puppet” of Moscow and threatening reprisals against Russia demonstrates America’s transformation from the guarantor of the post-1945 world order into the single most important factor threatening its collapse.

The answer of the US to the threatened loss of its global economic and political hegemony is an eruption of imperialist militarism. In the last few months, the US has bombed Syria with cruise missiles, dropped America’s largest non-nuclear bomb on Afghanistan and threatened to militarily attack North Korea as part of Washington’s ongoing military encirclement of China. Every day sees provocations against Moscow, including the buildup of NATO troops in the European states bordering Russia.

All the major powers are following the US lead. Everywhere, the bourgeoisie is turning to protectionism, trade war and militarism. Everywhere, bourgeois rule is increasingly dysfunctional, reckless and authoritarian. Everywhere, the working class faces the destruction of its living standards and democratic rights and the danger of a third world war.

Brexit was not the cause, but an expression of the national antagonisms provoked by the bitter competition between rival powers under conditions of deepening economic crisis. The EU and even its constituent states continue to fracture. Not only Greece, but also Italy with its much larger economy may be forced out of the EU. Spain faces the growth of Catalan and other separatist movements, which have been encouraged by developments in Scotland. Brexit and the turn to “America First” policies by Trump have spurred on the growth of right-wing nationalist movements, which exploit popular hostility to the EU and its austerity policies—most importantly in France with the rise of the National Front under Marine Le Pen.

Germany, with the support of France, has responded with discussions on forming a “core Europe” of the more economically powerful imperialist countries, with the rest relegated to periphery status. This is combined with escalating moves towards a European army independent of NATO.

The descent into trade and military war marks the failure of all attempts to overcome, within a capitalist framework, the contradiction between the globalisation of production and the division of the world into competing nation states—a fundamental contradiction of capitalism that gave rise to two world wars.

Brexit and the growth of national antagonisms

There is no doubt that May’s decision for a snap poll was taken in discussion with Washington. During last year’s referendum, she stood with the majority of the ruling elite, from Westminster to the major banks and corporations, which supported UK membership of the EU. This was not only because exclusion threatens access to a market constituting more

than 40 percent of UK trade. More important is the undermining of Britain's strategic relations with the US, which depend on London acting as the voice of Washington within both the EU and NATO.

Former Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron conceived of the referendum as a means of curbing the anti-EU faction within the Tory Party, which regards membership as an unacceptable restraint on the City of London's global ambitions. But the arrogance and complacency of the powers that be was exposed when the Leave campaign won. It did so by exploiting the anger of broad layers of workers towards a hated establishment that lined up behind the EU after it had imposed savage austerity on Greece, Spain, Portugal and Ireland.

The result has compounded divisions within the ruling elite, preventing the formulation of a coherent post-Brexit strategy. Having become prime minister by default, May sought to emulate the policy of the almost defunct UK Independence Party (UKIP)—holding hands with Trump in the hope of a favourable trade deal with the US and using Washington to pressure the EU powers to accept tariff-free UK access to the European Single Market. It has taken less than five months for these calculations to unravel. No one knows what alliances will arise from Trump's "America First" doctrine, or even whether its author will continue in office. What is clear is that the response of the European powers—above all Germany—to the threatened disintegration of the EU and the challenge from the US is a forceful assertion of their own national interests.

This means there is no possibility of realising May's demands for an "amicable divorce." Moreover, her "hard Brexit" rhetoric has exacerbated economic and political tensions within the UK that threaten its breakup. In addition to the demand by the Scottish National Party for a second independence referendum, calls for a border poll on the possible unification of Northern Ireland with the Irish Republic have been supported by the EU.

The perspective advanced by the pro-EU faction of the bourgeoisie, represented by the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats, is equally bankrupt. Their eulogy to the EU as a force for peace and equality is a barefaced lie that was deservedly rejected in the referendum. Their talk of defending "globalism" is a phoney pose of internationalism—a cynical euphemism for the enforcement of a neo-liberal agenda on behalf of the major banks and transnational corporations.

All efforts to encourage workers to back one or other capitalist camp within the UK—in favour of Brexit or the EU—only facilitate the ongoing preparations for trade war and military conflict. Whichever faction prevails, Britain is tied today even more closely to the US war drive than under Tony Blair. The agenda of the pro-EU forces is no less dependent on Washington than that of May, as confirmed by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's dropping of his opposition to NATO and the Trident nuclear missile system.

Behind the backs of the population, British forces are taking part in military manoeuvres in South Korea and are part of the NATO buildup in Poland and Estonia. Troops have been despatched in recent months to South Sudan and Sierra Leone. May has indicated that if she wins the election, Britain will strengthen its troop deployment in Afghanistan and join a US-led military assault on the Assad regime in Syria.

This is accompanied by bloodcurdling rhetoric declaring that the true measure of "strong leadership" is the readiness to wage war, including threatening pre-emptive nuclear attacks. Such deranged pronouncements, which bring to mind the "rogue states" against which government ministers routinely propagandise, are the hallmark of a ruling elite that feels itself under siege and welcomes war as a means of directing social discontent outwards against an external enemy.

The return of the "Five Giant Evils"

The world's eight richest billionaires possess the same wealth (£350 billion) as the poorest half of the globe's population, 3.6 billion people. Last year, Oxfam estimated that it would take 62 of the super-rich to obtain this share of global wealth, but revised the figure downward after finding that poverty in China and India is far higher than was thought.

The UK is home to the largest number of billionaires on record—134—with London host to 86, more than any other city in the world. It is this financial oligarchy that dictates every aspect of economic and political life. It is on their behalf that May intends to step up a social counterrevolution that has proceeded without let-up for almost a decade.

The British economy is among the most parasitic in the world—dependent on rampant speculation and its role as a low-wage, low-tax haven off of the European mainland. The plundering of billions in public funds to prop up the banks and super-rich following the financial meltdown of 2008 has only added to a mountain of fictitious capital that portends a still more explosive economic collapse.

Following Brexit, the City of London faces being cut out of major markets and having its banks and finance houses poached by other European capitals.

For the ruling elite, the only solution is to claw ever greater profits from the sweated labour of working people. Already, wages have fallen further than in almost a century—down by 11 percent since 2007, the second largest fall in Europe after Greece. In the first quarter of 2017, they have fallen once again due to rising inflation, and are expected to be almost £1,000 lower this year in real terms than was forecast 12 months earlier.

This, combined with zero-hour contracts and the "gig economy," means one in five UK workers—over 7 million people—are in precarious employment, one-third of the population is officially below the poverty line and more than half of households depend on state benefits. The real unemployment rate across the UK is 12 percent, around twice the official rate, which excludes anyone who has not sought a job in the past four weeks or cannot start one within two weeks.

Since the Brexit vote, the wealth of Britain's top 1,000 has grown by 14 percent to £658 billion—more than the combined wealth of the poorest 40 percent of the population, 10.3 million families. The average UK household owes a record £12,887 excluding mortgages—a total of £394 billion in personal debt.

The situation facing young people is especially dire. Nearly four million children were living in poverty in 2015, up by 200,000 on 2014, and relative child poverty is predicted to reach 50 percent by 2020. In England, tuition fees have gone up again to £9,250 per year, leaving graduates with debts averaging £44,000—the largest in the English-speaking world—on which interest payments are spiralling.

Young workers are the most likely to be on zero-hour contracts, working at the minimum wage or below. As a result, they earned £6,700 less than the national average in 2015, while those aged 18 to 21 had an average salary of just £10,200. Many more are unemployed. What has been called the "black rule" of economics is that youth unemployment is generally double a country's overall unemployment rate. The UK youth unemployment rate exceeds this average and officially stands at 12.8 percent.

Ensuring Britain's "global competitiveness" demands a cutthroat race to the bottom, with the benchmark for wages and conditions no longer set by the impoverished countries of southern and Eastern Europe, but instead by the cheap-labour centres of Asia. As May's chancellor, Philip Hammond, warned, "[W]e will have to change our model to regain competitiveness. And you can be sure we will do whatever we have to do."

Completion of the "Thatcher revolution" means the final destruction of the welfare state and return of the Five "Giant Evils"—want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness—it was meant to have eradicated. The Tories have already committed to slash the National Health Service

(NHS) budget by a fifth, £41 billion, by 2020. Welfare cuts will cost households between £2,500 and £3,000 per year, and local authorities have lost as much as 50 percent of central government funding, hitting vital public services. A raft of legislation means that the state no longer has the obligation to provide health care, house the homeless or feed the poor. Schools, hospitals and social provision—public assets paid for by generations of workers—are being either transferred to the private sector or closed down.

Against this backdrop, the political purpose of the campaign by the establishment and its media against refugees, migrants and Muslims is clear. It is aimed at scapegoating the most vulnerable workers—many of whom are the victims of Britain's wars—for the social problems created by capitalism, and justifying the “war on terror.” By directing social discontent along national, racial and religious lines, the bourgeoisie hopes to divide the working class and establish the political framework for waging war abroad and domestic repression at home.

The whipping up of anti-Muslim sentiment is central to the “war on terror,” involving the imposition of a raft of repressive legislation that collectively lays down the framework for a police state. A vast network of electronic surveillance has been set up, confirming that the real target of all such measures is the entire working class.

The turn to state repression flows inexorably from the social ruin of millions and the escalating drive to war. It would be fatal to underestimate the significance of the threat by an unnamed serving general of a possible “mutiny” should Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn become prime minister, and the supportive comments this solicited from leading military figures. Such statements testify to the utter decay of democratic norms, confirming that class tensions cannot be contained for much longer within the framework of parliamentary rule.

Corbyn's Labour Party is no alternative

Millions of workers and young people are bitterly hostile to the Tories and want to fight back. This has already given rise to strikes and votes for industrial action among rail conductors, car workers, academics, health care workers and teachers, in a rebellion against the collusion with the employers by the trade union leaders. But Corbyn's Labour Party does not provide an alternative.

It is almost two years since Corbyn was elected Labour leader, thanks to a flood of new members who hoped he would rid the party of the Blairites and take the fight to the Tories. Corbyn was the undeserving beneficiary of this leftward movement, betraying the mandate given to him and making one retreat after another.

He opposed all demands to kick out his right-wing opponents in the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), even as they launched a witch-hunt of his supporters. As a result, a couple hundred MPs continue to determine party policy. Corbyn allowed a free vote for MPs to line up with the Tories in backing the bombing of Syria and retaining the multi-billion-pound Trident nuclear system. Only with the official beginning of the election campaign has action been taken against a handful of members and local councils for openly working with other parties. Nonetheless, Blair remains untouched and free to work with his allies in the PLP for Labour's defeat.

Corbyn is making an electoral pitch based on a myth—promising a Labour government that will “take back the wealth” from the “tax cheats, the rip-off bosses and the greedy bankers.” But he stands at the head of a party no less controlled by the banks and big business and committed to militarism and war than the Tories. Whatever his personal pronouncements, he is responsible for an election manifesto pledged to

Trident's renewal, support for NATO and spending 2 percent of GDP on defence. It retains three-quarters of planned Tory welfare cuts and promises a “fiscal credibility rule” that would rule out any end to austerity.

Collectively, these policies represent every major demand of the Blairites, as is underscored by Labour's key pledge to reject any Brexit deal that does not guarantee access to the European Single Market. Corbyn's rightward lurch is epitomised by the manifesto's declaration that “freedom of movement will end when we leave the European Union,” alongside a plan to “recruit 500 more border guards to add to our safeguards and controls.”

Even though Corbyn has largely met all their demands, Labour's right wing is still not satisfied. They will not tolerate Corbyn in high office out of concern that he might arouse left wing, anti-capitalist sentiments that he is unable to control. Defeating Corbyn is not an end in itself, but preparation for waging a sustained political offensive against the working class. That is why the right wing has made public a plan to engineer a split after the election that would eviscerate the Labour Party and pave the way for the formation of a new neo-liberal, pro-EU party modelled on that created by Macron in France.

The history of the Labour Party

Corbyn's prostration before the right wing is not merely the result of his sanctimonious insistence that he “does not do personal politics.” His loyalty is first, last and always to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. For more than 30 years, he sat on Labour's backbenches as it transformed itself into a Tory Party mark two. Only when the extent of Labour's alienation from the working class resulted in its near-collapse in the 2015 general election—especially in Scotland—was he stirred into action.

Corbyn represents the last desperate effort to resuscitate a policy that has failed time and time again, and has played a crucial role for the bourgeoisie in stemming a revolutionary development in the working class—the policy of attempting to push Labour to the left.

Fearful that Labour would suffer a similar meltdown as Pasok in Greece after it imposed EU-dictated austerity measures, Corbyn made a last-minute entry into the 2015 Labour Party leadership contest. He boasted of his victory, “Since the crash of 2008, the demand for an alternative and an end to counter-productive austerity has led to the rise of new movements and parties in one country after another... In Britain, it's happened in the heart of traditional politics, in the Labour Party, which is something we should be extremely proud of.”

In stark contrast, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) insisted, “No one can seriously propose that this party—which, in its politics and organisation and the social composition of its apparatus, is Tory in all but name—can be transformed into an instrument of working class struggle...”

We made the warning that “the problem confronted by the working class is not just the limitations of Corbyn or the Labour Party. Underlying this is the reality of existing social relations. Can anyone seriously argue—especially after the events in Greece—that a redistribution of wealth can be effected apart from a massive social struggle by the working class to break the stranglehold of the financial elite over economic, social and political life?”

At every crucial stage over more than a century, the Labour Party has set itself against the socialist strivings of the working class. It betrayed the 1926 general strike, split to form the national government with the Tories in 1931 to administer austerity, and went on to form a second government of national unity to support the Second World War. The only time Labour carried out any significant reforms was in the war's aftermath, when the

survival of capitalism was threatened by a mass sentiment for socialism.

By the 1980s, at the very point Corbyn took his place on Labour's backbenches, its leadership was witch-hunting socialists out of the party and aiding the Trades Union Congress in its betrayal of the miners' strike. This smoothed the way for the handover of the party to Blair in 1994 and the ditching of its Clause 4 commitment to common ownership the following year. The Labour government that took power in 1997 proceeded to transfer more wealth to the oligarchy than Thatcher. It took Britain into the 2003 Iraq War and ended its days by bailing out the banks, whose criminal practices it had facilitated.

The only element Labour retains of its former connection to the working class is its name. The influx of new members under Corbyn has not changed the fact that, in its social composition and voting base, Labour is a party of the upper-middle class. Fully 78 percent of its members are in the AB/C1 social classes (managerial and professional administrators). In 2015, for the first time, Labour did better among middle class professionals than among manual working class voters. Over half of those in unskilled manual jobs do not vote, along with almost 60 percent of those aged 18 to 24.

A key element in determining Labour's social composition is its embrace of identity and lifestyle politics, with affirmations of race, gender and sexual orientation providing the mechanism for a self-centred petty-bourgeois layer to secure special privileges in education and employment.

Labour's real relationship to the working class is epitomised by its central role in the destruction of the social gains with which it was once associated. Labour accelerated the privatisation of the NHS through the Private Finance Initiative and its embrace of the internal market and alternative health care providers.

Across the country, Labour councils are imposing Tory cuts under the direct instructions of Corbyn and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell. It is not merely that the Labour functionaries will not fight. They are selling off vast tracts of social housing, parks, libraries and even town halls to the private sector, often through shady property deals and companies with which they are involved.

This speaks to a global phenomenon. The election of Trump, the rise of Marine Le Pen and the Brexit vote were all made possible by the venal character of what passes for the political "left." The parties and trade unions that once made up the "labour movement" are increasingly seen by millions as the unalloyed advocates of neo-liberalism and war. In the US, these "progressives" lined up behind the representative of the Pentagon and Wall Street, Hillary Clinton. In France, they backed the Rothschild banker and EU defender, Emmanuel Macron. In every instance, their defence of the status quo hands the initiative to far-right forces that pose as the voice of opposition and social protest.

The role of the pseudo-left

The socialist reorientation of workers and young people proceeds through a struggle against pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party. Despite their left phraseology, these tendencies are the political representatives of an upper stratum of the middle class—concentrated especially in academia and the labour and trade union bureaucracy.

Every "left" grouping seized on Corbyn's election to reaffirm their commitment to Labour, mounting a two-year campaign of disinformation proclaiming its "socialist" renewal. The Socialist Party wrote that Labour was now "two parties in one," bringing "an opportunity to create a mass party of the working class," while the majority within the recently formed Left Unity gave up any pretence of independence and told its members to

join the pro-Corbyn Momentum campaign.

Nothing that Corbyn has done since then, including expelling many of their members from Momentum, has led the pseudo-left to abandon their pledge of fealty. Instead, the Socialist Workers Party greeted Labour's election manifesto as a "left-wing... alternative for Labour that could help it beat the Tories," while Alan Thornett of the Pabloite Socialist Resistance insisted, "The job of the left now is to get behind the Corbyn campaign and drum up every vote we can."

This call for a Labour vote is neither a mistaken attempt to defend workers nor a misguided effort to advance a struggle for socialism. Richard Seymour of RS21, a splinter from the SWP, made this clear when he insisted, "The immediate task of the British left, then, is not to pursue a fantasy: kick Theresa May out, bring down the Tories, get a socialist government, and so on... The task is to fight for the survival of the Labour Party, on which all our hopes currently depend."

The essential role of the pseudo-left is to falsify Marxism, emptying it of all revolutionary content to subordinate workers and youth to one or another faction of the bourgeoisie. In the Brexit referendum, these groups sought either to align the working class behind the Remain campaign in support of "reform" of the EU, or lend support to the Tory right and UKIP through their call for a "left Leave" vote.

The Socialist Equality Party called for an active boycott of the referendum, insisting that both the Remain and Leave campaigns were headed by sections of the ruling class committed to greater austerity, brutal anti-immigrant measures and the destruction of workers' rights. It stressed, "A boycott prepares the ground for the development of an independent political struggle of the British working class against these forces. Such a movement must develop as part of a continent-wide counteroffensive by the working class, which will expose the referendum as only an episode in the deepening existential crisis of the British and European bourgeoisie."

On this basis, the SEP warned, "The biggest political danger in this situation is the mixing of class banners on the basis of the espousal of a supposedly left nationalism." It insisted that the result would be to directly subordinate 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."

This is exactly what has occurred. Today, whatever position they took on Brexit, the pseudo-lefts are all lining up behind a Labour Party that is committed to tighter border controls, ending free movement, NATO membership and nuclear war. Wholly integrated into bourgeois politics, there is no political line they will not cross—whether this means imposing austerity as their co-thinkers in Syriza are doing in Greece or supporting military interventions across the world in the name of defending "human rights."

The centenary of the October Russian Revolution

2017 marks the centenary of the October Revolution in Russia. The assimilation of its lessons is the essential pre-condition for the political reorientation of the working class in Britain and internationally.

Amid a capitalist breakdown that led to the horrors of the First World War, the working class overthrew the tsarist autocracy and took power, establishing the first workers state in world history. The example set by the Bolsheviks was a challenge to all the social democratic parties, such as Labour, that had supported their own ruling class in the war. It was to counter the danger that workers would follow the lead of their Russian brothers and sisters that the Labour Party adopted Clause Four of its

constitution in 1918, claiming that reforms won through parliament provided a peaceful alternative to revolution.

Today, the question “reform or revolution” has been decisively answered. Not only have Labour and parliament itself been sealed off as avenues of struggle for the working class, the scale of the catastrophe now unfolding can be answered only by adopting the revolutionary axis of struggle fought for by the Bolsheviks—socialist internationalism. The future of working people cannot be secured through futile attempts to reform the Labour Party. It depends on the building of a new and genuinely socialist leadership.

The decades-long suppression of the class struggle by the bureaucracy is coming to an end. An insurrectionary mood is developing, as indicated by a recent poll of young people by the European Broadcasters Union. When asked, “Would you actively participate in a large-scale uprising against the generation in power if it happened in the next days or months?” more than half, 53 percent, said “yes.” This sentiment must be made conscious and given political direction.

The SEP alone defends and continues the revolutionary heritage of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky. As the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world Trotskyist movement, our strategy is based not on national, parliamentary arithmetic, but on the international dynamics of the class struggle.

The allies of British workers and youth are their brothers and sisters across Europe, the US, China, Russia and throughout the world, who share a common enemy and a common goal—a world free of class oppression, inequality and war.

The aim must be the development of an independent political struggle of the British working class, in unity with workers throughout the European continent, to defend living standards and democratic rights. As the SEP insisted during the Brexit referendum, “The alternative for workers to the Europe of the transnational corporations is the struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe.”

Crucially, the SEP seeks to work alongside our comrades internationally to transform the ICFI into the international centre of revolutionary opposition to militarism and war. We call for a new anti-war movement based on four central conceptions:

- The struggle against war must be based on the working class, the great revolutionary force in society, uniting behind it all progressive elements in the population.
- A new anti-war movement must be anti-capitalist and socialist, since there can be no serious struggle against war except in the fight to end the dictatorship of finance capital and the economic system that is the fundamental cause of militarism and war.
- A new anti-war movement must be completely and unequivocally independent of, and hostile to, all political parties and organizations of the capitalist class.
- A new anti-war movement must be international, mobilising the vast power of the working class in a unified global struggle against imperialism. The permanent war of the bourgeoisie must be answered with the perspective of permanent revolution by the working class, the strategic goal of which is the abolition of the nation-state system and the establishment of a world socialist federation.

In this general election, the SEP will seek to build our party in the working class and particularly among the younger generation, for whom capitalism offers nothing. We will do so based on this history and this programme.

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