

The only answer to Brexit is the United Socialist States of Europe

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The factional warfare over Brexit within Britain's ruling elite is at fever pitch. Amid warnings of a crisis dwarfing Suez in 1956, threatening to permanently unravel the UK's relations with Europe, advanced preparations are being made by the police, army and secret services for a national emergency.

Yet this is a political conflict characterised above all by the deliberate exclusion of the working class from any influence over its outcome.

The pro-Brexit faction of the Conservatives and their allies cite the sanctity of the 2016 referendum on British membership of the European Union as the declared will of the people, while pro-remain forces urge a second "People's vote." But the specialised lexicon of debate—"hard Brexit," "soft Brexit," "backstop,"—indicates the exclusive focus of this fall-out in high places.

This is a fight over Britain's geostrategic orientation and economic and political alliances, amid developing protectionism and trade war and an eruption of militarism. Every faction—whether pro- or anti-EU membership or urging some form of continued relations with the EU—is viciously opposed to the interests of the working class.

The Brexiteers openly discuss how a hard Brexit will create the necessary conditions for the imposition of economic shock therapy, including slashing wages and ramping up exploitation to compete for markets in the US, China and south Asia. But when Tory Remainers and their Blairite allies in the Labour Party warn of the economic impact of Brexit, they speak as those who have helped impose savage austerity on workers and young people for more than a decade—and who would do the same within the confines of the EU.

Last week, UN rapporteur Philip Alston issued his report on poverty in the UK. After visits to several towns and cities, he declared that austerity has led to "the immense growth in food banks and the queues waiting

outside them, the people sleeping rough in the streets, the growth of homelessness, the sense of deep despair that leads even the government to appoint a minister for suicide prevention and civil society to report in depth on unheard-of levels of loneliness and isolation...

"The results? 14 million people, a fifth of the population, live in poverty. Four million of these are more than 50 percent below the poverty line, and 1.5 million are destitute, unable to afford basic essentials. The widely respected Institute for Fiscal Studies predicts a 7% rise in child poverty between 2015 and 2022, and various sources predict child poverty rates of as high as 40%. For almost one in every two children to be poor in twenty-first century Britain is not just a disgrace, but a social calamity and an economic disaster, all rolled into one."

This is the record of those portrayed as a moderate, civilised alternative to Boris Johnson and his ilk.

This situation is set to worsen. Without a shift in social policy, Alston warns, the impact of Brexit "could well lead to significant public discontent, further division and even instability..."

The sole genuine concern of the Remain faction of the ruling class is how to ensure British imperialism's global position by safeguarding tariff-free access to European markets. No advocate of Remain wants anyone to recall that the EU has functioned for more than a decade as the engine of austerity, ruining the economies of Greece, Spain and Portugal and subjecting its workers to social devastation. A wall of silence has been erected to conceal the reality of the contemporary European political and social order. Everywhere, amid a deepening economic crisis, free trade is giving way to trade war, financial security to joblessness, prosperity to austerity, the "free movement of people" to the closing of borders and the rise of the fascist right.

A key role in preventing any intervention by the working class is played by the Labour Party under Jeremy

Corbyn. Once again Corbyn dutifully follows the dictates of the most powerful representatives of imperialism. He abandoned decades of opposition to the EU to support the 2016 Remain campaign, even as Greece's population was being subjected to the EU's scorched earth austerity program. He now presents Labour as a safe pair of hands, preserving the national interest and navigating the Brexit crisis while preventing a worsening conflict.

His is a multi-stage proposal guided solely by political expediency—a “meaningful vote” to reject Prime Minister Theresa May's deal, a Labour minority government to renegotiate Brexit to guarantee access to Europe's markets or, failing this, a second referendum including an option to remain. There is no hint of an appeal to the working class, as Corbyn and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell continue to woo the City of London—or he would be demanding an immediate general election to bring down the Tories.

Everything depends on the ability of the working class to formulate an independent political response—not to resolve the crisis facing Britain's rulers, but to take forward the struggle for socialism here and throughout the European continent.

Brexit has proved that in a globally integrated economy, it is impossible to secure economic progress or defend democratic and social rights on a national basis. However, EU membership offers no genuine alternative for working people. The EU is disintegrating, under the impact of developing national and social antagonisms that have led to an eruption of conflict between Brussels and rightist governments in Italy, Hungary and Poland that posture as opponents of EU-dictated austerity. Held together as a trade bloc in the struggle for control of global markets and resources, plans are underway for its transformation into a military alliance with its own army, led by Germany and France, and rearmament to end dependence on the US through NATO. As proved tragically twice before, the result of such escalating inter-imperialist conflicts is world war.

The progressive unification of Europe is impossible without breaking with capitalism and ending the division of the world into rival nation states. Trotsky explained in *The Third International After Lenin*, “Geographically and historically, conditions have predetermined such a close organic bond between the countries of Europe that there is no way for them to tear themselves out of it. The modern bourgeois governments of Europe are like murderers chained to a single cart.”

The working class can only fight capitalism in unity

with their brothers and sisters throughout Europe and internationally. The rule of the financial oligarchy and its governments must be replaced by a socialist Britain in a United Socialist States of Europe. This, Trotsky explained, “corresponds to the dynamics of the proletarian revolution, which does not break out simultaneously in all countries, but which passes from country to country and requires the closest bond between them, especially on the European arena, both with a view to defence against the most powerful external enemies, and with a view to economic construction.”

The adoption of this perspective would bring the most powerful social force into action—the European working class. Amid the exclusive preoccupation of the media on the minutiae and infighting over Brexit, there are numerous indications of an eruption of the class struggle across the continent. This year has seen strikes involving UK lecturers and rail workers, French rail workers, German engineers and cross-border action by Ryanair and Amazon workers. It includes mass protests such as the recent 250,000-strong demonstration in Berlin against the rise of the far right in Germany, hundreds of thousands in France protesting fuel tax hikes and protests across Italy in defence of immigrants and refugees.

The Socialist Equality Party and our European sister parties, the Parti de l'égalité socialiste (PES) in France and the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) in Germany, together with our co-thinkers in the International Committee of the Fourth International, provide the necessary programme and leadership to take forward this developing counteroffensive by the working class.



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