

The rise of the Brexit Party and how to fight it

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The toxic political climate in the UK and the confusion generated among workers by the Brexit referendum and its aftermath is such that Nigel Farage's Brexit Party is anticipated to come first in today's European election vote.

Farage is benefiting from hostility to the European Union (EU) and stoking up noxious "patriotic" nationalism and chauvinistic anti-immigrant sentiment. His party also relies on Farage's threadbare pose as an opponent of the establishment and a champion of "democracy."

His central message is that almost the entire "political elite" is betraying the result of the 2016 referendum vote to leave the EU and that Brexit will be the beginning of a new era of Britain's "self-determination."

The ability of this political witches' brew to win popular support depends above all on the fact that the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn, while proposing a convoluted scenario for a "progressive Brexit" and/or a second referendum, offers no genuine alternative articulating the interests of the broad mass of working people.

Labour has proved itself incapable of uniting a working class suffering terrible social hardship against a ruling class which, whatever its divisions over Brexit, shares an agenda of endless austerity, the destruction of democratic rights and a violent lurch towards militarism and war.

Instead Corbyn's every effort is to suppress the class struggle, while he focuses exclusively on promoting Labour to big business as a means of securing either tariff-free access to the Single European Market or reversing Brexit. This has meant political debate continues to be framed around the question for or against the EU, as opposed to the fundamental class issues that divide the UK, Europe and the entire world.

Farage et al make their election pitch with the help of saturation media coverage because the ruling elite want to portray him as the voice of the outsider and the disaffected.

Meanwhile Corbyn spent his time, for weeks, huddled in ultimately futile negotiations seeking a Brexit "compromise" with Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May. It was only yesterday that he even renewed his call for a general election—without a trace of political seriousness and long after the damage had been done.

Under these circumstances, Farage has been able to tear away Tory voters, leaving it as a rump, and to combine them with his own former constituency in the nearly defunct UK

Independence Party (UKIP). He has in the process won the backing of an overwhelmingly older layer of Labour voters in the most socially deprived areas of northern cities.

Most striking, however, is that support for the Brexit Party among the younger generation is minuscule, with the majority hostile to a regressive party harking back to a supposed "golden age" when Britain was "its own master." According to YouGov, 53 percent of over 65s support the Brexit Party compared with just 10 percent of those under 25.

Farage is intent on portraying the European elections, which will see a massive abstention, as a plebiscite on Brexit and a weapon against any move towards a second referendum. To this end, he has refused to issue any policy agenda for his new party formed only in January. Farage told the BBC he will only talk about Brexit until the vote, leaving the party based solely on support for the UK leaving the EU without a formal withdrawal agreement—to trade on World Trade Organisation terms—until new trade deals can be agreed.

Farage has also tried to distance himself from his former political vehicle after UKIP moved ever more openly to the far-right, centred on an anti-Muslim agenda. This was not without difficulties. The person he chose to front his new party until he could take over, Catherine Blaiklock, was forced to resign after her tweets were reported, such as: "Islam = submission—mostly to raping men it seems"; accusing Muslim men of "impregnating white British girls to create Muslim babies" and claiming that Muslims in the West think "Someday this will all be ours."

Her resignation was followed by that of party treasurer, Michael McGough, after he was found to have made antisemitic and homophobic social media posts. This left Farage's statement that there was "no difference between the Brexit party and UKIP in terms of policy," but "in terms of personnel, there's a vast difference" suspended in mid-air.

Farage himself made anti-migrant policies central to UKIP's agenda under his leadership. He is an open admirer of France's far-right National Rally leader Marine Le Pen and US President Donald Trump and has appeared on platforms of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). The personnel making up the front ranks of the Brexit Party are mostly former right-wing Tories like himself, including former shadow home secretary Ann Widdecombe and Annunziata Rees-Mogg, sister to arch-Brexiteer Jacob Rees-Mogg.

This has left Farage to rely on the fig-leaf provided by George Galloway, the Stalinist demagogue who played a key role in the “Left Brexit” campaign in 2016 alongside the then UKIP leader, and who tried unsuccessfully to become the party’s candidate in a forthcoming by-election in Peterborough, and several candidates from the libertarian Institute of Ideas, grouped around the web site *Spiked*.

Spiked supporters such as Claire Fox, like Galloway, are touted as the “left face” of the Brexit Party—despite having moved far to the right since the old Revolutionary Communist Party wound itself up in the aftermath of capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union. Its editor, Brendan O’Neill, joins Galloway in portraying the Brexit Party as a place where “left” and “right” can happily unite. Its rise is “wonderful to behold... This is a group of politicians and voters uniting around a clear and important cause—the defence of democracy.”

The rise of the Brexit Party is anything but “wonderful.” It is the diseased product of the cultivation of the most politically dangerous divisions in the working class that has left two right-wing capitalist factions free to fight between themselves on how best to defend the strategic interests of British imperialism.

Remain and Leave Tories have now spent close to a decade imposing an “age of austerity” on the working class.

The final report from Philip Alston, the United Nations Special rapporteur on extreme poverty, issued yesterday, states that “ideological” cuts to public services since 2010 have led to “tragic consequences.” Britain’s social safety net has been “deliberately removed and replaced with a harsh and uncaring ethos” akin to that of a 19th century workhouse and leaving the UK’s poorest living lives that are “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

The “systematic immiseration of a significant part of the British population” has left 14 million, one fifth of the population, in poverty and 1.5 million in destitution in 2017—living on less than £10 a day.

Whether within the framework of an EU trade and military bloc, as the advocates of Remain argue, or outside and in close alliance with US imperialism, austerity—the shared agenda of all capitalist parties and governments in Britain, Europe and internationally—will continue.

The whole of Europe is in the grip of savage cuts, with almost 142 million Europeans at risk of poverty based upon a poverty line of just €10,000 per year—almost a third of the population. Yet, as in the UK with Farage’s Brexit Party, at this point it is the far-right which has politically benefitted. It has done so by exploiting hostility to the pro-austerity agenda of all of Europe’s mainstream parties and the xenophobia whipped up by official anti-immigrant measures.

Whatever Farage’s denials, he has already been at the centre of the creation of two far-right parties—UKIP and its offshoot, For Britain. The Brexit Party will easily evolve along similar lines. Its rise is a peculiar expression of a general phenomenon in which the eruption of national and social antagonisms is

tearing apart Europe.

At a meeting of far-right parties in Italy, Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini, the leader of Lega, urged Farage to align his Brexit Party with a new alliance of the far-right in the European Parliament. These include France’s National Rally, Alternative for Germany, the Finns Party, the Danish People’s Party and Austria’s Freedom Party. He told the BBC, “It’s a beautiful Europe and I’m waiting for Nigel Farage to join in... We can work together, I hope.”

Farage may reject this appeal for tactical reasons, but the *Guardian* revealed yesterday that a new documentary shows him in discussion with former Trump advisor Steve Bannon on taking the leadership role in his proposed “Movement”—a largely abortive alliance of far-right parties and leaders meant to include Hungary’s Viktor Orbán and the mass murderer Rodrigo Duterte of the Phillipines. Farage responds by saying, “Conceptually I like it” and calling the planned Movement “the fightback against the globalists.”

The rise of the far-right cannot be opposed by supporting the EU, which is an instrument of big business for attacking the working class and pursuing trade war and military rearmament globally. It cannot be answered by pro-capitalist parties such as Labour in the UK. It can only be opposed by a struggle against capitalism and for socialism.

Not a turn to nationalism based on the myth of a return to a social reformist Britain, but a unified offensive by the working class across the continent for the United Socialist States of Europe.

This would create the conditions for utilising Europe’s immense natural resources and productive capacity, now squandered on making the filthy rich even richer, to meet the needs of all working people for a decent job, education, health care and a secure home.

Success in taking such a new road is made possible by the eruption of the class struggle now taking place throughout Europe and internationally against austerity—as exemplified in the rising number of strikes and determined protests such as that of France’s Yellow Vests. Its political realisation depends upon building a revolutionary socialist leadership in the working class, the Socialist Equality Party in Britain and our sister parties in France, Germany and throughout the world organised in the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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