

Britain leaves the European Union: Against nationalism, For the United Socialist States of Europe!

Statement by the Socialist Equality Party (UK)
31 January 2020

At 11pm GMT, the UK will leave the European Union (EU) after 47 years of membership. The departure comes three-and-a-half years after the 2016 referendum on EU membership that produced a narrow 52-48 percent vote in favour of leaving.

The referendum on Brexit was called by then-Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron to sideline the Eurosceptic faction of this party and placate a support base he feared would otherwise desert to the UK Independence Party (UKIP). His calculation that the backing of all three main parliamentary parties, the trade unions, the banks and financial sector, the EU states and US President Obama would result in a Remain vote backfired, producing instead a Leave vote in part animated by inchoate hostility to the “Westminster elite” and the “establishment.”

Since 2016, there have been countless efforts to either delay Brexit or reverse it. Yet Brexit is now a reality. However politically confused the popular sentiment for Brexit was, its promotion by leading factions of the ruling class is the product of the huge escalation of inter-imperialist antagonisms produced by the global crisis of the capitalist system which produced two world wars in the twentieth century.

The Remain and Leave wings of the British bourgeoisie had opposing strategies on how to respond to the inexorable drift towards trade war between the major powers. Both factions are equally reactionary. The Remain faction wanted to preserve Britain’s global position within the EU trading bloc and its massive single market. The Leave forces viewed the EU as an impediment to the UK’s pursuing a global trade and investment policy as a totally deregulated base for financial speculation, centred on a strengthened alliance with the US and directed against Germany and France in particular.

Brexit is therefore a product of global economic and social contradictions produced by capitalism. This was underscored within months of the referendum vote by the election of Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election, standing on his own nationalist “America First” agenda. Trump embraced Brexit as a weapon to encourage the breakup of an EU he denounced as a “competitor,” not an ally, and as a “cartel” run in the interests of Germany.

Brexit has confirmed Trotsky’s insistence on the impossibility of harmoniously unifying the European continent under capitalism. It is the most advanced expression of an escalating breakdown of the EU, under the pressure of mounting centrifugal forces that are intensifying conflicts not only with the US but between the European states. Moreover, the nationalist tensions expressed by Brexit and the scramble for control of global markets and resources are leading to an eruption of imperialist militarism, directed above all at Russia and China, that threatens to plunge the entire world into war.

The working class is being made to pay for trade war and military rearmament through stepped-up austerity, as the British ruling elite and its rivals seek to remain globally competitive through a relentless assault on jobs and wages and the destruction of essential social services. The real economic and social agenda of Brexit is epitomised by the Johnson government’s stated aims of “completing the Thatcher revolution” and refashioning London as “Singapore-on-the-Thames.”

This class war offensive demands a crackdown on democratic rights and civil liberties that is seeing democratic rule give way to police state methods. The government’s “Operation Yellowhammer,” involving the deployment of tens of thousands of troops and riot police in the event of a “no deal” Brexit, are in reality plans to deal with the social conflict that is the inevitable product of the continued impoverishment of working people. Legislation is already planned that will ban all-out strikes, first in the transport sector and then throughout all services and industries deemed to be “essential.” At the same time the government has added numerous peaceful protest groups and left-wing parties to its “Prevent” strategy and intends to do the same regarding antiterror legislation.

The responsibility for the grave dangers now facing the working class rests above all with Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and his cheerleaders in Britain’s pseudo-left and Stalinist tendencies.

For four years, Corbyn used his popular support as a declared opponent of austerity and imperialism to suppress the class struggle and any challenge to British imperialism. He took his

place alongside Cameron in the Remain campaign, claiming that the EU, though imperfect, could be reformed in the interests of workers. This apologia was an attempt to counter the widespread opposition to the EU produced by its imposition of devastating austerity programmes against workers in Greece, Spain, Portugal and other countries, and its “Fortress Europe” policy of brutal anti-migrant measures that has led to the deaths of thousands in the Mediterranean and the erection of razor wire fences and de facto concentration camps throughout the continent. In this, Corbyn played the same role as Syriza in Greece, which promised to oppose EU-dictated austerity but implemented worse attacks than the previous New Democracy government, and policed refugee detention camps and expulsions.

The most reactionary role of all was played by the advocates of a “Left Leave” or “Lexit,” the Socialist Workers Party, the Socialist Party and the Stalinist Communist Party. They opposed the EU based on an espousal of economic nationalism centred on the claim that, following Brexit, Corbyn would be supposedly able to implement a “British road to socialism.” This policy politically subordinated the working class to the most reactionary elements within the ruling elite who led the official Leave campaign. It found its most degraded expression when the most prominent Left Leave spokesman, George Galloway, mounted a platform alongside UKIP leader Nigel Farage and various right-wing Tories, proclaiming, “Left, right, left, right! Forward march together.”

Galloway has now established his Workers Party of Britain, which “positively embraces Britain’s withdrawal from the EU” and demands anti-immigration measures. Predicting a “patriotic surge,” he threatens that anyone on “the left” who is seen as “anti-national” and “anti-British... who cannot stomach their own flag and their own nation and its culture and tradition and history,” will themselves “be history.”

The net result of the policies of Corbyn and the pseudo-left has been to foster dangerous divisions that disarm workers who now face a bitter struggle against the entire ruling elite.

Only the Socialist Equality Party advanced a genuinely independent programme for the working class, based on a principled struggle for socialist internationalism.

The SEP called for an active boycott of the Brexit referendum in opposition to all attempts to dragoon the working class behind one or other of the reactionary camps of the bourgeoisie. Our perspective was based upon the independent political mobilisation of the working class across Europe.

Our statement said: “The SEP is irreconcilably hostile to the European Union. But our opposition is from the left, not the right.”

We explained: “The first consideration of socialists is to safeguard not only the present interests of the working class, but also its future. The biggest political danger in this situation is the mixing of class banners on the basis of the espousal of a supposedly ‘left nationalism.’”

The SEP “conceives of an active boycott not as an individual protest, but as a means of beginning the political clarification of the working class and countering the disorientation created by the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and its pseudo-left apologists... Against the national chauvinism and xenophobia promoted by both sides in the referendum campaign, the working class must advance its own internationalist programme to unify the struggles of workers throughout Europe in defence of living standards and democratic rights. The alternative for workers to the Europe of the transnational corporations is the struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe.”

The objective basis for realising this perspective is now emerging in the form of a global eruption of strikes and mass protests encompassing millions—in India, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Colombia, Chile, the United States, Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Kenya, South Africa and India, epitomised in Europe by the Yellow Vests and public sector strikes against Macron in France.

Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* newspaper stressed its hope that Brexit will prevent the spread of the class struggle across the Channel. It was “supposed to be Britain that collapsed into chaos, while our continental neighbours basked in the stability allegedly afforded by European Union membership.” Instead “civil strife in France, including the sheer level of violence and fury now being directed at its political establishment and at the police who enforce their will, is in danger of spiralling out of control.”

The *Sun* is engaged in wishful thinking. Social tensions are at breaking point. The attacks planned against workers and young people will inevitably lead to an eruption of class struggle in Britain, as a component part of what the *World Socialist Web Site* predicted would be “a decade of intensifying class struggle and world socialist revolution.”

The fate of the working class depends upon its international unification against the common class enemy, under the leadership of the International Committee of the Fourth International. Together with our sister parties, the SEP will provide the necessary leadership for the revolutionary struggles now on the agenda, forging a unified movement of the European and world working class for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact