



2019 - the Year of Brexit?

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The New Year will be a year of major political conflict in Britain ? one that could spill out onto the streets. The Brexit crisis could in addition trigger the early onset of a recession, the first signs of which are already appearing in the world economy.

A general election may come sooner rather than later if May cannot get enough Tory and Labour votes for her Brexit deal, but the Tories will do all they can to avoid one for fear of letting in Labour under Corbyn.

But it would be the height of folly for British workers to wait passively for a Corbyn government. The trade union and LP branches need to start militant campaigning now in the workplaces, the communities, the streets, to fight racism, to raise wages, to organise workers in the gig economy, to put an end to austerity and cuts and, yes, to stop Brexit.

It became clear in 2018 that the British people bought a pig in a poke on 23 June 2016, when a narrow majority, 52 percent, voted for the country to leave the European Union.

Brexit Mayhem

After two years of painful negotiations, not so much with the representatives of the European Union as between the factions within her own party, Theresa May's "Deal" faced rejection by Parliament by a big margin. En route, she had managed to lose her overall parliamentary majority and put herself at the mercy of the arch-reactionary Northern Ireland Democratic Unionists.

Their rejection of her deal came as no surprise. So, too, with ?the odd couple? who head the European Research Group, ERG, Jacob Rees Mogg and Boris Johnson. They are both on record as preferring no deal and believe that World Trade Organisation rules would be just fine. They dream of a free trade zone with their kith and kin in Canada, Australia and New Zealand (that is, the white Commonwealth) and with Donald Trump?s deregulated Garden of Eden.

Accepting the goal of no hard border with the Irish Republic meant a so-called backstop could keep Britain in the single market and therefore with ?free movement of labour?, until a frictionless customs deal could be reached. This might well mean years of ?subjection? to EU rules and court decisions but without a place on the Commission or in the European Parliament. The only quick solution would have been to keep Northern Ireland in the single market and have the EU/UK border in the Irish Sea, but this was rejected by May and Corbyn.

As the phrase goes, during this transition period Britain would be ?a rule taker but not a rule maker?. It would also have to continue to pay an agreed sum into the common funds of the Union. Worse still, no new trade deals could come into operation without the say-so of the EU. Worst of all, ending the transition period would require the agreement of the EU.

Under the terms of Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, Britain is due to leave the EU on March 29. May has promised to let the Commons vote on her deal on January 15. If, as seems likely, no deal with the EU is agreed by parliament then, or in the few weeks remaining, this will mean not just a ?hard border? in Northern Ireland, that is, customs checks and imposition of tariffs, but the same at all the British ports and airports.

All reports, public and secret, suggest the result will be chaos. It means restricting or severing relations of production

and exchange that have been in existence for nearly fifty years. It will probably produce a further slump in the value of the pound, and the planned withdrawal of many companies with trans-European production chains. It will mean job losses.

May's hope is that, like the condemned prisoner, the approach of the day of execution will "concentrate the mind wonderfully" for wavering MPs. In short, it is sheer political blackmail. She hopes that, preferably on January 15 but at least on some date before March 29, enough Tories and enough Labour MPs will break from their No position and vote for the lesser evil of her deal to save the country from disaster.

The only way to avoid all this would be to withdraw Article 50 and abandon Brexit altogether via a second referendum. Of course, this would require Labour to do a complete somersault as well but it would only mean a return to its policy before June 2016, that is, recognition that leaving the EU would be far worse than staying in and seeking to change its anti-working class institutions in united action with our sisters and brothers on the continent. That is the only progressive outcome from the present impasse. It would certainly be likely to generate a reactionary French-style gilets jaunes movement centring on immigration phobia, but UKIP and Tommy Robinson have already taken to the streets against the "Betrayal of Brexit" and are guaranteed to mobilise whatever the outcome of a parliamentary vote.

The prospect of such a development cannot be bought off either by accepting May's supposedly soft Brexit or by a "hard" crash out. The price that working people in Britain and Europe would pay for either is far too high. Brexit conditions will encourage the growth of the extreme right and foment racist outrages, not avoid or appease them. The UKIP-Robinson thugs, if they materialise, must be defeated on the streets.

Labour's dishonest line

Unfortunately, Jeremy Corbyn has been playing the same sort of double game with the Labour membership as May has with the Tories. As a not-so-secret proponent of a Labour Brexit or Lexit, in 2015 he found himself at the head of a Parliamentary Labour Party which was overwhelmingly anti-Brexit. Even more uncomfortable, the 300,000+ new members, who were overwhelmingly supportive of him as leader, were also strongly opposed to Brexit and to ending free movement.

Thus, when Cameron's referendum came, Corbyn played a feeble and unconvincing pro-Remain hand. And when the result was out, the very next day, he called for it to be implemented. "The British people have made their decision. We must respect that result", he said.

Corbyn decided to set his compass by the minority of Labour voters and members who had voted Leave. He inaccurately dubbed them "our heartland" because many were in old, former industrial towns in the Midlands and North, areas often referred to as "left behind" and regarded like the rustbelt areas of the US, which swung towards Trump in 2016. Of course, Labour should have a policy aimed at regenerating these areas; massive investment and modern industrial development under public ownership and workers' control, but it should also be absolutely clear that they were devastated not by the EU but by the policies of UK governments, beginning with Margaret Thatcher but continued under New Labour. The closure of the pits, the steel mills, the shipyards, the sale of council houses, the wholesale privatisations, the disintegration of the NHS, all these policies have "Made in Britain" stamped on them.

Corbyn's closest advisors are Andrew Murray and Seumas Milne, both former Communist Party members who stick rigidly to the "anti-Common Market" line of the Labour Left and the CP in the 1970s. Their excuse is that a Labour government would face substantially greater obstacles to implementing a radical manifesto if Britain remained in the EU. In his most recent interview he expressed it thus: "I don't want to be told by somebody else that we can't use state aid in order to be able to develop industry in this country." As if a trade deal negotiated with Donald Trump would be any different!

The three main left "parties" outside Labour, CPB, SWP and SP, join the chorus that leaving the EU is essential for a Corbyn government to carry through left wing or "socialist policies" but they have been short on suggestions on what such a strategy would mean. Indeed, there is nothing in the existing Labour programme that Brussels would oppose

anyway.

Ironically, if Britain really does cut loose from the EU it will find even bigger obstacles to a socialist programme in any free trade deal with Donald Trump's USA. The reality would be far from any Stalinist daydream of socialist autarky. It would make Britain a 'rule taker' from a USA even more thoroughly wedded to neoliberalism than Brussels is, and one determined to drive hard bargains to 'make America great again'.

The US could also flood UK markets with its cheaper goods, obliterating many jobs here. Its companies would have the competitive advantage of fewer workers' rights and lower environmental and safety standards. The US also has a huge private healthcare sector. It would undoubtedly demand 'market access' to contracts within the NHS and other public sector services, and US courts would enforce its application.

The worst consequence of the contradiction between the covert pro-Brexit views of the Corbyn leadership and the anti-Brexit views of the great majority of Labour members, both within the Corbyn left and on the Blairite right in the PLP, is that it has paralysed the Party and left it without any clear position on the most important issue in British politics for generations.

On paper, at least, Labour is committed to Keir Starmer's "six key points", which call for an exit deal on terms that are as good as the benefits of membership, clearly an impossible ultimatum that the EU could never accept. Shamefully, the "wonderful" election manifesto of 2016 added rejection of free movement. The position was further muddled by the Liverpool conference's composite resolution which demanded a general election but left the option of a second referendum "on the table". Corbyn supporters have only accepted this as clever tactics because they believe that a left Labour government could only be elected if the party holds on to its pro-Brexit minority of voters by pandering to their chauvinism. Opinion polls regularly contradict this, showing increased Labour popularity if it adopted a clear anti-Brexit, pro-referendum policy.

Change Labour's Brexit line

Michael Chessum, national organiser of Another Europe is Possible, worked on Corbyn's 2016 leadership campaign and served on Momentum's first steering committee. In a Guardian article on December 16, he correctly summarised the issue:

'Real movements need internal democracy and leaderships that respect the mandates they are given. Jeremy has fought for decades for the right of members to decide policy, and that is why many of us fought for him so hard. It is beyond me why he would now seemingly take a stance so completely at odds with both the will of members and the mandate of party conference. If a left leadership is seen to thwart the will of members, this will do the left profound damage in the long run in Labour's internal politics.'

Instead of an open and democratic debate within the party, ending in the adoption of a clear position and a campaign to win the electorate to it, the party has relied on ambiguous formulations and even contradictory statements, by the leaders, Corbyn, McDonnell and Starmer, that both pro- and anti-Brexiters could interpret in their own way.

This is little more than Blair-style triangulation. Corbyn seems to believe that the majority of his supporters have nowhere else to go either in terms of finding an alternative left leader or, in the case of a general election, an alternative party to vote for. So he feels free to court the minority of anti-Brexit Labour voters by offering them the fantasy of a "Labour Brexit". What he is avoiding like sin is letting the Party debate what position to take on Brexit and, for good measure, he is now trying to stop the electorate voting in a second referendum.

This position is not honest and open, nor is it honorable. Moreover, it is not clever either; should there be a general election, pro-Brexit Labour voters are likely to switch support to an openly Brexit party while anti-Brexit voters could move to an openly Remain party such as the Greens or the LibDems. Even quite small shifts in either direction could wipe out all chance of a Labour majority.

The only way forward for Labour now is to halt the double speak and come out as the only party that can stop Brexit. It

should expose the lie that a big trade deal with Trump's America would bring bigger economic advantages than continued membership of the EU and the idea of an "independent" UK striking out on the road to socialism under a Corbyn government for what it is, a fantasy inspired by the mirage of socialism in one country?

Above all, Brexit would be an act of immeasurable self-harm by the working class, weakening the UK workers' solidarity with the relatively strong labour movements on the continent. A serious campaign to remain in the EU in order to mobilise workers across the continent against its undemocratic institutions and its reactionary policies could help to turn the tide against the Right in all countries.

The danger of the Right

The threat of the Right is a direct result of Brexit. Since Britain is not a member of Schengen and admitted only a tiny handful of refugees from war-torn countries such as Syria, the threats of an invasion by Muslims had nothing to do with the EU's freedom of movement. Yet the Islamophobic right wing press enabled right wing Tories, UKIP and assorted fascists to piggyback the referendum for hate speech against Britain's 3.5 million Muslims.

The launch of a campaign against the "Great Brexit Betrayal" headed by fascist leader Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (a.k.a. Tommy Robinson) and UKIP leader Gerard Batten, confirms what we warned of, a conjuncture of two streams of virulent islamophobic racism. Batten has been a regular speaker from the platform of the Democratic Football Lads' Alliance "Free Tommy Robinson" protests this summer where he called Islam a "death cult," and said Britain's Muslims should be obliged to publicly renounce parts of the Qur'an, and he called for Muslim-only prisons. He has called Yaxley-Lennon a "hero" and appointed him a UKIP "consultant" on "grooming gangs", adapting an old antisemitic trope to the cause of islamophobia.

Stopping the growth of the far right means countering their narrative with a more powerful alternative of our own. This must start from opposing Brexit, but not as the Liberals do, by praising an EU that in fact has enormous anti-working class goals built into its very foundations. Instead it should make clear that many of those goals and policies were copied from the Britain of the 1980s where they were pioneered. The reactionary utopia of Brexit, needs to be combatted with a socialist alternative, a perspective of struggle which presupposes the defeat of the populist right and fascists and the unity of Europe's workers, and those beyond, to build a new world. It means setting the goal of a Socialist United States of Europe, which is not a fortress that rejects or imprisons refugees but welcomes workers from beyond its borders.

This alternative cannot start by dressing up a nationalist myth about sovereignty and "taking control" in "leftwing" clothes. The control we need to take is over our workplaces, factories, offices, shops, schools and hospitals and running them for the common good. Our alternative starts by identifying those who presently hold economic and political power in society and fighting to seize it from them.

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