

The British far left and the European referendum

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Nearly 41 years on from the last time they voted on it, Britons will go to the polls on 23 June to decide whether to remain in the European Union or to leave it. Naturally, over four decades, the background and the protagonists in this debate have changed mightily. In 1975, the Conservatives were predominantly the Party of Europe and most of the rank and file of the Labour Party were hostile to 'Europe'. So, too, were veterans of the left like Michael Foot and Ian Mikado and the up-and-coming star of the left, Tony Benn.

Britain's powerful and militant union movement was also heavily against the 'Common Market'. The socialist left, that is, the Communist Party (CPGB), the Tribune Group of Labour MPs, and left trade union leaders like Jack Jones of the TGWU and Hugh Scanlon of the AUEW, all took the same position. Anti-Europeanism was part of a smug conviction that Britain, with its 12 million trade union members and huge and militant shop stewards' movement, which, moreover, had just driven a Tory government from power, needed no lessons from Europe. In addition, at that time, Britain's undemocratic First Past The Post electoral system appeared to ensure a perspective of majority Labour governments, not of the coalitions and compromises normal on the continent. This reinforced the underlying reformist strategy of the most significant forces in the Labour movement.

Today, the situation is reversed with the Labour Party and all the major trade unions solidly for remaining in the EU. Only the much reduced Communist Party, the Socialist Workers Party, the Socialist Party and the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) have stuck to their 1975 positions and are campaigning for a 'Left Exit' or Lexit.

Before the UK joined the EEC, in 1972, the far left had generally taken the view that, in or out, workers faced the same struggle and, since the constraints put on the class struggle by capitalist Britain and a capitalist Europe were substantially identical, there was no reason to side with entry or to oppose it. However, faced with the fact of entry, negotiated by a Tory government, the 'revolutionaries' changed their tune. By the time of the 1975 referendum on whether to leave the EEC, all the major British far left groups - the International Socialists of Tony Cliff (now the SWP) the Socialist Labour League of Gerry Healy, the RSL/Militant Tendency of Ted Grant, the International Marxist Group of Tariq Ali, had performed the same somersault from abstention to anti-EEC and for the same reason; tailing the great reformist machinery of Labourism and Stalinism. For the latter, the hostile attitude of the USSR to what it regarded as the economic wing of Nato was also still a consideration.

Only two small groups, first of all Workers Fight (now the Alliance for Workers Liberty) and then the founders of the current represented today by the British section of the League for the Fifth International (at that time, the Left Faction of the International Socialists) held to the abstentionist position.

Why abstain in 1975? Because the referendum was explicitly on the terms negotiated by Wilson (and Heath, since they had not been substantially changed) and the process of economic integration had not

begun. Now, after forty years of development, leaving would sever the relations of production and exchange, including the free movement of labour, thrusting the UK back into an earlier stage of its development. In short, it would be a reactionary step, testified to by the fact that a Brexit vote will be used as a mandate for further massive restrictions on immigration.

Unions jump ship

In addition, since 1975, the British ruling class has become (with its US Big Brother) the pioneer and practitioner of neoliberalism, privatisation and austerity. In 1975, the conditions, in or out, would indeed have been roughly identical in terms of a favourable arena of class struggle. Today, that arena is far broader and provides access to more powerful allies; witness the 2016 movement against the French Socialist Party government's attempt at labour law reforms. Even if passed in their entirety, these would amount to only the mildest version of the conditions existing in Britain. After the British labour movement's strategic defeats in the 1980s, such a mass movement of political strikes is virtually unthinkable to the leaders of the trade unions.

It was the defeats of the early and mid-1980, the car workers, the steelworkers, the miners, the print workers, the dockers and others, that made Europe seem less a 'bosses' club' that would halt the forward march of British Labour to 'socialism' and more a place where pre-Thatcherite conditions still flourished and might even be a source of returning them to Britain. In 1983, Labour's general election manifesto *New Hope For Britain* still committed it to 'end the powers of the Community in the UK' and abrogate the Treaty of Accession - thus breaking all of our formal links with the Community.¹ But, by the 1987 election, Labour's manifesto, drafted by the Neil Kinnock leadership, had dumped the anti-Common Market policy along with other 'shibboleths' of the left. It stated, 'Labour's aim is to work constructively with our European partners to promote economic expansion and combat unemployment.'

Then came the speech of the President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, to the Trades Union Congress, in Bournemouth, on 8 September 1988 where he pledged:

'The establishment of a platform of guaranteed social rights, containing general principles, such as every worker's right to be covered by a collective agreement, and more specific measures concerning, for example, the status of temporary work' and 'a Statute for European Companies, which would include the participation of workers or their representatives.' The TUC delegates responded with a standing ovation and serenaded him with a rendition of 'Frère Jacques'.²

Thatcher's response was to move in the opposite direction. Her hymn to neoliberalism in her famous Bruges speech a few days later, on 20 September 1988 made it clear. "We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level, with a European super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels."

In 1990, following a call by Delors for moves towards a 'federal Europe', Thatcher's reaction was a belligerent 'No! No! No!' The Sun echoed this in its own inimitable style with its front page headline, 'Up Yours Delors' and urged its readers, 'to tell the French Fool where to stick his ECU'.

The next two decades saw the European Commission try to implement a raft of social directives, not out of benevolence to Europe's workers but as part of the creation of a level playing field for competition between Europe's bosses and to ease the way, and then underpin the common European currency that became the Euro. These included the Working Time Directive, adopted in 1993 over furious British Tory protests. It ensures workers a maximum working week of 48 hours and a rest of at least 11 hours in any 24 hours and a whole 24-hour break every week. It grants the right to four weeks paid holiday each year and

restricts excessive night work. The Pregnant Workers Directive (1992, 1996) granted 14 weeks parental leave, unpaid, but with the right to return to the job.

More recently, the Temporary Agency Workers Directive (2008) laid down similar conditions for precarious workers as those directly employed but, thanks to British pressure, this only applies if they are in the same job for 12 months. This created a serious loophole that resulted in 40 per cent of such workers not being covered by the Directive because employers move them on just before the 12 months are up.

Britain's bosses the Tories and New Labour resisted all these moves, watering them down where possible and, where not, gaining an opt-out from their application in Britain. Their attitude was summed up by David Cameron at a Davos meeting of the European Economic Forum, 'In the name of social protection, the EU has promoted unnecessary measures that impose burdens on businesses and governments and can destroy jobs. The Agency Workers Directive, the Pregnant Workers Directive, The Working Time Directive; the list goes on and on.'³

Labour, under Blair, Brown and Miliband, continued to be pro-EU but they also continued the policy of seeking exemptions for Britain's bosses if they exerted serious pressure. Thus, Labour's support for the EU was far from critical. Jeremy Corbyn, a veteran Labour left, who for a long while stuck to the line of seeking exit from the EU, has now adopted a more critical support position for staying in. In an interview with the Independent on Sunday, he now said he was 'proud' to support Labour's Britain In Europe campaign but, on Radio 4, he also spelled out his criticism:

'We are determined to build alliances across Europe for progressive reform to make the EU work for working people. Labour backs Britain's continued EU membership as the best framework for trade and co-operation in 21st-century Europe, along with defence of the European convention on human rights. But we need to make EU decision-making more accountable to its people, put jobs and growth at the heart of European policy, strengthen workers' rights in a real social Europe, and end the pressure to privatise services.'⁴

He is right to abandon the Brexit perspective of the old Labour left without falling for the pro-EU position of the Labour right. He is right that leaving the EU would be of no benefit to workers in Britain or the rest of Europe. He is right, too, that the EU needs a radical social transformation. However, to imagine that the institutions of the EU are capable of being reformed into the organisations the working class needs to rationally and democratically plan the optimum development of Europe's economy, to guarantee workers' rights or to reverse the catastrophic devastation of the environment, would be as utopian as any national reformist programme.

To address these challenges requires revolutionary change. This applies both to the goal, a socialist, not just a 'social' Europe, and to the means that the workers across the continent must use to break the political power of the bankers and industrialists.

So, how does the would-be revolutionary left measure up to this challenge? The two largest organisations SWP and SP, have stuck like limpets to the position they adopted over 40 years ago. The fact that the Labour movement, both the TUC and the Labour Party, have long abandoned exit is a cause for sorrow but not for rethinking. After all, they can rightly say that the trade union officialdom look to Europe to save them against Westminster because they are unwilling to lead a fight for their members' rights, jobs, services.

The Socialist Workers Party

The SWP launched its campaign for Brexit with a long article by Alex Callinicos, The internationalist case against the European Union, and a pamphlet by Joseph Choonara, The EU: a left case for exit. The central problem with their position is that, while the authors describe all the capitalist and imperialist features of the EU accurately enough, they almost completely ignore the fact that all of their objections apply at least equally to the UK itself. Indeed, it was Thatcher's Britain that pioneered policies such as privatisation and the erosion of social housing and state education long before the EU took them up. At that time, EU institutions were still promoting the Social Charter. Britain under Thatcher and Major exerted maximum pressure to keep that Charter minimal, and even then opted out of it.

Yes, the EU, especially since the Great Recession of 2008-09, has, step-by-step, slimmed down its 'social' promises; but it is only coming into line with Britain. Nonetheless, because of the greater strength, trade union rights and in many cases the greater militancy, of the continental labour movement, social rights have not yet been as thoroughly eroded elsewhere in the EU as they have in Britain. Why else should our bosses keep complaining about them, and why else does the Vote Leave campaign place their abolition high on its list of goals?

Moreover, even under existing conditions, the EU and its institutions are far from the only enforcers of international capital's priorities. As institutions, the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO all serve that same purpose, and that is to say nothing of the over-riding power of the major financial institutions and corporations, all of which will continue to safeguard capital whether the UK stays or leaves the EU. In what way, then, would Brexit improve the conditions of struggle for the working class? For internationalists, that is the only criterion by which to judge the options, Remain or Leave?

Both Callinicos and Choonara admit that, while there is a danger that the Brexit campaign will spread national chauvinism and racism against migrants, they see no alternative to feeding this, by denouncing the EU as 'a capitalist project from the start, strongly backed by US imperialism and developing its own problematic version of neoliberal imperialism. The obvious conclusion is to reject the EU. Yes supporters [meaning Remain - ed] must either refute this analysis or abandon their position.'

Perhaps the quickest refutation is to point out that precisely the same points could be made of the UK 'it was a project of the English and Scottish capitalists from the start, it survived as a world power courtesy of US support and, together with the US ruling class, it virtually invented neoliberalism. And no doubt we all 'reject' it. That does not advance the argument one inch because the issue is not 'acceptance or rejection' of capitalist states, it is about the relative advantages for class struggle at home and abroad of remaining within the EU or leaving it.

Callinicos rests his case for a British breakaway on the unevenness of the class struggle across Europe, insisting that the EU is 'best understood as a dysfunctional would-be imperialist power' doomed to break apart. He continues with a quote from a 1971 article by former Socialist Worker editor Chris Harman saying that, 'We face a long period of hard bargaining between rival, national capitalisms, in which national ideologies will remain of key importance to the ruling classes.'

And what does this 'hard bargaining... in which national ideologies will remain of key importance' really mean? It would mean the tendency of each workers' movement in Europe to line up behind the 'hard bargaining' factions of its own ruling class. We can already see the first glimmers of this 'hard bargaining' and the 'key importance of national ideologies' in the razor wire fences thrown up across the Balkans and Eastern Europe, and the horrible scenes in the Calais 'Jungle'.

We can see it in the parties and movements that want to break up the EU and restore borders in mainland Europe, virulently right wing, hating migrants and refugees, wanting to tear up social gains made in the

past. In Britain, exit would start a series of conflicts over who gets what during the two years of negotiation to actually disentangle the UK from the EU. All the everyday anti-worker effects of capitalism during the next recession will be blamed on 'the Europeans' or 'the Germans' by the tabloid press.

A victorious Brexit camp around Johnson and Farage would claim they had a mandate to bar workers from eastern and southern Europe from coming to Britain and to tear up all the 'restrictions' on business previously guaranteed by EU law. In short, it will enable the victors to launch a carnival of reaction on immigration and workers' rights. Clearly this will be a setback for workers in the UK and in mainland Europe. Callinicos also blithely accepts Harman's conclusion that, 'political and social struggles will by and large remain nationally based', going on to say:

'Strategically the problem is that since the 1980s, but more especially as a result of the eurozone crisis, a Europe-wide neoliberal regime is being constructed. Breaking that is most likely to happen at national level. To make successful resistance dependent on a coordinated movement at the EU level is to postpone that resistance indefinitely. The process of uneven and combined development implies that struggles are most likely to succeed at national level but can then be generalised. Dialectically, then, for internationalism to advance there have to be breakthroughs at the national level.'

In fact, there is nothing dialectical about this. Callinicos' argument relies first of all on the suggestion that his opponents 'make successful resistance dependent on a coordinated movement at the EU level' as if anybody thought a continent-wide movement would have to spring into existence simultaneously and, presumably, spontaneously, before anything could be achieved in particular countries. On the other hand, he glibly asserts that success at the national level "can then be generalised".

Of course, struggles against austerity may start in one country before others, just as they may start within one country in one region or city before others, the question before us is whether they can then be spread more easily to other countries if those countries are all within the same legal and economic framework, or if they have voted to separate from such a framework.

Without realising it, Callinicos offers a strategic recipe for class struggle 'in one country' and his argumentation is, at the very least, a dangerous accommodation to nationalist ideology and the implied assumption that British workers will be better able to advance their interests in an 'independent' UK than in the EU. History indicates otherwise. Nearly all the high points of class struggle in the last century (1917-21, the mid-1930s, the late 1960s and early 1970s) saw an international cross-fertilisation of ideas and methods of struggle. True, Britain's great class struggles (1926, 1984-85) took place in isolation, but they also led to great defeats.

Callinicos cites Greece's defiance of the Troika in 2012-15, which he claims was necessarily tied to leaving the EU. This wilfully confuses the need for a left anti-austerity government like Syriza's to stop paying the state debt and to stop making cuts, with a 'voluntary' negotiated exit. Certainly, the Syriza government should have defied the Troika but such defiance should have gone alongside active opposition to Greece's expulsion from the EU or the Eurozone, something that would effectively have placed Greece under an economic blockade. 'Grexit' by contrast, would have shifted the political responsibility for this blockade away from the EU's rulers.

A focus on ending austerity, not just in Greece but right across the EU, and an appeal for solidarity from Europe's workers could have put the Greek labour movement at the head of a continent-wide movement of resistance. The slogans for this international solidarity should have included a demand to make the bankers pay for the crisis, enforced by coordinated and escalating workers' action, where the example set by the more powerful and militant labour movements could quickly have spread to the weaker ones.

Callinicos points to the EU's torture of the Greek people as proof of its imperialist character. Again true, but the real question remains: what about the states that dominate the EU? It was their banks, bondholders and ratings agencies that trapped Greece in the toils of an unpayable debt. Would these exploiters' domination over southern Europe be less imperialist if the EU did not exist? They existed before it and will still exist after it. Likewise, would neoliberalism be qualitatively weaker without the EU?

The actions of the USA, the transnational institutions and the global financial markets do not suggest that leaving the EU would improve by one iota the real independence of existing national states, or improve the conditions for class struggle within them.

What 'Brexit' would do though is to reduce the objective basis (a linked up economy, reduced state borders and a common legal framework) for a united struggle of Europe's workers, just as Fortress Europe's external borders obstruct solidarity with the workers of the world. This should be our starting point. A 'Europe-wide neoliberal regime' demands a Europe-wide movement of resistance to it, and not a retreat behind national borders that breaks up the opportunities for this resistance.

The Socialist Party

The Socialist Party of England and Wales (British section of the Committee for a Workers International) announced its slogans early, immediately after Cameron announced the insignificant results of his farcical re-negotiation.

'Our campaign will say, 'No to racism, open the borders, leave the EU', and 'Yes to workers' unity everywhere, solidarity against neoliberalism and capitalism, leave the EU'. It will also say 'No to Ukip and TTIP and the other neoliberal treaties, fight the bosses, leave the EU' and 'Yes to real action over climate change, no trust in the bosses' solutions, leave the EU'.

Much of the Socialist Party's argumentation for backing Brexit is identical to the SWP's, that is, listing all the neoliberal policies and actions of the EU whilst passing over in the most perfunctory way the fact that these policies have been even more savagely pursued by the British ruling class for considerably longer than the European Commission or the European Central Bank – indeed since long before the euro existed.

To this they add the claim that progressive reforms centred on renationalisation and public spending on services would be 'impossible within the EU' whilst ignoring the fact that they would be equally impossible within Britain without a huge class struggle against Britain's bosses and their parties, plus the judges, the police chiefs and the army top brass. In fact, EU law does allow member states both to nationalise and to privatise industries. The Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, Article 345 states 'The Treaties shall in no way prejudice the rules in Member States (MS) governing the system of property ownership.'

Of course, the Commission and the other member states would do all in their power to obstruct this, but so, too, would all the institutions of an 'independent' British capitalism and so, too, would all the international structures of global capitalism (the IMF, WTO, etc.).

What the SP, like their fellow Lexiteers pass over is the prospect of a battle across Europe for pro-working class policies to be adopted by the EU, at the same time fighting for their implementation by every member state, no matter what the current Commission, ECB or Council of Ministers says. We are presently witnessing the militancy of French and Belgian workers and their willingness to take industrial action to defend their rights. We have seen many such struggles by trade unions and youth over the last two decades; 1995, 2003, 2005 and 2010. Why should we join the most reactionary sections of our ruling class, backed by the arch-reactionary small business owners, and racist populist parties (similar forces on

the continent) to re-erect borders that make unity with those fighting against them more difficult?

The Socialist Party, however, go further than the SWP in adapting to chauvinist and nationalist moods present in sections of the working class. This adaptation began seven years ago when the Great Recession was just hitting. The strike by 800 construction workers at the Lindsey Oil Refinery (LOR) in February, 2009, was a strike against the employment of some 300 Italian and Portuguese workers. This was starkly visible to TV audiences in footage of pickets and mass meetings with workers holding placards, produced by Unite-Amicus, their union, which read: 'British Jobs for British Workers?' and 'British Workers First?.'

The Socialist Party, which had a member on the LOR strike committee, hailed the outcome as a major victory for workers. They tried systematically to cover up the chauvinist character of the strike and its outcome, the sacking of workers for being 'foreign?'. To their credit, the great majority of the trade unions and the British left condemned this action and Amicus-Unite and the Socialist Party's attitude to it.

Undaunted, the SP accused them of being middle class because they wanted strikes to be 'pure?' or 'perfect?'. Perhaps they should have amended the slogan 'Workers of the World Unite?' with the addition 'Unless You Come Here and Take Our Jobs?.'

The SP smartly moved on to create a bloc to stand for the then upcoming European Parliament elections with the Communist Party (CPB) and the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) under its redoubtable general secretary Bob Crow, called No2EU -Yes to Democracy. In the 2009 European elections it fielded 69 candidates nationwide and received one per cent of the poll, 153,236 votes, to be precise, and finished behind former NUM leader Arthur Scargill's personal fiefdom, the Socialist Labour Party. In the May 2014 Euro-election, No2EU, now with 'Yes to Workers' Rights?' replacing 'Yes to Democracy?', stood 46 candidates and scored the even more derisory 0.3 per cent, 31,157 votes.

Perhaps the failure of No2EU is the reason why the Socialist Party has relied on its election united front, the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) to do battle in the Euro-referendum. TUSC includes, as well as the SP, the SWP and the RMT. Alex Gordon of the RMT argues:

'Imperialist, supranational bodies such as the EU, seek to roll back democratic advances achieved in previous centuries? nothing less than to undo the results of the French and American revolutions. It repudiates the historical significance of the development of modern independent nations. Progressive forces must respond to this threat by defending and restoring national democracy. Ultimately, national independence is required for democracy to flourish.'⁸

And Britain on the morrow of a Brexit vote will perchance not be imperialist? Will the gains of the French and American revolutions (republics!) be safer here than across the Channel? Interestingly, too, Alex has evidently retreated from socialism only being possible in one country to democracy in one country as the only possibility.

Though the Socialist Party never go that far, they play a dangerous game with one of the favourite arguments of the right; that freedom of movement for workers within the EU is a mechanism for the bosses to import cheap labour, robbing British workers of their jobs or at least exerting downwards pressure on their wages. In doing so they come up with the idea that no workers would willingly leave their homeland except if conditions there were intolerable and that these workers will work for peanuts.

'The alleged benefits of the 'free movement of labour' are in reality a device for the bosses to exploit a vast pool of cheap labour, which can then be used to cut overall wage levels and living standards. In

general, no worker flees his or her homeland through choice, but only if the conditions of their lives become unbearable.⁹

This view of the natural rootedness of workers in their own country, ignoring the historically progressive effects of workers moving from one country to another in creating an international proletarian class throughout the entire history of capitalism, is bizarrely expressed by Peter Taaffe in his remarks on Polish migrant workers.

He claims that the Polish Prime Minister, [then Ewa Kopacz] is only too happy to continue to 'export' her problems, encouraging poverty-stricken workers to flee the country. If they were forced to stay, she and the Polish capitalists would be confronted by a massive rebellion of Polish workers, which is coming in any case. At the same time, if the workers' movement was taking on and defeating the bosses across Europe, many workers would choose to return to the country they were forced to move from by mass impoverishment and unemployment.⁹

This outburst provoked the SP's TUSC allies, the SWP, to protest at this as a concession to British nationalism, which it is. But it is a true and legitimate child of the whole No2EU approach.

Socialist Appeal and abstention

But what about the SP's erstwhile comrades in Socialist Appeal, the British section of the International Marxist Tendency? After a long silence on the question, it has finally issued a statement calling for abstention. It uses many of the arguments of the Left Exit supporters as far as the European Union is concerned and likewise the arguments we have raised against believing an independent or sovereign Britain is a better starting point. But its conclusion is as follows:

Neither side have anything to offer the working class, other than asking them to pay for the crisis of capitalism. In or out, on a capitalist basis, workers face a growing squeeze and falling living standards.¹⁰

Replying to Jeremy Corbyn they state that he,

hopes that the EU can be reformed from within. But a leopard cannot change its spots. It is brutally oppressing the workers of Europe. You cannot 'reform' the interests of billionaire gangsters. It is the laws of capitalism that dictate the policies of European governments - in Brussels, Berlin, and Britain.⁹

Now, this an excellent argument for revolution, not reform, as a strategy for socialism, but it is useless as an argument to prove that we have no side to take when it comes to deciding whether borders are raised, markets severed and rights to move in search of jobs abrogated. As for fighting for concrete reforms of the EU, for example, to stop the Troika inflicting cruel austerity on Greece, what is true at the level of a national state is just as true within a rather weak confederation of states. Let's remember how Rosa Luxemburg starts Reform and Revolution:

Can the Social-Democracy be against reforms? Can we counterpose the social revolution, the transformation of the existing order, our final goal, to social reforms? Certainly not. The daily struggle for reforms, for the amelioration of the condition of the workers within the framework of the existing social order, and for democratic institutions, offers to the Social-Democracy an indissoluble tie. The struggle for reforms is its means; the social revolution, its aim.¹¹

Obviously, Socialist Appeal would not dream of applying the method of counterposing reforms to revolution at a national level; why do so at an international level? We share the goal of a Socialist United States of Europe, so why not do what we can in this referendum to reject a greater fragmentation of the continent?

Our perspective should be to unite our forces in a series of interlinked struggles over wages and pensions, workers' rights, democratic rights, developing a series of transitional demands to arrive at a struggle for socialist revolutions across the entire continent.

The Socialist Appeal statement ends with a rhetorical flourish:

?We firmly reject this whole referendum. The labour movement should have an independent class position: No to the bosses? EU! No to austerity Britain! Fight for a Socialist Britain as part of a Socialist United States of Europe!

?The labour movement leaders should shout the truth from the rooftops: a plague on both your houses?.

Obviously, judged by their leaders' intentions there would be nothing to choose between the EU and the UK. Agreed, socialists have nothing to identify with in either formation. But the real issue is not whether the EU is ?better? than UK plc. It is whether the class struggle is better waged in a broader arena with a much bigger working class as comrades in arms, including those who choose to come and work in Britain, or in a smaller one.

Here it has to be observed that the words ?migrants,? ?refugees?, ?borders?, ?racism?, ?nationalism? do not even appear in the statement by the Socialist Appeal editorial board. To fail to address the issue that anti-immigrant racism represents is frankly incredible. So, too, is not addressing the effect that re-raising borders will have in inflaming national antagonisms. Both will weaken us against our rulers. To talk about internationalism only in the most abstract terms is little better than the position of the Left Exit camp.

Would it really be a matter of indifference to us if the other states were also to follow Britain?s example, that the EU fragments into fractious rival states, raising their borders and expelling refugees and workers from each other?s countries? Rather our goal should be to fight as an integral part of the continent?s working class with the prize of a much bigger means of production over which to establish workers' control and begin to plan the construction of socialism.

The alternative

The crash of 2007-08 and the long recession saw budget austerity used to attack the gains workers had made right across the continent. But European workers did not meet these attacks with passivity; resistance was strong in France, Italy, Germany, and Spain and most so in Greece. Thus, whilst the European Union is the Europe of Capital it is also the continent, and the major imperialist power bloc, with the strongest and most militant workers' movement. It is a major arena of class struggle and one where the balance of forces is more advantageous to the working class than in an isolated Britain.

Active solidarity between the workers of all Europe?s states is the only means by which we can achieve a continent without austerity, racism, exploitation and war. By spreading struggles, like those in France and Greece, beyond national borders into a Europe-wide revolution we can do this. That is why socialists in Britain should vote Yes to staying in the EU but unite with workers across the continent to fight for a Socialist United States of Europe.

We are for opening the borders of Europe to migrants and refugees fleeing poverty, persecution and war. We are for their right to full citizenship and equal access to social security, healthcare and education. We are for the release of all detainees and an end to the persecution of ?illegals?.

We are against all EU policies of austerity and privatisation which dismantle the welfare state, weaken labour protection, human and trade union rights, and that promote environmental degradation. We are thus for the total tearing up of the Fiscal Compact which pressures member states to impose balanced budgets

and austerity.

We are against the undemocratic institutions of the EU: the Council, Commission, Central Bank, reflected in the near-powerlessness of parliament. We are for their replacement by elected bodies under the control of the democratic organisations of the working people of the continent.

We are for elections by proportional representation with no percentage threshold, by all people resident in Europe over the age of 16, of a Constituent Assembly to establish the legal basis of the Union.

We are for a charter of democratic and social rights, including the rights to assembly, free speech, equal access to, and democratic control of the mass media, women's rights (equal pay, control of fertility, socialisation of childcare and housework), workers' rights (to strike, to join a trade union, etc.).

We are for a planned management of the natural environment, including the planned elimination of the use of fossil fuels and nuclear power, to combat climate change caused by capitalism and to overcome the hypertrophy of urban centres and rural depopulation due to lack of infrastructure and resources.

We are for the expropriation of private property in all the large-scale means of production, distribution, communications and banking under workers' control and management.

We are for the immediate dissolution of Nato and the disbanding of the standing armies of the various states, replacing them with a militia of workers and ordinary citizens.

We are for the right of all states, whose peoples have freely and democratically chosen to do so, to join or to leave the European Union.

Finally, through all these struggles we raise the need for a Socialist United States of Europe based on the common ownership of the means of production and exchange, of universal free provision of housing, welfare, education, healthcare and care of the young, the old, the disabled and the sick.

Conclusion

The arguments of the left for exit from the EU are pitifully short-sighted. Socialist Worker for example tells us that:

?The EU is also facing a crisis - Britain leaving could begin to break it up. That can strengthen workers fighting the Tories here and those in Greece fighting austerity.?12

It is nonsense to suggest the fighting capacity of any working class in Europe would be improved by breaking the EU into separate national capitalist states. The productive forces of capitalism, including labour, have long outgrown the borders of Europe's individual states.

Can anyone doubt that with Johnson or Cameron negotiating an exit, immigration will become even more of a reactionary football to set workers in one country against those in another in the name of a fictional national sovereignty? Can anyone doubt too that life will get harder for ?foreign? workers in Britain and British workers abroad?

For all the death and danger it entails it is already easier to get into Fortress Europe than it is to get into Fortress Britain ? even after the cruel and cynical deal done by the EU with Turkey's elected dictator Erdo?an, or the one being negotiated with the shaky government in Libya.

Blocking the free movement of labour, reimposing border controls and customs barriers, and severing ties

of economic and cultural exchange would make international solidarity more difficult for the working classes of these states. Overall, it would only foster economic decline and increase friction between states. Inevitably, this would promote even more reactionary nationalism everywhere.

If the Tory Brexit faction take over the party-and the government-they will clamp down on immigration as their number one task. Their next task will be to tear up the EU 'red tape' that protects jobs, reasonable hours of work, holiday and parental leave. Human rights and environmental regulations will be sacrificed on the altar of 'our' parliament's sovereignty. And as for austerity - in Ronald Reagan's immortal words 'you ain't seen nothing yet' - caused by the economic dislocation of extricating the UK from the EU treaties and negotiating new international trade deals will be used to encourage workers to tighten their belts for the sake of the nation.

For these reasons, the Lexiteers' claim that a win for Brexit means 'Corbyn's turn next' should be met with the derision it deserves.

If Remain wins, on the other hand, the European Union remains exactly as it was-in deep crisis, alienating more and more of its citizens by its policies of austerity and social destruction, a block of imperialist powers causing mayhem in the Middle East and Africa and fostering racism at home. The European left has not made any serious steps so far to coordinate a continent wide resistance. The rise of right wing racist populism and behind them fascist groups, like Jobbik or Golden Dawn, are our punishment for this nationally blinkered state of affairs.

What we need is neither simply a trade union movement, nor a social movement of youth like the Indignados, Occupy or Nuit Debout, as long as that limits itself to protests. We need a political class movement to drive the perpetrators of austerity from power and install governments that will start to solve the crisis caused by capitalism - at the expense of the capitalist class.

If we coordinate our actions with others across Europe, we can carry a message of revolutionary hope - of a transformed Europe of social justice, indeed a socialist Europe. This will be a major blow against the reactionary forces of the racist populists and fascists that have made alarming advances in France, Hungary, Poland and elsewhere.

Recent experience in Greece, perhaps soon to be repeated in Spain, shows that merely electing governments pledged to abandon austerity is insufficient to defeat the huge international forces of finance capital. If the working class and the youth are not organised and mobilised to enforce an anticapitalist response to the attacks of the central banks and stock exchanges, the bond markets and the IMF, governments, whatever their electoral mandate, will capitulate or be overthrown.

We urgently need to plan Europe-wide resistance, as we face the likely return of economic crisis and the rise of a right that would divide us into rival 'independent' states - adopting 'beggar your neighbour' policies once again.

Therefore we issue an urgent appeal for the organisations of the left, the militant trade unions, all those who are fighting austerity and racism to create a Europe-wide movement in which a common strategy for action can be hammered out in democratic debate and discussion and then taken back into the movements of every country. And quickly too - the time to act is now.

Notes

[1] <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:MkXR7iYrhYsJ:www.po...> [1]

[2] The Political Economy of European Social Democracy: A Critical Realist Approach. p.102, Bailey, D., London, 2009

[3] <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-davos-speech> [2]

[4] <http://labourmovement.eu/2016/01/jeremy-corbyn-reiterates-labours-suppor...> [3]

[5] <http://isj.org.uk/the-internationalist-case-against-the-european-union/> [4]

[6] ?Cameron?s EU renegotiation charade? The Socialist, 10 February 2016;

<http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/issue/888/22187/10-02-2016/camerons-eu-...> [5]

[7] <http://www.cesruc.org/uploads/soft/130306/1-130306141501.pdf> [6]

[8] <http://communist-party.org.uk/component/content/article.html?id=808:rail...> [7]

[9] <http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/articles/20815> [8]

[10] <http://www.socialist.net/no-the-bosses-eu-no-to-austerity-britain-for-a-...> [9]

[11] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1900/reform-revolution/intro.htm> [10]

[12] <https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/42232/Fight+to+exit+left+after+vote+on...> [11]

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/british-far-left-and-european-referendum>

Links:

[1]

<http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:MkXR7iYrhYsJ:www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/man/lab83.htm>

[2] <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-davos-speech>

[3] <http://labourmovement.eu/2016/01/jeremy-corbyn-reiterates-labours-support-for-eu-membership/>

[4] <http://isj.org.uk/the-internationalist-case-against-the-european-union/>

[5] <http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/issue/888/22187/10-02-2016/camerons-eu-renegotiation-charade>

[6] <http://www.cesruc.org/uploads/soft/130306/1-130306141501.pdf>

[7] <http://communist-party.org.uk/component/content/article.html?id=808:rail-union-president-gives-marx-oration>

[8] <http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/articles/20815>

[9] <http://www.socialist.net/no-the-bosses-eu-no-to-austerity-britain-for-a-socialist-united-states-of-europe.htm>

[10] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1900/reform-revolution/intro.htm>

[11] <https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/42232/Fight+to+exit+left+after+vote+on+EU+is+called>