

Britain after Brexit and the Rise of Racism - “We need mass struggle to rebuild class organisation”

Tuesday 5 July 2016, by [FAULKNER Neil](#) (Date first published: 1 July 2016).

Neil Faulkner writes: Parts of the Left are in denial about the Brexit vote. Many socialists campaigned for Leave on the basis that the EU is controlled by bankers and bureaucrats, that it is hard-wired for austerity, privatisation, and financialisation, and that a crisis for this mega-project of the political and corporate elite would be the Left’s opportunity. We now know this was a mistake. It is incumbent upon us to face that reality.

The EU Referendum was not a right/left contest. It was not an argument between capitalism and socialism, between the 1% and the working class. It was essentially a Tory split that pitted a soft right against a hard right. The Brexiters employed two main arguments.

The first was an anti-state argument. ‘We need to take back control’ was the refrain. This control, we were told, was in the hands of EU bureaucrats. Popular hatred of the political and corporate elite was thus channelled against one section of it (the Euro elite) by another section of it (the Tory Right).

The second argument was an anti-immigrant argument. In this case, popular discontent arising from the growing poverty at the base of society was directed against other sections of the working class. The explicit argument was that immigrants from the EU were the problem. The implicit argument – as always in racist discourse – was that anybody ‘not like us’ was the problem. Thus, the blowback from Brexit is affecting British Muslims every bit as much as Polish migrant workers.

Despite this lesson in the school of hard historical realities, sections of the Left are still in denial. What I keep hearing goes something like this:

Not everyone who voted Leave is racist. People voted Leave for many different reasons. There were good reasons for voting Leave. It was really a class vote against the elite. The Right hijacked the campaign, tarnished it with racism, and the liberal media have been peddling this in a very patronising way. Remain was a big-business campaign that offered people nothing. The anti-Brexiters are simply cheerleaders for the EU.

This view is underpinned by breakdowns of voting statistics designed to show the Remain vote as middle class, the Leave vote as working class. Try, for example, Charlie Kimber’s article ‘Brexit vote was a revolt against the rich’ on the SWP website, or Alastair Stephens’ piece ‘This vote was about far more than immigration’ on the Counterfire website.

The argument misses the mark at every point. No-one says that every Leave voter is racist. No-one denies that the Leave campaign drew upon deep pools of misery and despair. No-one doubts that many people voted Leave because they are poor and powerless. No-one claims that the Remain campaign represented the interests of the working class.

As for the voting statistics, the use of these in this way amounts to an abandonment of Marxist analysis in favour of bourgeois sociology. Marxism understands the class struggle as something contradictory and dynamic, not a matter of static categories.

But even at the level of psephology – as the pseudo-science of voting behaviour is known – the Lexis analysis seems deeply flawed. Union membership is much higher among skilled public-sector workers than among unskilled private-sector workers; and the former seem far more likely to have voted Remain. There is some evidence, too, that up to two-thirds of Labour voters supported Remain. And, of course, there is clear evidence that young people voted overwhelmingly for Remain.

Let us revert to Marxist categories. What sort of socialist strategy is it that orients on the more backward, unorganised sections of the class? What sort of strategy for radical change does not foreground the young, the unionised workers, and the Labour voters?

The real issue is this. The discontent at the base of society has been organised and mobilised by the Right, not the Left, and the whole of British politics has, in consequence, been shifted sharply to the right. Racism has become mainstream, legitimised in a way that has not been the case since at least the 1960s. This, furthermore, is a global phenomenon. The Brexit campaign was the local franchise of a worldwide syndicate that includes Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, and Viktor Orban.

It may be worth reminding ourselves of how racism works. It is endemic in class societies where people are forced to compete for jobs, homes, services, and so on. It reflects the fragmentation of the working class along racial, national, ethnic, and religious lines. It is a device which can be used by the ruling class to divide working people and redirect anger against the system into attacks on the oppressed.

Historically, upsurges of racism have often occurred when the system is in crisis, discontent is building, and established elites are discredited. The historical function of racism is then twofold: a) to undermine solidarity and unity in struggle; and b) to bind workers politically to ruling-class factions. That is, racism functions to frustrate collective action and reconfigure the relationship between workers and rulers. It is an alternative to the working class acting for itself and becoming an independent agent of self-emancipation.

This is not new. It is part of the ABC of Marxist theory and practice. But the trick is always to apply theory in concrete circumstances. Right now, this means two things.

First, we have to recognise the scale of the racist tide and the danger represented by the UKIP/Tory Right. This is not fascism, but nor is it traditional conservatism; we are seeing a qualitative shift to a harder form of racist populism in the context of a general crisis of the neoliberal order and the relative decline of Western capitalism.

Socialists should not kid themselves that the danger is not serious until we have Brownshirts on the streets. Classical Fascism certainly took this form: it required paramilitaries to physically destroy mass working-class organisation. The labour movement today, by contrast, is hollowed out by 40 years of neoliberal counter-revolution. Fascism need not take the same form, or follow the same trajectory, as in the 1930s.

My second point follows from this. We need mass struggle to rebuild class organisation. We need to offer an alternative pole of attraction, and this cannot be done simply by argument. An ounce of practice is worth a ton of theory. We have to show working people that it is possible to organise and fight, on a class basis, black and white, native and migrant, to advance our interests through collective action.

In short, we need mass movements against racism linked with mass movements against austerity and privatisation. Three immediate dates are these:

- 9 July for the Rise Up For Europe demonstration in defence of free movement and migrants called by Another Europe is Possible [1].
- 14 July, when health workers, supported by other trade unionists and radical activists, will be blocking the road to protest NHS privatisation [2].
- 16 July for the demonstration against austerity and racism called by the People's Assembly [3].

Neil Faulkner

P.S.

* "Brexit and the Rise of Racism". Left Unity:
<http://leftunity.org/brexit-and-the-rise-of-racism/>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.facebook.com/events/993593024089717/>

[2] <https://www.facebook.com/events/245797525796605/>

[3] <https://www.facebook.com/events/997373007038180/>