

Lexit will not dismantle Fortress Europe

Saturday 21 September 2019, by [HUCK Sabrina](#) (Date first published: 13 August 2019).

Over the weekend, LeFT (Leave Fight Transform) - a campaign for a left-wing Brexit ('Lexit') - was launched by supporters [in the Morning Star](#). In its founding statement, LeFT argues that leaving the EU would mean the UK will break with the structural racism of Fortress Europe. In its [piece for LabourList](#), the campaign endorsed "a break from the 'four freedoms'".

Those who have followed Brexit discussions on the left will be familiar with the argument that the EU policy of free movement mainly favours white European immigrants whilst movement of people from the Global South to the continent is restricted by immigration control. The Mediterranean has become a deadly, violent border as refugees crossing the sea are left to drown and European powers scramble over whose responsibility it is to take in those who make it to our shores.

It is true to say that European immigration control upholds structural racism and classism, which prevents people to move freely - this is true of both the EU's common migration strategy as well as individual member states' national policies. If Britain decides to leave the EU and stop any participation in the EU's external border protection regimes, UK left-wingers might be able to rest easily knowing that their country was not directly involved whilst Fortress Europe continues to operate as before. Of course, this will not make any material difference to refugees and migrants.

Dismantling Fortress Europe is probably one of the most complex and ambitious political projects for the left. It can only be a successful if it is approached on a multi-dimensional level: mobilising European civil society movements, changing political approaches on a nation state level and lobbying of the European institutions.

The population of forcibly displaced people stood at 65.6 million in 2016, up from 33.9 million in 1997, [according to UNHCR](#). There is no hiding from the fact that sheer scale means nothing short of a complete rethink of our current global order can deliver justice and equality. It must come in the form of a radical restructuring of the global trading system, as capitalism has created the social, environmental and economic conditions of exploitation of workers and resources in the Global South for the benefit of the Global North. These are often the root cause of refugee movements and migration. British socialists who are serious about internationalism can no longer avoid an honest conversation about the power of capitalism exercised through the nation state, migration control and borders globally.

Current policies on asylum illustrate how - in the context of the intersection of violent conflict, capitalism and climate change - the system is unfit for purpose. When politicians speak about asylum seekers, they commonly associate refugees with those fleeing war zones. But war and violent conflict is only one driver of migration. The exploitative economic conditions created by global capitalism, exaggerated by the impacts of climate change, have fuelled the "refugee crisis".

People forced to leave their homes because of these economic conditions are often referred to as "economic migrants" - and politicians are open about their belief that those coming here for better

jobs and living conditions should not be given the right to asylum in the same way as people fleeing war and prosecution. This is why, for example, the government is dragging its feet when it comes to refugees' right to work: they do not want to ease access to employment and create "pull factors" for economic migrants.

Instead, those who want to come here and work must contribute something valuable to the UK economy, such as being able to invest or bring specialist skills to fill jobs on shortage occupation lists. Such visa systems for "the best and brightest" workers will not be sufficient to provide a safe route to move for those impacted by irreversible climate change over the coming decades. Open borders – the right to move freely, unrestricted by visa or skills conditions – is the only solution that can realistically deliver safe ways to migrate.

Some of the most prominent supporters of leaving the EU in the Labour Party are opposed to open borders and have linked freedom of movement and immigration from Eastern Europe with workers' exploitation and wage depression. It will be difficult for any Lexit movement that wants to advocate for a more liberal immigration regime to accommodate "climate refugees" and break the anti-migrant worker narrative that it has fuelled.

As long as the interest of the nation state trumps the desire to develop a common political answer based on solidarity, Fortress Europe will prevail. Although some Lexiteers claim otherwise, European migration policy decisions are not taken in a vacuum, detached from democratically accountable representatives of the nation state.

Failed attempts to reform the Dublin agreement have shown how national governments were able to push a harsher external border control scheme, rather than redistribution of refugees within the EU. Even if the EU would cease to exist, the European nation states hostile or unwilling to accept refugees would still guard their borders, both at the frontline of the Mediterranean and on the mainland. Refugees would be passed along between different nation states that don't think of themselves as responsible.

Although the political response to refugees has often been bleak, civil society movements offer a glimmer of hope. The volunteer-led sea rescue missions show that opposition to Fortress Europe is prepared to take direct action in the face of prosecution threats. In Germany, the 'Seebruecke' movement has organised thousands-strong mass demonstrations against Fortress Europe and the criminalisation of sea rescue and for secure paths to migration for refugees. Alongside it, councils have passed motions to become a "safe harbour" for those rescued at sea and to campaign actively in support of voluntary sea rescue missions.

Our focus should be on building links with these social movements to create the conditions of solidarity in civil society, to work with our European left parties in the push against Fortress Europe on an EU level whilst supporting our comrades in struggles against anti-migrant right-wing populist parties at home.

Some might argue this is utopianism. But as we experience a political moment of rupture, others will seize this opportunity for change if the left fails to do so. Rather than stepping aside and pursuing individual solutions as a nation, there was never a more urgent moment for British socialists to be involved and ambitious for the future of European left than now.

Sabrina Huck

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Labour List

<https://labourlist.org/2019/08/lexit-will-not-dismantle-fortress-europe/>