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Britain: Right-wing England - the social and political basis of UKIP

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The quite astonishing vote for the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in June's Euro-election crystallised deep-seated political, social and demographic changes in England and Wales. These, argues Phil Hearse, will progressively re-cast politics and pose major problems for existing political forces, including the socialist left.

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To the surprise of many, UKIP came third with 17%, behind the Tories with 25% and Labour with 22%, beating the Lib-Dems into fourth place. These are historically low figures for both Labour and the Conservatives, representing the fact that both are in long-term decline. This much is easy to see, although in parliamentary elections it is disguised by the iniquitous 'first past the post' system, which always punishes minority parties. In the general election, we can be sure that the majority of UKIP voters will return to the Tory party for the simple reason that the Tories can form the government and UKIP cannot.

Thus, it is difficult to be certain about the future of UKIP as a political force, but what it represents politically and socially will not go away. What does it represent? Its policies appear to be based upon xenophobic, racist and nationalist reaction. But this is posed in a new context, and those on the left who take no heed of this (Socialist Worker's coverage of the election hardly mentioned UKIP) are in for some rude shocks. A good place to start analysing UKIP is to look at what they say about themselves.

A rare insight into their own thinking has been given in a document published by several right-wing websites. It is a report of a discussion with UKIP local Councillor Toby Micklethwait. This may well be boasting and exaggerated, but it shows their thinking nonetheless, and is worth quoting at some length.

"He [Micklethwait] said that when canvassing you do not waste time by arguing. You just say you are from UKIP and please vote for us (talk about their flowers). He said Kilroy had helped UKIP a lot. He said that UKIP had done well in a great doughnut, so to speak, in places which are not London itself, but which are all around London - the South East, the South West, the Midlands, East Anglia.

"He said that Conservatives and UKIP people get on really well with each other, and the Conservatives now talk as if they and UKIP were on the same side, which for practical purposes

most Conservative activists are (UKIP gives them a stick to beat their leaders, and an exit if their beating up their leaders gets nowhere)...

"Electoral politics is like warfare. You need lots of soldiers, and you deploy them where they will (make the) most difference. You do not ask these soldiers to convince anyone of anything. You do that with posters and advertisements." (He then goes on to talk about how about how UKIP got more media coverage than it deserved, which was aided by Kilroy-Silk and bribing newspapers with expensive whole-page advertisements).

"...UKIP has now and is going to have in future years a lot of money - more, he said, than the other parties. More than the Conservatives? More than Labour? Yes, he said, more than any of the others. "How come? Well simply most of the business people in Britain support UKIP. They hate the EU and want out. Maybe not the big business people. But in terms of sheer numbers, the majority of them support UKIP. The majority of people whose job description is 'Managing Director' want Britain out of the EU... People in general do not have much spare cash.... Big business people used to have a ton of discretionary money, but not anymore. No, it is the 'small' business folk, the individual capitalists, the people who can afford weekend boats and fancy houses with garages for three cars, and three cars, which have the money. A few thousand from this guy, another few thousand from that guy - that is how political money is raised, and UKIP is at the moment better than anyone else, because these people, of all people, now hate Britain being in the EU - hate it, hate it - and are willing to spend big money - boat money, car money - to damn well buy whatever it will take to get Britain out of the EU."

Bombast aside, what Toby Micklethwait is saying in Marxist terms, is the following: a) The key base of support for UKIP (but not the only one) is the petty bourgeoisie b) Support is especially concentrated in rural areas in the south of England and on the periphery of London c) Most Tory activists agree with them ideologically d) In ideological terms they have a big plus in that lots of the media really agree with them and are prepared to give them a big splash in publicity terms. This spells big problems for bourgeois politics, and for working class politics as well.

Political Polarisation

Before we return to UKIP we should of course note that UKIP's vote was part of a generalised dispersal of support for the major parties, which also benefited the Greens, the BNP and Respect, the left-wing unity coalition. We could say that given the general discrediting of Labour, especially by the Iraq war, privatisation and the crisis in public services - together with the general dislike of the Tories - there is a polarisation, to the left and the right. But on an all-UK basis the right, the UKIP plus the BNP, got much more support than the Greens and Respect. It is an uneven polarisation, which outside of the inner cities and Scotland, tends to go to the right. Why?

First there is an obvious political factor. Since Labour's victory in 1997, all the forces of British reaction have been gathering around two great themes: hostility to the European Union and hostility to immigrants and asylum seekers. That Britain is a 'soft touch' for welfare-scrourning asylum seekers and cynical 'health tourists' has become the general accepted view of much of the mass media, television and radio together with the usual suspects like the Daily Mail, the Daily Express and the Sun.

The predominant issue to gel the right wing has been that of immigration and asylum. The EU, which for many people is an irrelevance, only really becomes relevant as part of a more general xenophobic discourse. One telling example: Respect was the only 'party', which has defense of asylum seekers up-front in its electoral material. Every day the Respect office workers had phone

calls from people who said they agreed with nearly everything, but what was this nonsense about asylum seekers? Racist and chauvinistic attitudes have gone beyond the ruling class and the middle class, and are deeply entrenched in sections of the working class in England. This is not something new of course; working class xenophobia, and the idea of British exceptionalism has its historical roots in the ideology (and reality) of the British Empire. But the scale of it is new. Labour has been totally incapable of combating it, because it has run scared in front of the racist offensive and incorporated the panicked frenzy about asylum seekers into its own ideology and practice. David Blunkett and Tony Blair have been the best recruiting sergeants to the racist cause.

Europe

The anti-EU line of the Daily Telegraph and the Sun has been fueled by the pro-US orientation of their North American owners – Murdoch (now an American) and Conrad Black. But in addition, xenophobia cannot be kept neatly in a separate box called ‘asylum seekers’, and spills over onto other questions – it fits in perfectly with anti-EU hysteria. This is not based on any rational assessment of what is wrong with the undemocratic structure of the EU or the proposed constitution, but simply on hostility to ‘Frogs’ and ‘Krauts’ who want to interfere with ‘our’ pound. This creates immense problems for the British left in any future referendum on the EU constitution, where it will be hugely difficult for a left-wing campaign against the EU constitution to get its message heard.

It also creates problems for the Conservatives. Michael Howard will have no problem whatever opposing the EU constitution, but he and the shadow cabinet have a permanent problem with their base – the fact that the Tory leadership do not, and cannot, call for British withdrawal from the European Union. The above-quoted report of what Tom Micklethwait says accurately exempts top business people from EU-hatred. No serious force in the British ruling class wants Britain out of the EU. For manufacturing capital the reason is obvious – 80% of British manufacture exports go to the EU, and the biggest customer within that is Germany. How can the captains of the manufacturing industry want to award themselves higher tariffs than their competitors? That would be economic suicide.

On the other hand, financial capital is also generally opposed to EU withdrawal, despite its heavy investment in the US, the single biggest destination of British outward investment. Financial bosses do not want to be excluded from any market, and least of all do they want an increasingly united Europe to make Frankfurt the biggest financial centre outside New York, pushing London into third or fourth place. Facing towards America and Europe simultaneously will do nothing but benefit the UK financial moguls. Michael Howard take note.

The latter is therefore caught between his frenzied petty bourgeois base and the economic/financial needs of the ruling class. This means a hardened Euro-sceptical rhetoric from Howard, but also heightened tensions with the real Tory Euro-sceptics over withdrawal. One thing is clear. The British ruling class cannot abandon the Tory party, a key historical instrument. This is why we can expect to see a cranking up from many quarters of a major campaign in defence of Britain’s role in the EU, and pro-Tory columnists being wheeled out to rubbish UKIP. This is something which Toby Micklethwait leaves out of his assessment, and why UKIP are wrong to think the bourgeoisie is incapable of giving the Conservatives enough money to vastly outspend UKIP come the general election next year.

Roots of Reaction

If the success of UKIP is based on a long-term reactionary xenophobic campaign in the media, it has also been spurred by long-term political and social factors. First and foremost are the defeats of the labour movement at the hands of Thatcher and her successors. This has had major structural effects. The working class and the labour movement are not like they were in the 1970s. Trade union membership has declined, and major centres of working class strength – in the mines, engineering plants, car factories and beyond – have been dispersed. Neoliberalism has deepened class divisions, leading to centres of the newly affluent and the long-term poor.

If UKIP has found a base in some 'traditional' sectors of the petty bourgeoisie, it has huge support among the newly affluent. UKIP got its biggest vote in the huge 'Eastern' English constituency, which includes London's hinterland in wine bar and sports utility vehicle land - reactionary Essex and parts of Hertfordshire. In all-white Chesunt (Hertfordshire), home of Britain's largest branch of Marks and Spencer, a councillor was elected from the BNP. Two BNP councillors were elected in virtually all-white Loughton (Essex). Strong support came also in areas that have Britain's per capita richest towns – places like Guildford and Kingston in Surrey.

Following the American example there is a flight of the affluent middle classes from the major cities towards the new suburbia on their outskirts. If the present trends continue, inner-London will have an ethnic 'minority' majority within ten years. In London at least there is a strong overlap between ethnic identity and social status, despite the growth of the Asian middle class. What is being consolidated is an old story, seen in many parts of the world – racist reaction grows on the all-white edges of the ethnically mixed communities, while the urban mixed communities themselves remain centres of socially progressive attitudes on race (and many other things as well). London is being consolidated as the most left-wing part of England.

But it would be a mistake to see the UKIP phenomenon (or the BNP for that matter) as simply a middle-class affair. You don't get 17% of the vote without some support coming from the working class. There are a number of factors here. First there are areas – the 'sink estates' around Manchester being the most notorious – where traditional industries have declined and whole communities of the long-term unemployed and their families have consolidated.

These people are the losers from neoliberalism and the Thatcher counter-revolution, based in areas which previously were strongly Labour, but now say 'what has Labour done for us?'. The answer, of course, is nothing or very little. Support for UKIP probably came from some of these areas.

Frequently overlooked by the left are the growth of rural poverty, and the creation of areas of disaffection with the main parties, especially those on the left. Devon and Cornwall had high UKIP votes, and this part of South West England has for a long time had the highest unemployment rate in Britain. The swell of South West UKIP support spilled over into some traditional Labour urban areas like Portsmouth, where most local workers are poor by national standards. In addition, there is no doubt that even within the inner cities a small section of white workers, often I suspect older people, voted with the racists, either the UKIP or BNP.

Xenophobia

For students of European politics there is something quite chilling about this roll call of UKIP support. It has much in common with the political base of Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National (FN) in France. Le Pen is also the beneficiary of the affluent in the most right-wing parts of France like

the Côte d'Azur, as well as sections of the working class in former industrial heartlands like the Pas-de-Calais and the former coalfields. Le Pen's success gives us a clue about a crucial factor in the deepening of English xenophobia and the advances of UKIP and the BNP. In France, the most exploited and marginalised in the working class previously looked to the Communist Party (PCF). In all probability the forging of support inside the working class by the FN would have been impossible if the Communist Party had not all but collapsed, in a situation where the far-left organisations like Lutte Ouvrière and the LCR, although strong by British standards, are far from mass parties on the scale of the PCF at its height, and unable to provide a truly mass alternative.

In Britain the Communist Party was never a mass force, but the parallel with the collapse of the PCF is the decline of the labour movement and the attrition of Labour's links with the organised working class, towards becoming merely the second party of big business. In a certain sense the decline of reformism creates an opportunity for the militant socialist left, like the SSP in Scotland. But the decline of the workers movement overall is a massive negative factor in the situation. UKIP is the historical reward for two decades of working class defeats. And those defeats create a huge strategic problem for socialists.

Left Response

Under the impact of further attacks and a fightback against them, it is not too difficult to predict that the workers movement throughout Britain will revive. However, it will not become what it was in the 1970s and into the 1980s, a movement based on huge factories and millions of manual workers. Although this is highly speculative, it seems logical that a changed productive base will lead to different forms of trade unionism, probably more minority and heavily based on the public sector, and probably much more politicised – like the RMT and the FBU are today. It is also likely to lead to new forms of party organisation on the left, which do not conform to the old patterns familiar in the 1920-1980 period – mass social democratic or Stalinist parties, plus small Leninist competitors. Numerous trends on a European scale, not least the Scottish Socialist Party, point in that direction. Furthermore, the differentiated character of the working class, and the emergence of numerous new fronts of radical struggle, will certainly generate new forms of social solidarity and organization. This will tend to transform the bases of support for revolutionary politics – beyond having a profile of simply 'the extreme left of the labour movement'.

In this context it is necessary to say something about Respect, which had some extraordinary successes in inner-city areas, especially in London, but also in places like Preston. Respect suffered from lack of name recognition, an unbelievable media blackout, the fact that ballot papers were very complex and only in English, which meant that thousands of votes from Asian supporters were disqualified, and the fact that many of its potential voters were not registered or were illegally turned away from the polling stations because they had no identification. Nevertheless Respect raised the banner of a left-wing alternative and this was itself vital; Respect was the only nationally based left wing alternative. The quarter of a million votes cast for Respect were an important beginning, a vital opportunity. But as explained by Murray Smith in the last issue of this journal, the real challenge starts now. To capitalise its gains, it has to move towards becoming a party-type organisation.

This means above all that the Socialist Workers Party accept what their central leader John Rees is arguing, to make Respect a "mass alternative to Labour". As Alan Thornett said in the last issue of Frontline: "It is important that Respect develops in this way. The SWP conception would mean carrying on in the old way. Every demonstration, and major event of the left, would continue to lose its visual identity to the revolutionary organisations - in particular to the SWP because it is by far the

biggest. Dozens of SWP stalls and flags and placards and paper sellers ensure that every major event looks at first sight like an SWP event. This is what shocked the European left when the SWP arrived in Florence for the ESF in 2002. We need to get to a position where the visual impact is made by a single united party with the bulk of the left within it. Already Respect is trying to increase its profile, but this needs to go a lot further.”

Phil Hearse

P.S.

- Frontline 14:
<http://www.redflag.org.uk/frontline/14/14ukip.html>