

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Great Britain & Northern Ireland (Europe) > Migrants - refugees, racism (UK) > **Britain - 'Refugees Welcome Here: Racism out of the Referendum' rally report**

Britain - 'Refugees Welcome Here: Racism out of the Referendum' rally report

Monday 30 May 2016, by [HORE Charlie](#) (Date first published: 29 May 2016).

While some of the pro-remain arguments about the EU itself are naive, the rally showed the importance and the possibility of uniting around a strong anti-racist position, whatever the referendum result. Charlie Hore reports.

"The referendum debate is likely to be dominated by immigration", said the *Today* programme, as though this was news. In a week that had already seen *Vote Leave's* TV broadcast blaming all the problems of the NHS on migrants, and their even viler 'The Turks are coming!' campaign, Stand Up To Racism took a welcome initiative in calling a 'rally in central London named "Keep Racism Out of the Referendum: Refugees Welcome Here!"

The title might be a bit optimistic – there's as much chance of keeping racism out of the referendum as there is of keeping football out of the Euros – but it signalled a determination to fight back against the racism coming from both official campaigns, UKIP and the far right.

Lord Alf Dubs opened the meeting by talking about his campaign to bring 3,000 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to the UK. He called for more pressure on the government, in particular to get the children here for September in time to start the new school year.

Colette Levy, from Hidden Children of Vichy France, gave a very powerful reminder of the realities of fascism and anti-semitism, and laid into Marine Le Pen and the Front National.

Natalie Bennett of the Green Party spoke explicitly for a remain vote, stressing that the referendum is an opportunity to both celebrate the free movement of labour and to say that we want it extended to everyone, doing away with Fortress Europe. She added that unfair immigration policies are the fault of British governments, not the EU, and said that it's when we talk about people that we can really take the argument on.

Shakira Martin from the NUS Executive exposed the hypocrisy of the Tories attacks on English as a Second Language teaching (ESOL) while criticising ethnic minorities for not learning English. She went on to highlight the ways in which attacks on further education provision particularly hit women and black people, and made a strong attack on Prevent – "we want to be students not suspects." She was also for a remain vote, and said she was optimistic about our ability to fight back "because we have leaders like Natalie and Jeremy Corbyn who will fight for us", which got one of the loudest cheers of the night.

Rabbi Lee Wax began by showing off a t-shirt saying "my parents were refugees", and went on to make the point that practically all Jewish people in Britain today are refugees or the descendants of refugees. She quoted the British press attacking of Jewish refugees in the 1930s to show that exactly the same language is being used today.

Weyman Bennett from Stand Up to Racism pushed for support for the Convoy to Calais on June 18, and called for thousands of people to come to Whitehall to see it off. He stressed the importance of challenging the racist rhetoric about migration and refugees – “in the referendum, don’t let the racists divide us.”

Talha Ahmed from the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) was again pro-remain, saying that in his opinion the EU has been a key defence against fascism. He argued that anti-refugee sentiment, anti-semitism and Islamophobia are all linked – they showed the need for a change of political direction. “We should welcome refugees because they add to our culture, because it’s the right thing to do, and because we need to show human solidarity.”

The first speaker from the floor spoke of his worries about the racism coming from UKIP and the official leave campaign, echoing some of the arguments from the platform for a remain vote. The chair responded by suggesting that the discussion should be about fighting racism and not the referendum. For the most part people followed this, speaking about topics such as the fight to defend FE and the battle over the BBC programme about Newham, as well as two especially moving accounts from women who had been held in the Yarlswood detention centre.

But one speaker argued that the two were linked – “what will be the effect on a leave vote on my workmates from the EU? Will they have to go through immigration interviews, or will they be thrown out?” He finished by saying that both side were imbued with racism, and that we needed to be against both Little Britain and Fortress Europe. One of the organisers of Left Leave made the only explicit pro-leave contribution of the night, making it clear that they rejected the racist arguments used by the official campaign – “we will be spending much of our time attacking people who are voting the same way as us.”

Some of the claims from remain supporters were clearly based on what they would like the EU to be, rather than what it actually is, but they illustrate an important point that much support for the remain position is based on a positive sense of anti-racist solidarity. The meeting itself was a welcome sign that large parts of the left have realised the damage that the official campaigns and UKIP are doing, and are determined to reject the racist line of argument that says migration and migrants are the problem.

And it was a reaffirmation of something that we can lose sight of amid all the polemics – anti-racists on all sides of the debate have more in common with each other than we do with most of those who are campaigning for whichever outcome we support. We need to hold firm to that, because whatever the result of the referendum, that unity is going to be very necessary.

Charlie Hore

P.S.

* rs21. May 29, 2016:

<https://rs21.org.uk/2016/05/29/refugees-welcome-here-racism-out-of-the-referendum-rally-report/>