

Interview

# Britain: Standing for solidarity after the Brexit vote

Sunday 10 July 2016, by [BENCE Charlotte](#) (Date first published: 8 July 2016).

The UK referendum vote to leave the European Union last month was a political earthquake that continues to reverberate in Britain, Europe and beyond. Both the ruling Conservative Party of Prime Minister David Cameron—who supported a Remain vote, though leading members of his cabinet backed Leave—and the UK Independence Party of Nigel Farage, a loud voice for Leave, are scrambling after the two leaders both resigned. Meanwhile, a coup attempt organized by more conservative Labour Party figures against left-wing leader Jeremy Corbyn, a critical supporter of Remain, appears to have fizzled.

The turmoil at the top is matched by discontent below. On the one hand, there are reports of an increase in attacks on migrants and people of color since the referendum vote—a sign that supporters of the hard-line right were emboldened by the outcome after a campaign where anti-immigrant rhetoric was constant. On the other, there have been urgent mobilizations to defend migrant rights, including a London demonstration to oppose “Brexit” with as many as 100,000 participants where solidarity was a dominant theme.

Charlotte Bence, a UK-based union organizer and member of revolutionary socialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, was in Chicago to speak at the Socialism 2016 conference on July 1-4. She talked to SW about the aftermath of the referendum vote and the tasks that the left faces today in supporting refugees and immigrants and carrying on the struggle against austerity.

**Socialist Worker** (USA)

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WE HAVE to start with political honesty about what the left was able to do in this vote and what it wasn't.

The fact is that the left-wing Leave vote didn't have any real influence beyond the ranks of the far left and its immediate allies and friends, and pretending otherwise doesn't put us in a good place for what comes next.

The left Leave campaign were making very good arguments about the fundamentally un-reformable nature of the EU and why it's better for the British working class to leave. But those ideas got no traction because the debate was dominated from the start by the official Leave and official Remain campaigns. That meant the left was running to catch up on both sides, whichever position you took.

Both sides in the referendum were dominated by racism—in particular racist ideas about immigration. The official Leave side was horribly racist because its main message was about how to “regain” some kind of national control and stop the hordes of migrants and refugees from coming to

the UK.

But the Remain side pandered to those sentiments as well. The Remain side claimed that if the UK remained in the European Union, we could renegotiate freedom of movement within Europe, which is one of the right's talking points.

So both sides were playing a racist game of pitting the working class against itself.

WHEN YOU look at the breakdown of the vote—if you look at the Lord Ashcroft poll, which surveyed more than 12,000 people about how they voted—the question of immigration definitely played a part. According to the Ashcroft data, the number one concern for both Labour and Conservative voters was the question of sovereignty, closely followed by immigration.

But the issue we were voting on wasn't immigration, but whether the UK should leave or stay in the EU.

When both sides pandered to racism to the extent that they did, people's fears around the state of their communities were exploited and given a convenient scapegoat. And there's fertile ground: The services provided by the National Health Service (NHS) are getting worse; classroom sizes in the UK, and England in particular, are going up; and social housing now exists now for nobody but the most desperate, with years-long waiting lists being the norm across the country.

When the mainstream narrative presents you with a scapegoat and says all these things are happening because of your immigrant neighbor, then voting to leave, in part, becomes a reaction against that. The reaction isn't necessarily tied up with completely and utterly racist ideas, but when people have been told that the reason these things are happening is because of immigration, then of course, they vote to leave.

This is what's happened in economically and politically eviscerated communities like the north of England, which all voted to leave.

I think we have to look at the Leave vote in communities like the north of England—communities that have been abandoned by the Conservatives since they've come to power—as the only real way that people had of expressing their dissatisfaction with life in what's supposed to be one of the richest countries in the world, but where everybody feels so very, very poor.

When you have the architect of all this misery, Prime Minister David Cameron, telling everybody that they have to vote Remain because it's nice to be in the EU, people are naturally going to say, "Well, fuck you, I'm not doing that. I'm voting to leave."

I think the increase in racist attacks since Brexit would have happened irrespective of which way the vote had gone. I think the 57 percent increase in racist attacks would have happened even if the vote had been for Remain, because when both sides were creating that culture around immigration, that's the inevitable fallout.

There have been all kinds of horrible attacks on European migrants, British people of color, and migrants who aren't white Europeans since the vote happened. There was racist graffiti scrawled on Polish community centers, and BBC broadcasters who had horribly offensive, racialized language shouted at them. You can search the internet for these examples and depress yourself by seeing how many there are.

But as horrible as these attacks are—and as important as it is to stand up to all of them—they don't represent evidence that the far right is gaining momentum, in my view. The attacks and anti-

immigrant sentiment don't represent, as yet, an organized presence of racists or fascists. These are individuals shouting at other individuals who they see in supermarkets or on the street.

That isn't to say the racist slurs aren't horrible, but it's quite a different matter from gangs of marauding fascists marching around our towns. In reality, when the far right has attempted to organize since the Brexit vote, it's been beaten back.

In the southern city of Southampton, for example, there was a mobilization of 14 of the so-called "Pie and Mash Brigade" turned up to spread racist, anti-immigrant, anti-refugee rhetoric. They were countered by 1,500 local residents, trade unionists and anti-fascists who were waving pro-refugee, pro-migrant placards and shouting pro-refugee, pro-migrant slogans. That's positive.

I think we should take heart in this response and the places where we're beating them back.

ONE OF the things that the UK left doesn't necessarily agree on is the nature of the demonstrations called since the vote in support of remaining in the EU.

On Saturday, July 2, in London, there was a demonstration against Brexit with many thousands of people at it. Yes, some of the people at the demonstration were waving European Union flags, which I think is a complete dead-end. But just because the demonstration was called by forces I would describe as a bit reactionary, it doesn't automatically follow that everybody who was on those demonstrations is a bit reactionary.

There were pro-migrant and pro-refugee placards and banners out there—and the people holding them see the European Union as the only way you can defend the rights of people who are not from the EU and the UK. Unlike a lot of other countries in Europe, Britain hasn't really had a set-piece confrontation with the EU until now—which means we're not used to debating what the EU represents and the role it plays in smashing working-class movements.

I think this is a job for the left to take up: to continue to talk about what the EU is and what it's done in countries like Greece, alongside a conversation about how we can build movements in solidarity with people both within and without the EU.

One of the things that's exciting to someone like me, who has been part of the far left for a number of years, is that people who were there, chanting decent slogans and waving decent placards, were mainly people I don't recognize. These are people the far left doesn't have a relationship with, but with whom we need to engage quickly.

There are pro-migrant, pro-refugee demonstrations and rallies being organized all across the country—in towns and villages where the far left hasn't been seen for decades. This is exciting because it shows that the response isn't just a small far-left minority.

We aren't the only people who are trying to mount a defense of migration. We aren't the only people saying that people who were born outside of the UK should be welcomed on our shores.

KNOWING ALL this makes me feel positively about what we can achieve when we put our minds to it. Although we're not involved with everything, where we are involved, we're making a real impact.

One of the things I'm proud of about rs21 is that the Friday after the vote, we were part of a demonstration we called in conjunction with some other groups on the British left that was specifically focused on defending migration and refugees, irrespective of the outcome of the vote. Some 1,500 young people marched through central London, demanding that refugees be welcome in the UK and saying that migration isn't a crime.

The message from the racists to immigrants is: "It's time for all you lot to get out now, pack your fucking bags." But there are people who are saying, "No, that's not what I stand for, that's not what I'm about. I'm going to go on these demonstrations, and I'm going to defend migration."

I think the left has to understand that whichever way you voted—whether you voted for Leave or whether you voted for Remain—the priority now isn't recriminations or debating whether we were right or wrong, though the process of accountability toward each other is important.

First and foremost, our priority right now has to be getting involved in these campaigns to defend migration and defend refugees.

And we have to think about how to integrate that work into everything else we do/ Because it's all well and good to organize anti-austerity campaigns, but that isn't enough. The reason the right wing has been able to whip up hysteria around immigration is because they've given the impression that the reason classroom sizes are going up or it's difficult to get appointments with your doctor is because of the waves of immigrants coming over to the UK.

We have to get better at saying: "It's not the fault of your immigrant neighbor that you can't get a doctor's appointment. It's David Cameron's fault because he's the one who cut funding for the NHS. It's the Conservative who are putting pressure on schools, not migrants."

That's the way that we can integrate migrant and refugee solidarity work into everything else we do.

**Charlotte Bence**

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\* <https://socialistworker.org/2016/07/08/standing-for-solidarity-after-brexit>