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# Internationalism is at the heart of the struggle against Brexit

Thursday 10 October 2019, by [SPARKS Sue](#) (Date first published: 9 October 2019).

**Other contributions to the debate on this site, notably by Phil Hearse and Kate Hudson, have rightly emphasized the urgency of the tasks facing us as socialists and internationalists, given the dangers of a Boris Johnson victory at the inevitable general election in the near future, and the increasing xenophobia, threats of violence and acts of violence being whipped up by the Tory right, the Brexit Party, and elements of the media.**

While we know what should happen - Labour and the unions should be mobilizing people on the streets in huge numbers to counter the 'people versus parliament' narrative pushed by the Tories and their creatures in the press - we are instead having to watch a damaging level of confusion and even complacency within the left. Though there has been a degree of activity to stop a no deal Brexit, this has mostly been confined to parliament, with the exception of the mobilisations against the prorogation, which were addressed by leading Labour politicians, but were actually organized by much smaller groups under the umbrella of Another Europe is Possible (AEIP). The court victory against Johnson's anti-democratic action in proroguing parliament was achieved by individuals. Labour MPs, though a few had talked of refusing to leave Parliament, in the end left it to the courts to end the prorogation.

Recently I have been thinking about Zimmerwald and the divide in the socialist movement precipitated by the First World War. No doubt people will say any parallels with today are hyperbolic. It's true that we are not in the midst of a barbarous war, nor are the prospects for revolution at all of the same order. But for the first time in my life - and I began to be an active socialist in the early 1970s - I perceive a very fundamental divide in the post-1968 left, which I would broadly characterize as between those of us with an internationalist perspective and those with a national one. Hence the Zimmerwald reference.

There was always a 'left' with such a national perspective of course, but it was not part of the post-68 left. It was in the Labour Party and in the Communist Party, and it conceived of the tasks facing it as being to take control of the British state machine and use that to institute a British Road to Socialism. The opposition to joining the EEC (as it then was in the 1975 referendum) on the part of those forces was based in the view that membership of the EEC was incompatible with pursuing a national road to socialism. The opposition of the revolutionary left then (though it wasn't united) was based on our reading of the impact of a yes vote on the balance of forces in the working-class movement, which had just seen the highest level of class struggle since 1945. Our view was that it would reinforce the strength of the right in the labour movement, which was dedicated to demobilizing the working class in the interests of the Labour government of the time.

Moving forward to 2016, against a backdrop of an extremely low level of working class organization and combativity, and with a Tory government in power, most of the post-68 left, inside and outside of Labour, took the view that it was necessary to call for a vote for Leave, on exactly the grounds that

the Labour left and CP had based their 1975 policy: namely on the character of the EU itself and that membership of it was an obstacle to reform of the British state and specifically to the successful execution of Labour's strategy under Corbyn. This decision ignored the character of the Leave campaign, based as it was in the right wing of the Tory Party and UKIP, with a platform of nationalist xenophobia and extreme free market economic policies, backed vociferously by the most reactionary elements of the Tory press. Somehow this was all irrelevant. They claimed that if only Labour had placed itself on the Leave side, the nature of the campaign would have been utterly transformed. It also ignored the international context of the rise of far-right populism, viewing the UK as an exception because Corbyn had been elected leader of the Labour Party.

Subsequently, the need to preserve Corbyn's leadership became the overarching objective of much of the left, with the forces wanting to oppose an increasingly 'hard' Brexit being derided as middle class and/or pawns of the 'Blairites'. Even now, with the reactionary nature of the Brexit project so glaringly obvious, parts of the left still can't bring themselves to oppose it. They oppose 'no deal' but they are vague as to what kind of actual Brexit they would support. Again, the recent ambivalent policy adopted at the Labour conference was passed because delegates were persuaded that regardless of the fact that the majority of Labour Party members and voters oppose all forms of Brexit, to insist that party policy reflect that would represent a victory for the right inside the PLP and would therefore be a defeat for Corbyn. The irony, of course is that it's a policy very likely to doom the entire Corbyn project, as it seems extremely unlikely Labour can win a majority in the forthcoming election.

Against that, a portion of the left has put forward a policy of Remain, but with the perspective of joining forces with other left movements across the EU in order to revolt against the policies which have immiserated Greece and other southern European countries, and to end Fortress Europe rather than erecting Fortress UK. Those of us who support this are regarded as hopelessly naïve, because, we are assured, it's impossible to reform the EU, while it's evidently quite possible to reform the British state (all previous failed attempts to the contrary).

Quite apart from that, the actual policy of the Corbyn-led Labour Party on a central issue of the "Remain, Reform Revolt" platform - the defence and extension of Freedom of Movement - has been absolutely terrible. The Labour conference did pass an excellent motion on the subject, pushed through with a huge amount of work and against the general silence of much of the left on the subject. However, the next day, Diane Abbott said that the motion wasn't binding in terms of what would be in the Labour manifesto. There are laudable efforts to try to ensure that isn't the last word, but don't hold your breath for freedom of movement to be in the election pledges. So the denunciation of left Remainers as patronizing and writing Leave voters off as racists should rightly be applied to the Labour leadership, as they obviously believe that arguing for freedom of movement would alienate too many Leave voters. While much of the left has not gone so far as to justify immigration controls, where there has been an attempt to provide a 'left' case for restricting immigration, on the basis that cheap migrant labour undercuts "native born" workers and exerts a downward pressure on wages or that the EU is forcing workers to move from their home countries in the east, it's within an unashamedly nationalist perspective. An excellent analysis of what is wrong with such ideas can be found [here](#).

So where does this leave us? The crucial errors made by much of the left in the 2016 referendum and afterwards, and the fact that the most influential trade union leaders and those advisers closest to the Labour leadership are not prepared to fight Brexit, have meant that the majority of Labour members and voters, and many rank and file trade unionists, have been left to take individual decisions about how to oppose Brexit. Many have participated in the huge People's Vote marches, but they have seen only Liberal Democrats and Tories, or the odd Labour Party MP or minor trade union leader, on the platforms. Unions haven't mobilized and haven't tried to affect the character of

the protests. Only a minority, around AEIP, has formed a left bloc on the marches and called for open borders. The rest of the post-68 left has stayed away, declining even to pass out placards or give out leaflets to explain their position. The absence of union banners or left Labour speakers is then used as justification for ignoring the literally millions of people on the streets. Even now, when Johnson's clearly anti-democratic manoeuvres led some of the Lexiters to come in from the cold, the Labour and most union leaderships have not thrown their weight decisively behind the protests, presumably fearful of contamination with the Remain virus.

What can we do about this situation? Essentially we have a gap. There are large numbers of people who want to stop Brexit, who loathe the present government and the kind of hostile atmosphere it has encouraged towards minorities, and its aggressive Little Englander nationalism. They are often the same people who want to take decisive action against climate change. On the other hand, there are very small numbers of socialists who have the necessary clarity about the dangers of the present situation. We need to unite those socialists, whether they are inside or outside the Labour Party, and find every possible route to connect them with those who want to fight.

There are many voices arguing that the priority is not to ignore or 'write off' those who have perceived Brexit as a way of redressing the injustices they feel. This is frequently, but not always, accompanied by the idea that we should not alienate them by being too assertive in our opposition to Brexit, in our solidarity with immigrants, with ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, or even in our opposition to climate change. That view - that 'identity politics' or 'middle class liberal metropolitan elitism' has led the left to turn its back on 'the working class' - is fundamentally mistaken. It rests on an anachronistic view of what the working class is, and it breaks with the idea that as a left, you organise amongst the most advanced elements and, by doing so, you bring waverers behind them; anyone who has tried to improve working conditions or pay in a workplace understands that. You try to isolate those who hold ideas which align them firmly against you (hard core racists, deferential working class Tories, the inveterate anti-union individuals). You have to start with those who are already clear who the enemy is (and who their friends are).

In the present situation that means mobilising those implacably opposed to Brexit: young people, migrants, people of colour, those who know that anything being proposed by the Tories can't be good news for them. In a determined fight against the Tories, Farage and the far right, you hope to bring others with you, but without allowing the pace and direction of that fight to be dictated by the need to make concessions to those who don't see that clearly. Perhaps the most powerful argument in this respect is the utter failure of the 'nationalist' left to make any progress in pulling the pro-Brexit working class (as they perceive it) to the left and away from its inclination to vote for Farage or Johnson. Indeed, it's not clear that they are trying to do so, beyond urging people to vote for a Corbyn government. A reformist Labour government is indeed desirable. But the path to getting there has been made muddier and more convoluted by many of the people who claim to want it most.

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