

UK: Alex Callinicos's Brexit Blues

Thursday 9 May 2019, by [BURGIN Andrew](#), [HEARSE Phil](#), [HUDSON Kate](#) (Date first published: 29 April 2019).

Politics in Britain, British political life, has now reached a critical juncture. Brexit - which is set to significantly damage the economy, further erode the living standards of the working class, and strip rights away from European workers in Britain - has divided the ruling class into two warring camps. The neoliberal pro-EU wing, willing to accept the regulatory framework of the EU, is up against the (also neo-liberal) ultra free-marketeers who seek to end to all economic, environmental and workplace regulation which they hope will bring increased profits to their narrow elite. The free-marketeers are part of an English nationalist movement, also represented by Nigel Farage and his new Brexit Party. UKIP has evolved into the fascist wing of this movement. Both UKIP and Farage had their stages, side-by-side, outside Parliament on March 29th - the day Brexit didn't happen.

The Labour Party hasn't escaped this political crisis and it too faces divisions. A section of right-wing Remain MPs have left the party to form a new centrist organisation while the Labour Party itself has now entered into negotiations with the Tory government over the Brexit deal. Although there are no serious expectations that Corbyn and May will come to an agreement, the Labour Party remains committed to delivering Brexit in some form. However, a majority of the membership oppose Brexit altogether. The ambiguities of Labour's position are driven partially by the need to maintain its position in the post-industrial areas that voted to Leave.

In the run up to and since the referendum, the radical/revolutionary left has also been divided over the question of Brexit. We are part of the radical left that called for a Remain vote in the referendum, not because we harboured illusions in the progressive nature of the EU, but because the Leave campaign was fuelled and dominated by reactionary politics. We believed that a Leave victory would empower the right rather than the left, and that far from providing a solution to any of the fundamental problems facing the working class it would open the way to further defeats. The post-Brexit treaties and legislative settlements would be seized upon by the government as a further opportunity for deregulation and attacks on our rights.

Others on the left argued that the crisis which a leave vote would inflict on the ruling class would open up a greater space for the left. In doing so, the Left Leave (Lexit) Campaign tended to dismiss and downplay what we considered to be real gains for the working class, such as freedom of movement referring to it in their campaign literature as 'so-called freedom of movement', and ignored the increasingly apparent rise in support for the far right, fed by the racist narrative on which the official Leave campaign was built. The Socialist Workers' Party was part of the Left Leave Campaign but has subsequently kept its distance from the successor organisation - the Full Brexit Campaign. This new campaign is travelling politically in the slipstream of English nationalism with some founding members being prepared to speak on platforms organised by Nigel Farage or even to stand as candidates for Farage's new Brexit Party in the European elections.

Alex Callinicos, a leading member of the SWP, has recently attempted to theorise the modification of his party's previous position, writing on Brexit [[1](#)] in *International Socialism Journal [ISJ]*. One would hope that this would constitute the beginning of a timely re-assessment of the untenable Lexit

position.

Callinicos recognises that opposition to free movement and a capitulation to nationalism are at the heart of the Full Brexit campaign but he still seeks to defend the core Lexit position. We believe he does this by attempting to construct a protective belt of subsidiary propositions which are as untenable as the central position itself.

To start with, Callinicos explains the problems for the ruling class, which make Brexit a disaster for British capitalism. The problem for the British bourgeoisie is that access to the European market is absolutely vital for the 80% of exports that are services. The issue of the import and export of goods is secondary. The propositions of the Tory Brexiteers about WTO rules bringing a new special relationship with Trump's America are daydreams. There is no realistic position for British capitalism other than significant integration with the economies of the EU.

This seems a realistic assessment, but there is little explanation of the conundrum which it demonstrates – *why*, if this assessment is true, has a significant section of the main party of the ruling class come out with a strident anti-EU position if it is so damaging to capitalist interests? The key to understanding the situation is to recognise that there is a split in the ruling class; this results from neoliberalism being 'visibly in crisis', and is responsible for what Callinicos describes as the 'crisis of the political system'. The split is being played out through the Tory Party, thanks to David Cameron's attempt to defeat the hard right in his party by calling the Brexit referendum, but no section of British society is left untouched. In their struggle to take British capitalism to the extremes of free-marketism, the far-right in the Tory Party – along with their ideological allies in UKIP and elsewhere – has whipped up and deployed racism and xenophobia to generate strident anti-Europeanism. As we saw during the referendum campaign, this was used as a mobilising banner to secure a Leave vote, with the stage then set for the hard right to take control of the Conservative Party. This is what is currently being fought over – and the stakes could scarcely be higher. A hard right Tory victory will result, in government, in an utterly reactionary programme aimed at crushing the last remnants of the 1945 welfare state settlement and further attacking workplace rights and the rights of migrant workers.

Callinicos's three main political conclusions are the following:

1. The debate on Brexit is essentially a debate *within the ruling class*; it is important for the radical and revolutionary left not to get stuck in this debate.
2. Some remainers who advocate a second referendum are prioritising the fight to retain EU membership over the fight against racism, because a new referendum will inevitably unleash an avalanche of xenophobia and racism.
3. The fight against racism and its cutting edge Islamophobia requires maximum unity on the left, and differences on Brexit must not be allowed to disrupt that unity.

The argument that Brexit is mainly a *debate* within the ruling class cannot be sustained. It is a division, not a debate, which has life and death consequences for the working class, and migrant workers in particular. The imposition of Trump-style capitalism will be the outcome if the hard right wins. This is not a situation in which the working class movement can be bystanders. Take for example the situation of immigrant workers after Brexit which is insufficiently addressed here by Callinicos. He rightly states that 'a left that opposes free movement sets itself against workers in the rest of Europe'. But he argues:

'The difficulty confronting May and Corbyn is all the more acute because both have interpreted the referendum result as a rejection of free movement for European citizens. This—dictated in May's case by her own core prejudices, but a pragmatic move on Corbyn's part in large degree in response

to pressure from trade union leaders and Labour right-wingers—has made striking a deal with the EU harder, because free movement is one of the “four freedoms” that have hardened into a legalistic dogma that Brussels seeks to impose on its neighbours. But it also panders to the anti-migrant racism played on by the Tory right and UKIP during the referendum campaign.’

But it is not that May and Corbyn have *interpreted* the Leave referendum vote as being opposed to free movement, it was *all about* immigration and free movement. Callinicos concedes that it is ‘partially’ right to say there was an upsurge of racism after the Brexit vote, but false to say that the Brexit vote itself was mainly a racist or xenophobic vote. The question of who actually voted Leave has been answered by former SWP member Charlie Hoare in the US *Socialist Worker* [2], looking at the Ashcroft survey of referendum voters which found that two-thirds of Leave voters had voted Tory or UK Independence Party (UKIP) at the 2015 general election. He writes:

‘The survey also found that Black and minority ethnic voters and young voters — two groups hit particularly hard by both unemployment and austerity — decisively rejected Leave, with Muslims voting 70 percent Remain.

‘Ashcroft didn’t ask about trade union membership, but at the 2018 Trades Union Congress (TUC) congress, Steve Turner of the trade union Unite said that [60 percent of trade unionists voted to remain](#).

‘Of course, responses to unemployment and austerity played a part in determining how some workers voted, just as some white workers responded in the U.S. by voting for Trump....Similarly, as I noted in [an article written immediately after the referendum](#): “It’s an odd ‘working-class revolt’ that doesn’t include Scotland, West Belfast, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Bristol, London, most union members, most Black and minority ethnic voters, and three-quarters of young voters”.’

This argument, which coincides with positions outlined by Wayne Asher in *International Socialism*, seems to us to be irrefutable. Brexit is not just a ruling class issue that can be parked on one side while we get on with the fight against racism. It is the mechanism by which hard right forces use and increase racism to push themselves forward and get into power.

On the question of a second referendum, Alex Callinicos says:

‘Advocates of a “People’s Vote” are indeed in a contradictory position. They argue (falsely) that the vote to leave on 23 June 2016 was a racist vote, and also argue (with partial truth) that the result encouraged racism. But they advocate another referendum, even though the Tory right, UKIP (now remodelled under Gerard Batten’s leadership in alliance with the alt-right and Tommy Robinson) and open Nazis will rely on anti-migrant racism even more than the first time round. But Remainer ultras seem happy to pay the price in heightened racism in order to keep Britain in the EU.’

Callinicos doesn’t seem aware that the fairly unambiguous SWP position that the first referendum was not based on racism is slipping. On the one hand he says that remainers ‘falsely’ claim the Brexit referendum Yes vote was based on racism, but then talks about ‘the anti-migrant racism played on by the Tory right and UKIP during the referendum campaign’ and says that in a new referendum the hard right ‘will rely on anti-migrant racism even more than the first time round.’

As explained by Charlie Hoare and Wayne Asher [3], there is strong empirical evidence that the Leave vote was won by mobilising the most reactionary sections of the population, especially huge reactionary sections of the petty bourgeoisie. It was a massive exercise in pushing politics as a whole to the right.

On his third point, on unity irrespective of a Brexit position, Alex Callinicos says: 'This is the issue—combating racism and the far right. By comparison, where you stand on the EU is a secondary question'. He argues:

'By refusing to accept this logic, some left Remainers are putting support for the EU ahead of fighting racism and fascism. Maybe the stress of the past few years has turned some of them into left liberals who have bought into the ideology of "Europeanism" and sincerely believe the EU to be a motor of progress. Others may hope that campaigning against Brexit will give them the edge against other sections of the radical and revolutionary left. But many left Remainers are much better than this—accepting the left critique of the EU but opposing Brexit in the mistaken belief that in current conditions it is impossible to campaign against the EU on a socialist basis. We disagree about this. But there is no reason that we can't stand together against the main enemy—the bosses and the racist far right that the crisis of their system is strengthening.'

We agree with unity against the racists and fascists. The authors of this article were amongst the organisers of the recent successful No Pasaran! conference in London, which drew together participants from across the movements in Britain and elsewhere in Europe. Such unity is essential but it is also essential to organise politically against the dynamic forces behind the rise of the far right.

The real situation is that most left Remainers perfectly well understand the nature of the EU, but think that in this concrete situation Brexit anti-Europeanism is being used to advance the hard right inside and outside of the Conservative Party, and indeed is a deadly threat to the working class and immigrant workers in particular. And far from alleviating the racist and right-wing nationalist threat, a hard Brexit will actually accentuate it.

There is a curious insouciance in the Callinicos approach. Fighting racism and the far right is not something that goes on irrespective of the political situation and the new forces that have emerged – with no connection to Brexit. In the present situation there is a real danger of a hard-right Conservative government, backed up by the Brexit party. This would be an absolute disaster for the working class, and for millions of migrant workers and long-term immigrants in particular. This is not just a ruling class debate.

Apart from the impact of a hard right government on workers' and migrant rights, a hard Brexit would have an enormously detrimental effect on working class living standards, as explained by Sabby Sagall writing in the current issue of *International Socialism* [\[4\]](#):

'A hard Brexit will undoubtedly result in a significant deterioration of levels of employment and income. This is apart from the likelihood of an economic downturn in the event that there is no deal with the EU on the terms of Brexit. The resulting chaos could double food prices and plunge Britain into a recession that could last 30 years, worse than the 1930s. The government's own statistics estimate that under the worst scenario, in 15 years GDP would be 10.7 percent lower than if the UK stays in the EU. According to barrister Anneli Howard of Monckton Chambers: "the anticipated recession will be worse than the 1930s, let alone 2008".'

The SWP and other Lexiteers, in attacking those campaigning against Brexit – for example the hundreds of thousands who marched on March 9 – have cut themselves off from influencing the progressive forces in the debate, as well as from the many tens of thousands of migrant workers and young people who were on that march. The likes of Alistair Campbell and Vince Cable are only able to pose themselves as the leaders of the anti-Brexit movement because Jeremy Corbyn and other key Labour leaders are absent and have ceded leadership to the Labour right and Liberals.

So Alex Callinicos's main conclusion that we can forget about the issue of Brexit and get on with unity against the racists and bosses doesn't work. At least not in the way that he poses it. In a situation where there are unfortunately a small number of people in the workers' movement who want a 'full Brexit' and are prepared to speak on the same platform as Nigel Farage, parking the Brexit question won't work.

The hard right and the fascists have to be opposed at every turn. But socialists cannot abstain from opposing the threat posed by the Brexiteer hard right of the Conservative Party, and their flank guards in the Brexit Party and UKIP. Anti-immigrant racism and Islamophobia did not originate with Brexit but it is Brexit that has enabled the hard right to make huge advances and opened up the path for a Boris Johnson Trumpian-style premiership.

We believe that Brexit must be recognised not just as a problem for the ruling class, but as central to the crisis that is unfolding to the detriment of the working class across Europe. Brexit must also be understood as the British expression of deeper shifts within capitalism internationally, and the British manifestation of the far-right turn, afflicting Europe and beyond.

The delusions of the Tory Brexiteers with their empty rhetoric of a 'Global Britain' are mirrored on the left by those Lexiteers who wish to build a Socialist Britain while cutting economic ties with its biggest trading partners, ending freedom of movement and operating the economy under World Trade Organisation rules.

The importance of Europe for the radical left is that it is the arena in which it is possible to seek the solution to the reality that the productive forces have outstripped their national framework. The working class in Britain is increasingly part of a pan-European working class and needs to develop the forms of transitional organisation that will enable it to operate on a European-wide basis. One of the central problems of the Eurozone crisis in Greece was that the working class there was isolated from the wider European labour and trade union movement despite the best efforts of the solidarity movements. It is by consciously attempting to raise the level of struggle above the national that will provide the framework for proletarian internationalism to cease being an abstract slogan and become part of the living reality of the struggles of the class.

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<https://prruk.org/alex-callinicos-brexit-blues/>

Footnotes

[1] <http://isj.org.uk/brexit-blues/>; <http://isj.org.uk/shambling-towards-the-precipice/>

[2] <https://socialistworker.org/2019/01/08/building-the-left-in-the-face-of-brexite>

[3] <http://isj.org.uk/the-left-and-brexite/>

[4] <http://isj.org.uk/remain-and-replace-a-socialist-case/>