

Britain & EU referendum: For a critical in vote against racism

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Cameron's announcement on Saturday on his return from Brussels with his so called reform package, that the long awaited referendum on EU membership would take place on June 23 and that he would recommend a vote to stay in, has triggered civil war in the Tory Party.

Within hours they were kicking lumps out of each other as pent up decades of bitterness burst into the open.

By Sunday, six ministers, including Michael Gove and Boris Johnson (the Mayor of London) and an outright majority of Tory MPs declared themselves in favour of exit. Initial aspirations of a civilised debate broke down within hours as personal attacks were launched. Cameron ridiculed Boris Johnson in Parliament accusing him of manoeuvring for personal advantage (a scandalous suggestion of course). The pound fell on the markets as the political situation became more uncertain.

British politics were changing in front of our eyes. A re-alignment was taking place between UKIP and the Tory xenophobic right— with George Galloway making a guest appearance. However, one thing was clear from the outset (and had been in advance), that this campaign will not be a debate about the character of the EU and the role it plays but rather a carnival of reaction as one anti-EU group competes with another to be more anti-migrant and anti-asylum seeker.

Cameron competes with the Tory right and UKIP to play the racist card with the best effect. "We must end the something-for-nothing society", he said as he announced the date for the vote—which is code for 'we must stop foreigners coming here and sponging on our benefits.

Labour is far more united with just six MPs declaring for exit. Straight after the announcement, Jeremy Corbyn said that Labour would be calling for a vote to stay in. This did not mean, he said, that he supports Cameron, even if they would be on the same side in the vote. He ridiculed Cameron's reforms as taking benefits away from children and benefits away from workers.

Corbyn said that Cameron's referendum had nothing to do with what is best for the people of Britain, but was a part of an internecine war that was taking place in the Tory Party. Nor did he share Cameron's vision of Europe. Whilst Cameron wanted a neo-liberal Europe he wanted a social Europe, a Europe of the people.

This was all in sharp contrast to Ed Miliband, who also spoke in the Commons debate and simply

argued a pro-EU position.

Historical roots

Today's warfare inside the Tory Party has long historical roots and reflects strategic divisions in terms of Britain's place in the world—Europeanism or Atlanticism. This is something they have grappled with, and been bitterly divided over, for over 40 years.

Michael Heseltine famously walked out of Thatchers cabinet in 1986 over the purchase of US rather than European helicopters. Heseltine and the pro-Europe wing of the Tory party looked towards the European market while Thatcher—despite her signing of the Single European Act of 1986—looked across the Atlantic to the USA and world markets.

For Cameron, however, the issue is less about the strategic location of British capitalism than the internal management of the Tory Party and a pre-election pledge to UKIP voters in advance of an election that he did not expect to win.

The democracy of the referendum

The referendum itself (as set out in the Referendum Bill) is deeply undemocratic in at least two important ways.

It excludes over 2 million EU citizens living in the UK. EU citizens have the right to vote in British local elections as well as European elections. This is a big issue, in London in particular, where a quarter of disenfranchised people live. This is a concession to the Tory right, to prevent a revolt over this, rather than something Cameron would want himself.

In the Scottish referendum all those living in Scotland were given the right to vote—as were the 16-17 year olds who are also excluded by the Referendum Bill. In Scotland of course including everyone suited the outcome Cameron wanted.

The SNP strongly opposed these exclusions whilst Labour effectively supported them, reversing their opposition to the Referendum Bill and voting for it.

The other issue on which the SNP rightly raised strong opposition is the UK-wide nature of the referendum vote, which could drag Scotland, and indeed Wales, out of the EU against their will. Nicola Sturgeon is rightly demanding individual votes in the four nations of the British state and is warning that a No vote could trigger a second independence referendum in Scotland.

Character of the EU?

Socialist Resistance has long held the view that the EU is a reactionary anti-working class neoliberal institution and we are in principle in favour of exit from it.

The nature of the EU is determined by the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 (with its single currency) and the Nice Treaty of 2001. This was to act as a supra-national authority charged with ensuring that the member states comply with neo-liberalism in order to increase the rate of exploitation and compete more effectively in world markets.

The most authentic face of the EU was played out in Greece by the Troika—a tripartite enforcer mechanism comprised of the European Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the IMF who used Greece as a test for extreme neoliberal measure. These have imposed pauperisation on the Greek working class for the first time since World War I— and is therefore entirely consistent with the role of the EU under the Maastricht Treaty and the single currency.

Then there is the matter of democracy. Power in the EU lies with the Council of Ministers and the Commission—neither of which are elected bodies but which are dominated by the biggest and most powerful countries. All this means that internal reform is impossible.

How to vote?

Despite all this we are calling for a vote in this referendum to stay in. It might be counterintuitive but it is necessary. There are a number of reasons for this.

The campaign itself will be carnival of racism and xenophobia and will play into the rise of racism and anti-migrant sentiment of Britain and across Europe.

The referendum is an initiative of the right and it is a part of a rightwing agenda: i.e., this would not be an exit that would strengthen the worker's movement. When Tony Blair proposed a referendum in 2004 (which never happened) we were in favour of exit. Today with the rise of UKIP and racism and xenophobia across Europe it is a very different matter.

The consequences of a vote for exit at this time and under these conditions, would clearly strengthen both the Tory right and UKIP and could even bring about a dangerous realignment between them. It would be taken as a mandate for the introduction of a range of new restrictions on immigration and not just from the EU. It would also put EU citizens living in Britain in a difficult and vulnerable situation.

The Tory right, in the form of the 'free market' Institute for Economic Affairs, have already published scenarios that they would expect a Tory government to follow after British exit. These scenarios involve realignment of the UK state with the other major reactionary elements of the international bosses' clubs - the World Trade Organisation, NATO, the European Free Trade Area (EFTA), the EU Customs Union and the European Economic Area (EEA).

The Tories (or whatever rightwing government would come out of an exit vote) would repeal the Working Time Directive that limits (however inadequately) workers' hours and remove the EU restrictions on genetically modified crops, as first steps in a long series of reactionary policies. Reactionary Free Trade Agreements would be negotiated and the possibility of signing the UK's own version of TTIP or even joining the USA in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is proposed.

In any case, defining the EU as a reactionary anti-working class institution does not mean that we are obliged to vote for exit whatever the circumstances and whatever the consequences. We need to be guided by what best serves the interests of the working class by creating the best conditions to build the fight back against austerity and win some much needed victories. Neither is it the end of the matter, nor would it mean that we would not vote for exit under conditions where it would strengthen working class struggles.

Unfortunately, the conditions for a progressive and credible No campaign (i.e., on the basis of socialist and working class politics and significant forces) do not exist in Britain today.

With previous struggles around the EU— e.g. the Maastricht Treaty and the single currency in the 1990s—it was possible to be part of broad left wing No campaign that was to some extent based on socialist and working class principles and represented something significant. It did not imply any alliance or common “national” interest” between British workers and “British” capital: while resisting global ambitions of capital it also resisted spurious notions of a common interest in British “sovereignty”.

Today we need an internationalist, not a nationalist, approach to the EU: one based on resisting the strengthening of British, European and multinational capital, resisting austerity and opposing racist barriers to access and migration. We need an alliance not with British capital or the right wing fringe of UKIP, but with workers and working class organisations and political parties in Europe and beyond. And we need to revive and strengthen working class and socialist organization in Britain to ensure that we have the basis to challenge austerity at home as well as its imposition on other countries.

The campaign ‘Another Europe is possible’ [1] is the best approximation we have today to this model:. We strongly agree with its focus on the need to defend migrant rights and oppose racism. We think however that its criticism of the EU today both in terms of democracy and in terms of people’s living standards through driving forward austerity could be sharper. But we notice that the letter written to the Guardian supporting the campaign was stronger on these issues than the original publicity – which is definitely a step forward.

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P.S.

* Socialist Resistance. February 23, 2016:

<http://socialistresistance.org/8127/eu-referendum-for-a-critical-in-vote-against-racism>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.anothereurope.org>