

Britain: Right wing putsch, escalating racism, deepening austerity - the real meaning of Brexit

Tuesday 21 March 2017, by [HEARSE Phil](#) (Date first published: 19 March 2017).

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"The way the Leave campaign have tried to ramp up a fear of immigration has been disgraceful—but the truth is that if you see an immigrant in a hospital, they're far more likely to be working there than being treated. The time has come to brand the "Brexit" campaign for what it is—a bid for a right-wing Tory takeover of the reins of power in the UK and to dismantle the hard-worn social gains of the last few decades. The people leading the case for a vote to leave are on the right of the Conservative Party and will take an "out" vote as their signal to make their power grab complete."

Nicola Sturgeon, 16/6/2016

Our enemy's enemy is not necessarily our friend, and of course the Scottish National Party, despite its vaguely leftish social democratic programme, is not a friend of socialism. But Nicola Sturgeon was completely correct on what was happening during the EU referendum last year. Being anti-EU has been the banner of the Conservative right wing for 30 years or more. The victory of the Brexit vote last June represented the spectacular victory of the Conservative right and the forces that backed them - like UKIP.

The core Brexiteers in the Tory leadership are not just right wing on Europe, they are right wing on everything. In January 2011 Observer political editor Toby Helm explained how getting out of the EU was just the banner behind which the Tory right were fighting for a party takeover and to ditch the coalition with the Liberals.

"... their concerns run far wider and deeper (than the EU). Unease is being fuelled by a growing belief in the Conservative party that a series of other fundamental Tory principles are being watered down in a similar way - just to appease Nick Clegg's party."

"As well as Europe, [Bill] Cash cites the coalition's liberal approach to criminal justice, its stance on the Human Rights Act and a decision to give prisoners voting rights as areas where the very essence of Conservatism is being lost in deals with Lib Dems.

“It is part of what he calls ‘a silent revolution’ being pushed through by Cameron and Clegg – one that young Tory MPs are being forced by their whips to back against their will ‘in defiance of the Conservative manifesto’ on which they went to the country only eight months ago.”

It was probably not within the wildest imaginings that Bill Cash, John Redwood and David Davis – amongst those dubbed by John Major as being “three apples short of a picnic” – that within five and a half years that they would not only get a European Referendum, but actually win it and be in the midst of a push to get rid of EU workers and carry out a brutal ‘hard Brexit’. But that is exactly where we are. The referendum outcome has resulted in a cabinet that is markedly more right wing than Cameron’s.

In her absurd 2016 Tory conference speech Theresa May promised that her government would take major steps to tackle poverty and inequality: but the reality is the very opposite. Her government is deepening the policies of austerity, brutalising the NHS, crushing welfare and attacking democratic rights. Every announcement reeks of the Tory right’s brutality: keep out the refugee children, send whistle blowers to jail, sell off the Land Registry to a private company, deny more crucial funding to the NHS, build a new runway at Heathrow, keep EU residents unsure of their future as ‘hostages’ in the Brexit negotiations. And start the deportations now.

The people behind the Tory right and Brexit were not confined to Eurosceptic MPs. Their crucial allies were the Murdoch press, the *Daily Mail*, the *Express* which ran an anti-immigrant front page every day for several years, and the *Daily Telegraph*. All of them regarded the post-2010 coalition with the Liberals as treason and ran an increasingly raucous campaign against the Cameron-Osborne leadership, variously dubbed the Notting Hill set and ‘Cameroons’, pictured as backsliding liberal ‘lovies’.

They are ran a similar (and unfinished) campaign against Commons Speaker John Bercow for his comments on Trump, and indeed the *Mail* campaign against him as a ‘left’ Tory has been going on for years. The control of a significant section of the print media, especially the best-selling *Daily Mail*, has been crucial for the right wing billionaires in imposing the right wing Brexit agenda. The print media is especially important in addressing the most reactionary sector of the electorate, the over-50s, who also happen to be amongst the most likely to vote, with the over-65s recording more than 80% referendum turnout in some regions.

Rising racism, deepening austerity



Every political event has to be judged not abstractly, but in the concrete political context in which it occurs. Especially we have to judge on the basis of ‘qui prodest?’ – who benefits? The campaign to get Britain out of the EU was not like a progressive, anti-authoritarian uprising, the fruits of which were seized at the last moment by the reactionary right. As I pointed out in a 2009 article [\[1\]](#), the fight for Brexit, was initiated and led at every stage by the Tory right, backed by UKIP.

The result has been to deepen racism from above and racism from below, and to deepen the Tories’

progress towards a radical destruction of the welfare state. The Brexit referendum outcome led to a spike in xenophobic racism in general and a spike in racist attacks in particular. In the weeks following the Brexit vote reported racist attacks rose by 41%, culminating in the murder of Polish worker Arkadiusz Jóźwik in Harlow, Essex.

As the *London Evening Standard* explained:

“Racist and religious hate crimes increased in the UK directly after the Brexit vote, official figures show. Nearly 5,500 racially or religiously motivated offences were reported to police in the month after the vote, new Home Office figures revealed today. The statistics also show that the number of racially or religiously aggravated offences, which include assaults, verbal abuse and xenophobic graffiti, remained above pre-vote levels in August with around 4,500 further incidents during the month, despite falling from its July peak.”

It's true that there has been a secular rise on hate crime figures for four years, but the post-Brexit spike in unmistakable. And that is directly because the Brexit vote legitimised racist and xenophobic views making racists bolder in expressing anti-foreigner opinions and staging racist attacks.

There has been a major right wing campaign to deny or minimise this effect of Brexit, pushed forward by the right-wing think tank Civitas, the Mail, the Express and of course UKIP. Nigel Farage was tackled on this issue by LBC journalist Shelagh Fogarty who asked him whether he thought the rise in racial attacks and the vote to leave the EU were linked. He replied:

“I don't think it is. I think we're getting a bit hung up on this (sic). What is also happening is we have people who've previous been convicted of rape and murder coming into Britain and committing heinous crimes again because of the free movement of people.”

Shelagh Fogarty replied: “Alright, we'll come to them again if you like – I mean we've covered that extensively – I'm talking about British people who see a foreigner and now feel in bigger numbers, it's ok to punch them, to kick them, to kill them in some cases.”

Farage replied, “I don't believe that's the case, if it is, it's deeply regrettable.... If Brexit has led to any increase in bad language or bad behaviour, it is regrettable but I'm not sure the link is a direct link.” (LBC radio September 2014)

So that's it for Farage – racist attacks and the murder of a Polish man are just “bad behaviour” which is “deeply regrettable”.

Beyond the racist attacks, Brexit has had multiple negative effects for EU citizens living and working in the UK, asylum seekers and immigrants in general. There's no doubt that the Home Office is under instructions to minimise the number of new immigrants and asylum seekers let in and to do everything possible to get EU citizens and other non-UK nationals to leave the country.

Britain has become a very bad destination for refugees and asylum seekers. A Guardian report carried out with three other European newspapers found that:

“... Britain takes fewer refugees, offers less generous financial support, provides housing that is often substandard, does not give asylum seekers the right to work, has been known to punish those who volunteer and routinely forces people into destitution and even homelessness when they are granted refugee status due to bureaucratic delays” (Guardian 1/3/2017).

All this is designed to make Britain a less attractive propositions for refugees. But in addition the

Home Office is trying to make it as difficult as possible for EU residents to remain. Applicants are faced with an 85-page form to fill in, which has been described as being of Kafkaesque complexity. Those who don't fill in everything 'correctly' get a letter which states:

"As you appear to have no alternative basis of stay in the United Kingdom you should now make arrangements to leave. If you fail to make a voluntary departure a separate decision may be made at a later date to enforce your removal..."

The objective is clearly to spread alarm among those who want to stay in the UK and by implicit threats to get them to self-deport. Indeed that is what is happening, with EU workers already leaving Britain in large numbers. They are not being replaced by new EU immigrants, leading to labour shortages and a threat to the NHS. Already the number of EU nurses coming to Britain has declined by 92% since June 2016.

There are nearly three million EU citizens living in the UK, nearly all of them working, and many having been here for years. Among them, for example, are 31,000 academics, all of who faced an uncertain future. Of course they are generally not among the most threatened or imperilled by a possible eviction from Britain. But it is an example of the irrationality of extreme right Tory immigration policy. Even from the objective viewpoint of British capitalism, the presence of such a cohort of European academics is a major plus, and enables and cements British participation in pan-European scientific projects which often have significant business spin-offs.

On March 8 the government organised a mass deportation of 42 people to Jamaica. The legal magazine *The Barrister* pointed out that:

- Some of the people removed have lived in the UK for nearly their whole life.
- Many left children, partners and wider families behind.
- Some have asylum claims and fear for their lives on removal.
- Many had legal cases pending. Deportation will stop them from accessing their rights.
- Many could not afford to pay the huge legal fees to regularise their stay.

People who were deported on this flight explained their terrifying experience to Vice magazine. Nearly 150 people from Jamaica have now been deported since September 2016. Jamaica is also preparing for mass deportations of its citizens from the US under Trump.

An ICM survey published by the TUC on March 17 reported a big upsurge in the experience of racism by Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) workers since the Brexit referendum. It said that:

1 in 5 BAME people (19%) have suffered or witnessed racial assault

2 in 5 (41%) have heard racist remarks or opinions

2 in 5 people (38%) have seen racist material online

1 in 4 (27%) have seen racist graffiti, posters or leaflets

This of course is the subjective experience of BAME people. But this subjective experience reflects objective facts. Racism from above and racism from below have sharply increased since the Brexit

vote. Not surprising since – obviously – anti-immigrant xenophobia was a significant factor in the Brexit victory.

Hard Brexit plan

Brexit is deepening Tory austerity plans. On 14 February Tory chancellor Philip Hammond warned the European Union states that if Britain didn't get the trade deal it wanted and was forced into 'hard Brexit', it would radically change its 'social model', in order to attract foreign investors. This would include a massive reduction in business taxes and an attempt to further push down wages. Former Tory premier John Major was among those who pointed out that such a plan would result in a collapse of our present (much reduced) welfare state. A hard Brexit social model will be directly at the expense of the living standards of working people.

Already Brexit is having negative consequence for living standards, as the sharp decline of the pound pushes up prices. (It has had particularly negative consequences for Brits who live in Europe and who depend on pensions or salaries paid in pounds – like many of the hundreds of thousands who live in Spain who have seen their income go down by 15%+). In fact the government is preparing for a hard Brexit by trying to create a huge government reserve fund to fight off speculator attacks on the pound and damages to tax returns. This is part, but only part, of the current attacks on welfare spending across the board.

It's true that the Conservatives have been undermining the welfare state since coming to power in 2010. But the Ukipised Tories post-Brexit are savagely deepening this. Ongoing attacks include the gross underfunding of the NHS, a sharp reduction of the finance to non-academy schools that could see thousands of teachers made redundant in the next two years, an edict which effectively bans councils from further building of social housing, the ongoing witch hunt of disabled people crashing benefits across the board, and of course the savaging of council spending that has substantially squashed their ability to make much of a difference to the poor and disadvantaged.

We are not arguing here that Tory attacks on the welfare state and general hostility to the poor and oppressed were caused by Brexit. But rather that May's even more rightwing Brexitised cabinet, giving central positions to hard right wingers like Liam Fox, David Davis, Chris Grayling, Amber Rudd and Damien Green, has intensified its drive towards ever more rightwing, anti-welfare state solutions.

Workers' rights

The EU wasn't built to defend the rights of workers, far from it: but the way things stand at the moment British workers have a range of rights – sometimes just ignored by employers – that will disappear with Brexit. These rights are leftovers from the 'social chapter' period in the EU, overseen by Jacques Delors, a period long gone down the austerity memory hole. The point is that Labour's Commons attempt to amend the Article 50 provisions to defend these rights failed, making them potentially – and it should be said quite probably – victims of Brexit.

These rights include the working time provisions which limit compulsory working hours to 48 a week; time off provisions that make it compulsory to take a minimum of 48 hours off work per fortnight and a rest time of at least 11 consecutive hours (12 hours for young people) every day; annual paid leave; maternity rights and parental leave; anti-discriminations measures and compensation for discrimination victims; a range of health and safety provisions and protection for

agency workers.

Those who supported Brexit could argue that abolishing these measures was not what the majority of Leave voters voted for. But going out of the EU in the current context opens up the severe danger that this is indeed what they will get. When Britain goes out of the EU all these workers' rights will automatically lapse. To get on the statute book again, they will have to be re-enacted, providing infinite opportunity for the Tories to claim they are 'outdated' and incompatible with a 'flexible' economy – the kind of low wage, low-tax, de-regulated economy that Philip Hammond is threatening. If the Tories merely intended to transfer the EU's workers' rights provision into British law, then why didn't they just accept the Labour Commons amendment on this? Their failure to do so is extremely ominous.

Brexit threat to the environment

The same thing holds true for Britain's regulation of the environment. A raft of environmental laws and regulations exist because they are requirements of EU membership – about 70% of all environmental regulations, which will now fall when Brexit is enacted. In particular Britain has been required to make progress on renewable energy, recycling, animal welfare, clean air and clean coastal water because of EU directives.

There is no proof that the Tories will not simply incorporate present EU regulations and targets into British law, but it seems at best unlikely. Especially as Britain has already been in a battle against new anti-pollution, clear air targets that the EU wants to impose. And a desire for trade deals with the United States which has very different regulations could mean ditching EU rules, for example by accepting chicken washed in chlorine and beef pumped full of hormones.

Human rights

There are two distinct areas of human right connected with Brexit – the European Charter of Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights, which theoretically protects the implementation of the Charter. The Charter contains legal requirements and 'principles' that have no legal status – most social and economic 'rights' are just unenforceable 'principles'.

Technically the Charter and the Court are not directly linked to the EU. It could be possible for a Brexit Britain to remain in both, but May has announced that Britain plans to leave the European Charter, and without membership of the Charter the Court would have no powers in the UK. The reason for Tory displeasure is clear: the Court has made uncomfortable decisions that enraged the Brexit right on homophobia, child protection, deportations, torture and freedom of the press. The European Court – and the threat of going to it – has acted as a final arena for human rights campaigners to challenge egregious decisions of the British courts. In today's context, its absence from the British legal system would mean a weakening of legal checks on the rich and powerful.

Who voted for Brexit?

Socialists are not big fans of plebiscitary democracy. The referendum has a spectacular history of being used for reactionary purposes by authoritarian governments that have control of or big support among the media. Louis Napoleon's 1851 'Eighteenth Brumaire' coup was sanctioned by a big referendum victory, as was 'Anschluss' – the forced incorporation of Austria into Germany in

March 1938.

Turkish president Erdogan, having closed down all opposition media and imprisoned many democrats and Kurdish activists, is now holding a referendum to sanction his new authoritarian presidential constitution. The sanctity of the Brexit referendum being claimed by the Tory right and UKIP is of course completely hypocritical: Nigel Farage was careful to point out that if the remainers won by only 52% to 48% (the exact figures he used) the vote could not be considered definitive. But 52% for Brexit must be of course definitive for all time.

The breakdown of the 2016 referendum vote by age and gender is very telling. Among both men and women you only get a Brexit majority in the over-50s. Men in the 18-24% group voted 61% for Remain and among young women in the same group it was an astonishing 80% for Remain. Sixty one percent of men over 65 and 66% of women over 65 voted 'Leave'. Doubtless the youth vote was not a strong vote in favour of the EU as an institution, but a vote in favour of 'Europe' as a social category, ie for internationalism as opposed to nationalism.

While millions of the comfortable petty bourgeoisie in the shires voted 'Leave', of course there was a big Leave vote among sections of the dispossessed working class, particularly in de-industrialised and former coal mining areas. Still it was a reactionary vote. In tracking down key indicators, polling company Nesta found a strong correlation between a Brexit vote and utterly reactionary view on social questions. Stian Westlake their Head of Research says:

""If you look at someone's class status and their income, and you try and use that to guess whether or not they voted Remain, it turns out it's not that much better than guesswork. It gives you around 55% accuracy, and obviously a guess would give you 50% accuracy.

However:

"If you look at attitudes to questions such as, 'Do you think criminals should be publicly whipped?' or 'Are you in favour of the death penalty?' - those things are much better predictors, and you get over 70% accuracy".

The point is that although the underlying reason behind someone voting for Brexit might be a vaguely class resentment against the 'elite' that doesn't care about them and has abandoned them, it is still a politically reactionary vote, because it accepted the case that immigration was the key to the plight of working class people in their communities. Xenophobia and nationalism is deep in the Brexit vote, but it's topped out with a huge chunk of racism.

This is not something new: you could see it clearly in the regional pattern of voting in the 2009 European election when UKIP won 17% of the vote, as I explained at the time [\[2\]](#).

But there's one factor that's very important and easily missed because it is counter-intuitive. While the majority of Labour constituencies voted for 'Leave', the majority of Labour voters did not. Estimates of Labour's Remain voters vary between 64-67%. Many of these voters doubtless would have would have been happy with a more determined anti-Brexit line from the Labour leadership. Moreover there is growing poll and anecdotal evidence that there is a significant shift among Leave voters: four per cent of them said Brexit was the worst event of 2016. Leave voters are much more likely to have changed their mind than Remain voters.

Why we fought for Remain

There is absolutely no principle which obliges socialists to be in favour of a capitalist single market as opposed to capitalist autarchy. During the 1975 referendum most socialist organisations fought for a 'no' vote to British membership, in the case of the organisation I was in (the IMG) behind the slogan "No to the capitalist Common Market, yes to a United Socialist States of Europe".

But in principle we are neither protectionists nor free traders. The EU is no less capitalist now than it was then, no more democratic, and indeed together with the IMF has been complicit in enforcing vicious austerity on Greece, Italy, Spain, Ireland and (less successfully) Portugal.

In my view there were three related reasons for voting Remain.

First each election and referendum has to be judged concretely and not on the basis of abstract principles. This referendum was the mechanism of a right wing coup, under the leadership of the Tory right and UKIP. Full stop.

Second the referendum was the vehicle of a wave of anti-immigrant xenophobia and racism.

And third, concretely Brexit means an assault on the living standards of the working class. Brexit is going to pump inflation into the system as the pound sinks and indeed already has, as wages are held down. Brexit is going to target the last vestiges of the 'social Europe' protection for workers. Brexit is going to hit employment in manufacturing industry as the country's main manufacturing customers imposed tariffs. And Tory Brexit presupposes a model for the economy of cheap labour, deregulation and ultra-low corporate taxes to (attempt to) attract foreign capital.

Put together this is a massive reactionary agenda. The workers movement and the left should be doing everything possible to obstruct it.

Young Remainers



At the June 12 2016 London meeting advocating a 'Left Brexit' (Lexit) Tariq Ali bemoaned the fact that it was very hard to convince young people of the Brexit case, something he put down to the false information about Europe given by the media, who he claimed picture it as a social and green paradise (which is a likely story, but anyway). Exit polls quoted above showed indeed a huge majority of young people in favour of a Remain vote – an astonishing 80% of 18-24 year old young women and 61% of men the same age.

But the huge vote among young people for Remain is not so hard to understand. Whatever young people did or did not know about the European Union, one thing is clear about them – they overwhelmingly support multiculturalism and reject racism. And they understand perfectly well that Nigel Farage and his clones in the Tory right champion nationalism and xenophobia for fundamentally racist reasons. That's why the mass demonstration against Brexit on 25 June last

year, two days after the referendum was so young and disproportionately female. The basic instincts of the young Remainers are fundamentally correct. But there is a problem.

Right wing Labour and Liberal politicians know that there is, because of Labour's weak response, a political vacuum of militant opposition to Brexit that they can exploit. Indeed the Liberals had a very organised contingent on the June 25 demonstration, but most of the Left were absent. Without the emergence of a significant left wing anti-Brexit force, there will be a price to be paid in terms of the political evolution of these young people.

The people on the June 25 demonstration were very much the same kind of young people who dominated at the demonstrations over Donald Trump's inauguration. Not surprisingly most of them spontaneously see a connection between the Brexit vote and Trump's electoral victory. That's because there is one: both are part of the same right swing trend in world politics.

There is something really strange in the attitude of some left wingers towards working class voters for Brexit. In France there are millions of working class people who vote for the ultra-reactionary Front National. This is especially true in the former industrial areas of the Pas de Calais and the run-down former 'red belt' suburbs of Paris. But it seems that no one on the British Left doubts that this is a completely reactionary racist and xenophobic vote, albeit one protesting what neoliberalism has done to those communities.

Equally the motivations of millions of working class Trump voters in the Mid-West 'rustbelt' areas of the United States are doubtless similar – often a protest vote against being abandoned by the rich elite and the government, who are oblivious to the suffering and poverty in the centre of the world's richest country. But few I suspect would claim there was anything progressive about voting for Trump. Or indeed would deny that it was a reactionary vote for racist and xenophobic solutions.

But when it comes to the EU referendum, which was won for Leave on the basis of anti-immigrant xenophobic nationalism, the same criteria do not apply. On the contrary detailed searches are made for something progressive in the Brexit vote, described by one prominent Left leader as 'vaguely democratic' in wanting to 'take back control' of 'our' own nation. As if 'taking back control' were not directly linked to the nation of taking back control of borders that are 'too open' to immigrants and 'taking back control' from institutions that are indeed – foreign.

Article 50

Last November Jeremy Corbyn did not say Labour would put forward its amendments and then vote for launching Article 50 even if those amendments were defeated. Not at all. He said there was a 'bottom line' for Labour in order to get Labour's vote for Article 50:

"Jeremy Corbyn told the Sunday Mirror that Labour's "Brexit bottom line" would require guarantees for access to the EU's single market for exporters, continued protection of workers' rights, safeguards for consumers and the environment and pledges that Britain would make up any loss of EU capital investment." (Guardian 5 November 2016)

By the New Year this was no longer a 'bottom' line. This change was very unfortunate, to put it mildly. Labour had every right to say the EU referendum left the conditions for Brexit open. It was quite right to wage a fight over the conditions of launching Article 50, and a significant fight does not take place if you announce in advance that you will vote for Article 50 come what may.

When shadow Brexit Secretary Keir Starmer spoke in the House at the opening of the Article 50

debate, the Tory right must have been sniggering inwardly. Waxing eloquent on the democratic nature of the referendum, Starmer gave the Tories an assurance that Labour's amendments were basically just making the record.

The only real argument against Corbyn maintaining his November 'bottom line' position is that it would have been seen as 'undemocratic' and Labour would have paid a high electoral price in constituencies that voted Brexit. But that assumes that all Brexit voters are equally adamant on a 'get out whatever the consequences' position. There is of course a hard core that say this and they are frequently on TV. Frankly nothing will reconcile most of this minority to Labour under Corbyn. Probably they were going to vote against Labour whatever position Corbyn took on launching Article 50.

Lexiteers

It has to be said that the views expressed here are not held by significant sections of the Left who consider that it is "eminently sensible" to fight for a "Peoples' Brexit". Regrettably this is not on offer and far from being eminently sensible is just day dreaming. The first duty of socialists is to face reality as it is, not how they would like it to be. The Brexit on offer is a right-wing, reactionary Brexit imposed by the xenophobic ultra-nationalist right wing. We should fight it every inch of the way.

At the end of a long period of defeats for the working class, some sections of the Left have over time effectively given up – and moved to the right or out of politics. Others have responded by holding on to what they learned in the 1970s and '80s, or even earlier, failing to deal with substantial changes in both the infrastructure and ideological superstructure of world capitalism. So it is with the EU referendum with notable sections of the Left content to repeat that the EU is a 'bosses' club' – as if that solved everything and automatically orientated the Left on how to vote in the EU referendum. The reality has been outlined on these pages by Neil Faulkner, and I leave the last word to him:

"If the monster of nationalism and racism incubating inside the Brexit camp was less than wholly apparent during the campaign, it is undeniable now. Yet I have seen revolutionaries whose opinions I used to respect claiming that the EU Referendum result represents 'a class vote' and that, because working-class communities voted heavily against the Remain camp, we are witness to a popular revolt against austerity and inequality.

"This is breathtaking stupidity. It is to make a nonsense of any distinction between 'class in itself' and 'class for itself': a vital distinction for Marx, who knew the great difference there was between the mere fact of class position – a matter of sociological description – and conscious mass struggle by working people acting for themselves to change the world. Indeed, in some sense, the whole of socialist activity is accounted for by this distinction.

"For socialists to think that millions of working people voting for Johnson, Gove, and Farage – who conducted the most racist election campaign in recent British history – can somehow be interpreted as 'a class vote', or, as the Lexit website claims, that the result constitutes 'a left-wing victory' leaves me struggling for the words."

Me too.

Phil Hearse

P.S.

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<http://leftunity.org/right-wing-putsch-escalating-racism-deepening-austerity-the-real-meaning-of-brex-it/>

Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 38302), [Right-wing England – the social and political basis of UKIP](#).

[2] Idem.