

The Left Against Brexit

An Internationalist Case for the European Union

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It's increasingly clear that there is no such thing as a 'good Brexit', let alone a 'people's' or 'left' Brexit - and this reality is gradually becoming obvious to millions of people in Britain. Brexit, after all, has always been a right wing project. Ardent eurosceptics from Nigel Farage to Daniel Hannan have long harboured a nationalist dislike for the idea of European unity - a hostility that has always gone alongside an aggressive support for Thatcherism and an extreme free-market ideology that yearns to emulate the US by, for example, abolishing the NHS.

Brexiters dream of a Britain 'unchained' from the shackles of European regulation - in other words, even more of a capitalist dystopia. They want a country where workers' rights are thrown on the bonfire, environmental and social regulations are slashed, and the country returns to levels of inequality not seen since the Victorian era. These tendencies already exist in our broken economic system, but the hard Brexit project wants to further turbo-charge them. They would turn Britain into something akin to a large offshore tax haven (see page 11). An economy where finance is already prioritised at the expense of the real economy would become even more unequal.

Today, their empire nostalgia is recast as a 'global Britain', but retains the same underlying fantasy that Britain alone can re-write the global rules and the rest of the world will just have to go along with it. The national trauma of Brexit lies in the melancholic (for some) realisation that Britain is no longer an imperial state. The European Union (EU), as the world's largest economic bloc and Britain's biggest single export market, very much holds the cards. As a member of the EU, Britain had a say over its rules through the EU's internal decision-making processes. As a non-member, it is only 'freed' to make the illusory choice of whether to accept EU rules or suffer massive economic damage.

Unlike Tory backbenchers, Theresa May (who was still prime minister at the time of writing) seems aware of this situation. The 'Chequers deal', which she attempted to broker with her divided Cabinet, proposes a partial integration into the EU's single market, particularly for manufactured goods. It would mean accepting EU rules that the UK does not have control over in a number of different areas, but would allow for 'divergence' in others. However, even this was too much for the hard Brexiters to stomach, prompting the resignations of Cabinet ministers David Davis and Boris Johnson, who have committed to voting against a deal struck on these lines.

If that wasn't enough, the EU has already branded the Chequers deal unworkable. This means that despite failing to convince her party of the compromises so far, May will need to make further concessions if a deal is going to be secured. These issues are further complicated by the political landscape in Ireland, where the reintroduction of a hard border - the inevitable consequence of some form of exit from the EU's single market and customs union - would inflame an already difficult peace process. This is unacceptable to the left, and indeed, on paper at least, to all but the most hardline of Brexit fanatics.

THE COMING CRISIS

A major political crisis looms. Theresa May is likely to have to delay signing the EU's favoured agreement until the very last moment. Severe economic dislocation – with the fear of a cataclysmic 'no deal' Brexit – will have to have started in order for her to have any hope of getting the deal through parliament. The prospects of the government falling are clearly very real.

For the radical left to be able to prosper in this situation, however, requires getting our own house in order over what Brexit represents and why it can't work for the left (page 23). Many of the criticisms of the nationalism that animates the hard right of the Tory party are taken for granted by progressives. But the evident power disparity between the UK and EU in the Brexit negotiations also poses an equally strong question for us: is our radical programme helped or hindered by this self-inflicted Brexit crisis?

For Labour, the issue has tended to be cast as a crude electoral calculation. This involves identifying a number of Labour-held constituencies that voted Leave and repeating *ad nauseam* that their vote must be respected. It avoids any strategic consideration of whether Brexit, in any form, is favourable to working class voters. And it avoids any sense that the job of politicians might be to lead, rather than follow, on a vital issue that will shape the future of the country for generations to come.

It also, however, side-steps the fact that even in 'Leave constituencies' the result wasn't mainly driven by Labour voters: a majority of Labour voters in Labour-held seats in the north of England and the Midlands voted Remain (57%) according to the British Election Study. This is not so different to the national picture, where at least 2 in 3 Labour voters backed Remain. We also now know that Labour Leave voters are much more likely to have changed their mind about Brexit than their equivalents on the Tory side. Polling by Best for Britain and Hope Not Hate has calculated that as many as 1.4 million Labour Leave voters would now back Remain.

The shift of these voters makes sense in the context of the ideological climate that characterises the Leave-Remain split. Labour voters care passionately about their communities. The economic carnage of a hard – or worse still a 'no deal' – Brexit wouldn't be felt by the financiers of the City of London. It will hit most severely what's left of a UK manufacturing base battered by decades of Thatcherism. Regions outside of London, particularly in Wales and the North East, are especially exposed.

For the Tories, the chaos of a no deal Brexit would be an opportunity. They want to create an economy locked into the American sphere of influence, without European standards for healthcare, workers' rights and the environment. This was never the case for Labour Leave voters. For many it was a protest vote against a system that they could see was failing their communities. The disastrous official Remain campaign led by David Cameron and George Osborne just poured petrol on this fire of discontent. Now, as the shambolic reality of Tory Brexit rumbles on with apparently no end in sight, it is little wonder that many Labour Leave voters are starting to reconsider.

Among the wider population too, most polls now give Remain a consistent (though small) lead – essentially reversing the split at the referendum itself. But beneath the surface the Leave vote looks increasingly fragile. The results of an August 2018 poll from YouGov were particularly revealing. They found 62% of Leave voters agreed with the statement "Problems in the negotiations with the EU make it likely that Britain will get a bad deal"; 84% accepted the point that "the process of leaving the EU so far has been a mess"; and 58% of Leave voters thought the promises made by politicians in the referendum would be broken. Perhaps most significant, however, given the likely course of the negotiations towards Britain becoming a 'taker' and not 'maker' of EU rules, was the relatively small number of Leave voters, some 19%, who said they would be prepared to change their vote if "the UK would still have to obey EU regulations without having any say in them". This

would amount to a huge swing if they did indeed change their votes.

REMAIN AND THE LEFT

The left has a unique role to play in this situation. Only the left has the politics and critique to understand where the Brexit vote came from: a cry of anguish against status quo Britain. We also have an obligation to working class people to take practical steps to transform our economy in their interests.

Anti-Brexit organisations have an understandably poor profile amongst the radical left. With leading figures wedded to the collapsing Blairite 'centre ground' – notably Tony Blair himself, along with his fixer Alastair Campbell – the mainstream Remain movement will never appeal to those of us who believe Europe needs radical change.

This opens up a space for the political ideas that this pamphlet addresses. There is a distinct radical case for staying in the EU, which starts from the assumption we cannot light a path to a new society through nationalist division. Instead, we need to work together with our allies across Europe to realise a bold and transformative socialism.

Radicals need to make an unromantic assessment of the tasks at hand across the continent. The EU has many negative qualities – just look at its treatment of Greece (page 29). But the solution to this can only be brought about – like so many issues we encounter in the twenty-first century – through international cooperation, not 'going it alone'.

Staying in the EU and working across borders to tackle the many problems the continent faces is the best and only viable option. The alternative is to roll the dice on a Tory hard Brexit and hope for the best. Faced with this choice, leadership from the left is now required.

Conclusion

The British left is at a crossroads unlike any other in its history. Just as the Corbyn moment gives us hope, the Brexit moment presents us with an unprecedented crisis. Domestically, we face an entrenched regime of deregulation combined with an emboldened far right whose anti-immigration narrative has soaked into the mainstream.

The choices we face are not unique to us. From the emerging splits in Germany's Die Linke to the 'sovereigntist' approach of some on the French left, the temptation to give in to the politics of nationalism and border-building is stronger than ever.

Our strategy for battling Brexit and the rising far right starts from an understanding that only the left can win against the encroaching darkness. Only a transformative, socialist vision can compete with the politics of hate and the reality of social crisis. And the agents of change will be workers and ordinary people – in all their diversity – not the morally bankrupt establishment.

But what comes next is not just a question of understanding or analysis – it is a question of doing. Intervening into the mechanics of Brexit and trying to stop the train crash seems like an arduous task, but it is essential. The price of defeat would be the biggest expansion of immigration controls in Britain's recent history, a decimation of our rights, a deregulatory trading agenda that will make TTIP look progressive, and a major economic crisis.

DEMOCRACY IS THE ONLY WAY

All of these effects, and the right wing narratives that feed on them, will hurt both Labour's electoral

prospects and its prospects in government. For those in charge of it, Brexit is not just a policy but an ideological project designed to permanently shift power in favour of the forces of the right.

Winning against Brexit and building a future we can be proud to leave to our children is a process that must begin with a fresh referendum on the terms of Brexit – a ‘People’s Vote’, as it has become known. Any attempt to block Brexit via parliament alone, even with a mandate from a general election, would prove pyrrhic. Crucially, this is not a ‘second referendum’ on the same issue – it is a substantially different vote, giving the people the right to determine their own destiny in light of the specifics of the exit deals on offer. Brexit is now a solid object, not a mere concept.

Neither the Conservative government nor the deal it negotiates will command popular support. It may well also not command a majority in parliament. MPs have the opportunity to vote down the deal. We must mobilise to put pressure on them to do so at every opportunity, building a mass movement led by the left and the labour movement. Regardless of whether the deal passes in the autumn, our demand must be for more democracy: the people must be allowed a final say.

A People’s Vote is not, however, an alternative to a general election. On the contrary, Labour should fight to bring down the government and force an election at the earliest possible opportunity. But we need to be clear – Labour must put a People’s Vote in its manifesto. Without this commitment, Labour would go into an election either promising a ‘bespoke Labour Brexit’ that it has no time to negotiate, or offering a Norway-style deal that is straightforwardly worse than EU membership and will leave Corbyn with no seat at the European table.

It is entirely plausible, however, that the parliamentary arithmetic will make a general election impossible. Conservative Remainers will vote against the deal, but they may not vote to bring down the government if that means losing power (and their own seats). In other words, there could be a parliamentary majority for a referendum but not an election. Getting a People’s Vote, and defeating the government in it, is the surest (if not the speediest) way to achieving a general election. But getting a referendum is only a minority of the task – we would have to win it as well.

NO TO THE STATUS QUO

In 2016, the Remain campaign was dominated by a political establishment that just didn’t ‘get it’. Britain Stronger In Europe focused on economic doom, roaming data charges and house prices, and featured a revolving carousel of centrist politicians and high-profile bosses. If we are honest, Labour’s official campaign was barely better; it largely said the same things as Stronger In, with added rolling coverage of the fact that Alan Johnson used to be a postman.

The establishment still doesn’t get it, and it can’t be allowed to lead the anti-Brexit campaign in any People’s Vote referendum. We, the left, must lead the battle this time, and use it as a means to put forward our vision for a future of hope and solidarity. In a People’s Vote, we would be up against a Conservative Party defending its toxic deal – a much better context than 2016 to launch an insurgent, anti-establishment campaign. This is not only a question of principle but also essential to victory: an anti-establishment movement would have a good chance of winning, while another elite-led coalition could lose once again.

Ours is a future of solidarity between people and across borders. We are not interested in preserving the status quo in the EU. Labour must go to the public clear in its resolve to fight the right wing establishment in Brussels just as much as the Westminster elites – to end Fortress Europe, push back against the neoliberal economic consensus and build unity between workers across the continent. That could well mean breaking the EU’s rules where we have to, but it definitely means building a serious pan-European left.

Another Europe is Possible will be here at every one of these strategic stages: persuading Labour and the left to oppose Tory Brexit, winning a general election, getting a People's Vote, winning the referendum, and building an internationalist left that can turn the tide in Europe and beyond. And we hope you will be too.

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