

The Brexit crisis and the struggle for socialism

By Chris Marsden
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Two and a half years after the 2016 referendum vote to leave the European Union (EU), the British capitalist class is mired in crisis.

The dominant pro-Remain faction is desperately manoeuvring to either overturn the result, or at least secure a deal preserving tariff-free access to the Single European Market on which it depends for 40 percent of trade and for London's role as a centre of financial speculation.

The pro-Brexit faction, led by right-wing Tories and the sectarian thugs of the Democratic Unionist Party, resists all entreaties to compromise. They believe the EU can be forced to accept the UK's terms through an alliance with the Trump administration in Washington. Such an arrangement would free Britain to strike unilateral trade deals internationally and refashion Britain as a Singapore-style free trade zone in Europe based on crushing levels of exploitation.

The working class has no interest in backing either right-wing faction.

The task is not to help overcome a bourgeois crisis of rule, but to mobilise across Europe to take power and implement a socialist programme.

Millions of workers, especially the younger generation, look on with disgust at the naked xenophobia of the Brexiters, warnings of more job losses, economic downturn and deepening austerity, the strengthening of far-right forces and the return of visa requirements in Europe. However, the claim that renewed membership of the EU is an answer is a lie.

The advocates of Remain are all pro-capitalist politicians, who in all essentials share the anti-working-class agenda of the pro-Brexit Tories. They believe the interests of British imperialism are best pursued within the framework of a European trade bloc. On every major question aside from Brexit—attacks on democratic rights, anti-strike laws, as well as cuts to vital social services to funnel money to the big corporations and super-rich and to fund predatory military interventions and wars—the Tories will all march in lockstep with the Blairite wing of the Labour Party.

Moreover, the “civilised” Europe that the advocates of Remain invoke as an antidote to right-wing British nationalism is a myth. The Brexit vote in 2016 was much larger than anticipated, not because of “racism” but because of legitimate hostility to the EU as an instrument of capital that has imposed savage austerity against the working class throughout the continent. This offensive continues and escalates.

Since 2008, economists estimate that Europe lost economic activity due to austerity measures imposed by its governments equivalent to Spain's entire GDP—about \$1.3 trillion. Around 10 percent of people in the euro zone live in a household below the official poverty line, with many more numbered among the working poor. Almost one in six workers in temporary and part-time jobs were at risk of poverty in 2017. This month, the Social Europe think tank issued a report that found the EU-wide poverty rate based upon earning less than €9,760 a year stands at 28.2 percent—142 million out of a total population of around 500 million.

This is set to worsen, with Italy, Spain, and even Germany hovering on the brink of recession, amid dire warnings that a second global economic

crash is looming.

As for European politics, the 2018 congress resolution of the Socialist Equality Party (Britain) explained that world capitalism is entering a new period of trade and military war, driven by the fundamental contradictions between socialised production and the private ownership of the means of production; and between a global economy and the division of the world into antagonistic nation states. In response, the ruling elite in every country is embracing nationalism, authoritarianism and fascistic reaction.

“Brexit was only an initial expression of this disintegration of the post-war European order. The project of European unification under capitalism is being stripped of its liberal pretensions. Right-wing movements are being assembled as a shock force against the working class, and the doors of state office thrown open to the likes of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and Italy's Lega. Seven decades after the death of Hitler, the fascistic AfD is the main opposition party in the German parliament... while in France, President Macron pays tribute to the leader of the Nazi collaborationist Vichy regime, Marshal Pétain,” the resolution explained.

The deep alienation from official politics expressed in the 2016 referendum is rooted in the extraordinary growth of social inequality and a hatred of the world's ruling elites who have benefited from this social misery. This was acknowledged this month by the International Monetary Fund's David Lipton, who warned of “lower levels of trust in the core [global] institutions” and of “national governance” that “has in many respects [also] fallen into disrepute... One lingering resentment growing out of the Global Financial Crisis was the perception that bankers were saved at the expense of the average worker.”

Lipton asked, “What might the next economic downturn produce? History suggests such a downturn is somewhere over the horizon...”

The response of the working class is already becoming clear in the form of an initial wave of strikes across Europe, in the United States, Mexico and around the world. After decades in which the social democratic parties and trade unions worked successfully to suppress the class struggle and allow free rein to the major corporations and banks, a mood of resistance is growing.

The “yellow vest” protests in France against President Macron, mass protests in Hungary against the Fidesz government's “slave labour” scheme and the strike by 70,000 Mexican auto-workers are all examples of the beginnings of a mass international movement against the financial oligarchy and its imposition of austerity.

It is essential that British workers intervene in the crisis over Brexit based on their own class programme and interests. To do so they must base themselves consciously on this emerging global movement of the working class. This means rejecting all appeals by the various pseudo-left groups to take sides with one or other faction of the ruling class and their insistence that workers entrust their fate to Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn.

In 2016, the SEP called for an *active* boycott of the Brexit referendum, warning, “There can be no good outcome of such a plebiscite. Whichever

side wins, working people will pay the price.”

Against the reactionary perspective of national economic development that was at the heart of the Brexit agenda and support for the EU, we called for workers to adopt the perspective of a unified struggle across the continent for the United Socialist States of Europe.

Brexit and the pseudo-left groups

All the pseudo-left groups lined up behind one or another capitalist faction, with the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party (SWP) advocating a “Left Leave” vote portraying Brexit as the basis for a national road to socialism through reforms implemented by a Labour government led by Jeremy Corbyn. Left Unity, Socialist Resistance and the Alliance for Workers Liberty also lined up behind Corbyn and the Labour Party, which backed Remain, while promoting the “progressive” virtues of the EU.

Today, the former advocates of “Left Leave” support a Labour government as the answer to a “Brexit crisis” which they played a central role in creating. This is to be brought about by protests, organised and controlled by the trade union bureaucracy, to secure a general election.

To this end, the Socialist Party urges “the trade unions—the largest democratic organisations of the working class—to step up to the plate,” while Counterfire insists, “The whole labour movement therefore has every interest in uniting to ensure that from this crisis the Tories are forced to leave office and a general election is called.”

No call is made for a struggle against either the trade union leaders, or the Blairites, even as the SWP admits, “The Labour Party is not mobilising its membership to act over the crisis... The trade unions are spectating. This is a massive political crisis but working-class people are not being organised to shape the outcome.”

The SWP knows full-well that the Labour Party and the trade unions are not merely spectating. They are vehemently opposed to such a mobilisation of the working class because they serve the interests of big business.

The pseudo-lefts are forced to hinge their fantasy politics on the claim that Corbyn represents an opposition to the right-wing in the unions and the Labour Party and even a socialist alternative. This lie is becoming increasingly threadbare, after three years in which he has bowed down before every programmatic demand of the Blairites. His performance during the Brexit debacle should bury it.

Corbyn has acted throughout in his central role of opposing the class struggle and insisting that all questions of principle must be subordinated to maintaining the unity of the Labour Party and doing only that which is possible through parliament.

If Corbyn were serious about fighting for a general election to remove the Tories, this would be framed as a demand for action by the working class. Instead, Corbyn’s appeal was to the Blairites to allow him the right to move a motion of no-confidence in the government, and to the City of London based on his pledge to negotiate access to Europe’s markets if Labour came to power. Now his motion of confidence has failed, the Blairites will move forward with their demand for a second referendum—most likely with Corbyn’s blessing.

It is measure of the cynicism of the pseudo-left that the theoretical leader of the SWP, Alex Callinicos, acknowledges the fraudulent character of its socialist rhetoric. He wrote December 18 in *International Socialism*, “This journal has long opposed the EU as a dysfunctional would-be imperialism that seeks to drive neoliberalism deep into its member states and its periphery. On that basis we supported a vote to leave in 2016... But although we think it is right to stand against the EU, we don’t think that this is the most important issue for socialists.”

In the January 22 *Socialist Worker*, Callinicos explained that what is “important” is to advise Corbyn on how to negotiate with the EU! Corbyn “has been attacked for having unrealistic red lines,” he writes, but he “has

some cards in his hand.” If he “went back to his previous support for free movement” (i.e., reversed his anti-immigrant policies!) he would “be extending a hand to left wing Remainers” and might “actually improve Britain’s bargaining position with the EU.”

Writing in *International Viewpoint*, Socialist Resistance make clear that, for them, British imperialism remaining in the EU is of far greater importance than replacing the Tories with a Labour government. In passages indistinguishable from Tony Blair, they complain, “It is right to call for a general election but, were it to happen, it would be seriously problematic. Even at this late stage Corbyn is unable to say whether Labour’s stand would be pro-or anti Brexit.... The only viable answer to this is a second referendum, which remains the only chance of ending this whole process.”

Socialist Resistance shows the interests it represents by praising the *New York Times* for having “defended a second referendum by saying that a democracy that does not allow people to think again is not a democracy” and notes that “support for a second referendum grows—even amongst Tory MPs.”

These positions fully substantiate the International Committee of the Fourth International’s designation of the pseudo-left groups as advocates of imperialist realpolitik.

However the factional conflict within the Labour Party and its pseudo-left periphery ends, nothing can emerge that genuinely articulates the interests of the working class—including a second referendum that would prove to be as divisive as the first.

The answer to austerity is not a pro-capitalist Labour government dedicated to rebuilding “national unity” across the Brexit divide, but the unification of the working class against the capitalist class in a struggle for socialism.

Workers must form organisations of class struggle, independent from the labour and trade union bureaucracy to bring down the Tories and form a workers’ government. In this fight, British workers have the most powerful allies in their brothers and sisters throughout the European continent.

Together with our comrades in the International Committee’s European sections, the SEP in Britain, the Parti de l’égalité socialiste (PES) in France and the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) in Germany, we call for a unified struggle against the EU and its constituent governments to end the rule of the financial oligarchy and to establish the United Socialist States of Europe.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>