

Class struggle and socialism are the only answer to the Brexit crisis

1 April 2019

The prospect of leaving the European Union has provoked the deepest crisis of rule in the post-war history of British imperialism. But the great danger is that the working class is not only being prevented from intervening in its own interests, it is being divided against itself and politically subordinated to one or the other of two right-wing pro-capitalist factions.

With Prime Minister Theresa May failing three times to secure agreement in parliament for the deal struck with the EU on post-Brexit trading relations, talk of a Conservative leadership contest is now overshadowed by speculation that there might be a second snap general election, following the one held in 2017.

If a new election is called, the Tories are predicted to lose power to Labour, which has a five-point lead in the opinion polls and could form a minority government. Pro-Brexit and pro-Remain Tory MPs are united in opposing such a move, fearing that it will lead to unstoppable demands for an end to austerity by the working class, despite Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's declared aim of defending the "national interest."

Corbyn has indicated that a no-confidence motion will be put this week if May's deal is again rejected. This starkly poses before the working class critical issues of political perspective and leadership.

Any possibility that the ruling class might have of resolving its raging internal conflict is thanks only to Corbyn's refusal to honour the mandate he was given in two party leadership elections: To bring an end to decades of austerity, militarism and colonial wars, starting by driving the Blairite right wing out of the Labour Party.

Rank-and-file members who elected him have instead been subjected to three years of political backsliding on policy—including on NATO membership, retaining the use of nuclear weapons and Corbyn's insistence on Labour local authorities imposing Tory cuts—plus his

acquiescence in the witch hunt of the "left" on trumped-up charges of anti-Semitism.

Meanwhile, Deputy Labour leader Tom Watson has made clear that the Blairites will do whatever it takes to prevent any political challenge to British capital. He told the Prospect think tank that he was ready to serve with pro-EU Tories in a cross-party government of "national unity." Watson heads a group of 80 Labour MPs called "Future Britain," comprising over a third of the Parliamentary Labour Party.

The trade unions likewise offer no alternative for workers, with Trades Union Congress General Secretary Frances O'Grady and Confederation of British Industry Director General Carolyn Fairbairn issuing a joint letter to May declaring that "Our country is facing a national emergency," and demanding a "Plan B."

There are genuine and valid reasons why workers support Brexit that do not reflect the racism and nationalism whipped up by the Brexiteer faction of the bourgeoisie, including hostility to the EU's imposition of austerity and hope that leaving the EU can bring an end to the social devastation wrought by successive Labour and Tory governments. The same holds true for many of those who support Remain, whose opposition to Brexit does not signal an uncritical endorsement of the EU, but rather fear of the economic impact of Brexit and repugnance toward the deliberate encouragement of nationalism and demands for an end to immigration and the free movement of labour, on which many young people depend.

In the absence of a socialist alternative, even if a general election were held, nothing would be resolved. It would be fought almost exclusively on the issue of for or against Brexit, dividing the working class and preventing any unified struggle against the ongoing offensive against jobs, wages and social conditions.

Whichever side won, political divisions would continue, and sections of the ruling class would utilise growing popular disaffection to advocate a strong state and authoritarian rule.

History provides a warning.

Watson's support for a national government recalls the decision taken by then-Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald in 1931 to join the Tories in a National Government. The working class paid the price in the millions who were made unemployed and the savage austerity that was imposed during the Hungry Thirties, along with the emergence of the British Union of Fascists under Oswald Mosley, an echo of the emergence of fascist regimes in Germany and Italy.

The same bitter price will be paid by workers today for the combined treachery of both Labour's right and left.

Whatever form the struggle for global competitiveness takes, in or out of the EU, it demands a further savage assault on the livelihoods of workers. That is why the plan for a domestic mobilisation of 50,000 soldiers in the UK in the event of a "no deal" Brexit is echoed within the EU by French President Macron's declaration of a state of emergency and deployment of the army against "yellow vest" protests in France.

The Socialist Equality Party advanced a perspective in the 2016 Brexit referendum that articulated the interests of workers and young people not only in Britain, but throughout Europe and internationally, and which today offers the only way out of the political trap that takes of form of "for or against Brexit."

Calling for an active boycott of the referendum, the SEP rejected the reactionary perspective of national economic development that was at the heart of the Brexit agenda as well as any support for the EU. We explained that Remainers and Brexiteers represented right-wing capitalist forces united in their hostility to the working class, who differ only over whether or not to pursue the strategic interests of British imperialism within a European trade block.

The SEP wrote:

A boycott prepares the ground for the development of an independent political struggle of the British working class against these forces.

Such a movement must develop as part of a continent-wide counteroffensive by the working class, which will expose the referendum as only an episode in the deepening existential crisis of the British and European bourgeoisie.

Brexit is the product of the eruption of inter-imperialist antagonisms, which have found the starkest expression in the coming to power of Donald Trump in the United States and his fascist invocation of "America First." It is the most advanced manifestation of the break-up of the EU, which is faced with a descent into trade war, militarism and the deepening of class antagonisms provoked by unprecedented levels of social inequality between a super-rich oligarchy and the mass of workers.

Throughout Europe, the response of governments to the deepening crisis of world capitalism is more austerity, the whipping up of nationalism and anti-immigrant xenophobia and the cultivation of the fascist right. But the working class is beginning to fight back in a rising wave of strikes and social protests across Europe, in Algeria and Sudan, in Mexico, the United States, China and internationally. It is to this emerging movement of the European and international working class that the British working class must now turn.

The answer to the Brexit crisis is not unity with the EU, but class unity with the millions of workers now coming into struggle against Europe's governments. Workers must form rank-and-file organisations of class struggle, independent of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, to bring down the Tories and form a workers' government as part of a continent-wide struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe.

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