

# Britain: the Brexit issue debated in the British SWP journal

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, by ASHER Wayne , CALLINICOS Alex

As Brexit chaos continues the British SWP has published in its journal *International Socialist Review* a long article signed by Wayne Asher, “a former member of the International Socialists”, criticising the SWP line which was to vote Leave demanding a “Lexit”, and arguing along the lines of the position defended by Socialist Resistance and the “Another Europe is Possible” campaign.

In the same issue, an editorial by Alex Callinicos reaffirms their Lexit position, but less stridently than initially, and avoids what position to take today on the Tory Brexit in parliament by arguing that “The radical and revolutionary left too should avoid getting trapped on one side or other of the debate within the ruling class and instead stand ready to promote and help shape “fundamental revolts”.”

These two articles are posted below.

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## In a hole and still digging: the left and Brexit

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**Wayne Asher**

“The fighting party of the advanced class need not fear mistakes. What it should fear is persistence in a mistake, refusal to admit and correct a mistake out of a false sense of shame”.<sup>1</sup> Thus Lenin, writing on the eve of the Russian Revolution. But his warning echoes down through the decades for the benefit of all revolutionaries. It is the contention of this article that the traditional left in Britain has committed a colossal mistake in its approach to Brexit, and is making matters worse by an obstinate refusal to correct it.

The left’s opposition to the European Union goes back to the early 1970s and became an important topic in 1975 when the Harold Wilson government tried to solve its internal divisions over the Common Market, as it then was, by calling for a referendum. Almost the entire left, including the International Socialists (IS)—forerunner of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), called for a No vote, a vote that is, to leave the Common Market. This was on the basis that the Common Market was a bosses’ club, and that the UK ruling class was eager to remain because there was strength in numbers at a time of historically high class conflict. Further, the Common Market was a reactionary organisation, a consciously undemocratic construct that could never lead to a united socialist states of Europe.

The main position paper explaining all this appeared in International Socialism. It described the EEC (European Economic Community), as “a customs union plus a dear-food agricultural protection scheme plus a supra-national bureaucracy with considerable formal regulatory powers but no guns”.<sup>2</sup> Note the point about “no guns” well. The EU is not a state—yet it is seriously suggested among the left and by Jeremy Corbyn too—that the Brussels bureaucracy would be an unresolvable obstacle to a Corbyn government with a large popular mandate. The Morning Star, once the Communist Party’s daily and still publishing today, said: “A Labour government determined to take our railways and postal services back into public hands would soon run into trouble with the EU”.<sup>3</sup> Corbyn himself has also been guilty of this timid formalism: “We need to look very carefully at the terms of any trade relationship, because at the moment we are part of the single market, obviously. That has within it restrictions on state aid and state spending”.<sup>4</sup> In practice, of course, Brussels cannot even prevent much smaller capitals such as Hungary and Poland from defying basic EU tenets of bourgeois democracy.

Still, it is important for what follows to note that the 1975 analysis was an accurate picture at the time and remains true today. Why then, can we argue that to take an identical position, based on the same arguments, in the 2016 referendum was a mistake? Simple. Objective circumstances and the balance of class forces had changed.

In 1975, IS probably had 4,500 members, many of them were respected militants; some of the factory branches formed in the heat of 1974 still existed. The possibility of building a national rank and file movement was still pursued very seriously. The International Marxist Group had over 1,000 members as did Gerry Healy’s Workers Revolutionary Party. The Communist Party, had, on paper, over 30,000 members and was massively influential in the workers’ movement. The Labour government, brought to power in 1974 by the rising class struggle, featured well-known left wingers such as Peter Shore, Tony Benn and Michael Foot in senior cabinet positions.

In February that year, International Socialism said: “We must utilise every opportunity to play a leading part in any referendum campaign (including probably organisational participation) and to draw closer to the left social-democratic workers, most of whom will not be active [Labour Party] people) and to fight for our perspective and programme amongst them”.<sup>5</sup> The confidence and optimism and ambition positively shouts off the page here, something related directly to the times.

In other words, the pool in which we swam in 1975 was much bigger, the chance to build an authentic left-wing opposition movement much greater and, it must be remembered, this was pretty much a clear left/right split. For, apart from outliers like Enoch Powell and Richard Body, virtually all the Tory Party favoured staying in the EEC. The fascist National Front campaigned for an Out vote, but most of the left thought they were sufficiently strong to avoid an Out campaign falling victim to reactionary nationalism.

In the event, In won by 67.2 percent to 32.8 percent. In a relatively favourable environment, a left alternative still could not carry the day, although it is quite true that the highest Out vote in England came in South Yorkshire, then one of the epicentres of workers’ militancy.

Flash forward to 2016. No-one I suppose, doubts that the left was immeasurably weaker than in 1975, both in numbers, size of periphery and in class implantation. There is no controversy about why this dispiriting fact should be so; the long downturn, now of historical length, massive de-industrialisation and the failure to unionise the vast number of new workers derived from technological change (in the IT and telecoms industries for example). In this unpromising environment, how likely was it that there would be a viable space for a Lexit given the disappointment of 1975? How likely was it that opposition to the EU, a left-wing argument in 1975, would not end up as an extreme right-wing one in 2016 with all that implied for the UK political scene?

After a false start, pro-Corbyn group Momentum did eventually understand this fundamental point. After originally not taking a position, just one month before the vote, the leadership polled the members, who voted by two to one to support a Remain position. Momentum criticised the EU on exactly the same grounds that the SWP did; it called for a pan-European anti-austerity movement, radical democratisation of the EU and an end to fortress Europe. But on the concrete issue of the day it concluded that Brexit would be “a victory for the nationalist right and their campaign against migrants”.<sup>6</sup> Michael Chessum, then a member of Momentum’s steering committee, said: “There is now a growing coalition of coming together to campaign for a Remain vote on an unapologetically progressive and critical basis—for freedom of movement, internationalism and solidarity across borders”.<sup>7</sup> It was possible in 2016 to have a position that was critical of the EU but founded in the concrete reality of the situation.

It is worth speculating as to why Momentum got this decision right—which I argue is very unusual among the UK left. One factor must be that Momentum is a very large organisation with over 40,000 members and many more supporters. That means its periphery is also correspondingly larger and its members talk to more people. Another is that its members are relatively young. A third factor is that, as a new organisation, its membership looked at the issue with fresh eyes, not from the perspective of 1975.

The SWP position, from Alex Callinicos, appeared in this journal. His article reiterated many of the well-accepted and understood shortcomings of the EU, especially after the 1992 Maastricht Treaty and the move to a single currency. Unfortunately, he seems to have believed that the real need of his position paper was to explain the reactionary nature of the EU on the grounds that: “The underlying assumption of those on the left supporting a Yes vote is that the EU represents, however imperfectly, the transcendence of nationalism and so internationalists and anti-racists should vote for Britain to remain in the EU”.<sup>8</sup>

But this is emphatically not so—it is quite possible, as Momentum did—to accept the traditional left analysis of the EU and still argue that the correct decision in the 2016 referendum was to argue for Remain. Whatever the levels of oppression and unpleasantness in today’s Britain, they are not the fault of Brussels but of two decades of New Labour and the Tories, and neither were reliant on Brussels to carry through such policies. Socialists who argued for a Remain vote did so not because of illusions in the EU but because they saw that the main issue in the campaign—given the weakness of the left—would inevitably be reactionary nationalism and outright racism.

After the surprise Leave vote in the 2016 referendum, almost all the left then persuaded itself that there had indeed been some kind of popular uprising against austerity. From the Labour left, Diane Abbott MP, a close associate of Corbyn, called the vote “a roar of defiance against the Westminster elite”.<sup>9</sup> Charlie Kimber, again writing in this journal, said: “The central issue is that it was a revolt against the establishment. People who are generally forgotten, ignored or sneered at delivered a stunning blow against the people at the top of society; this was a rejection of the governing class”.<sup>10</sup> Writing in *Socialism Today*, published by the Socialist Party, successor to *Militant*, Peter Taaffe wrote: “There was a determination to give the ‘toffs’ a bloody nose—those who do not have to live in the deprivation that the Tories and capitalism have created. Traditional Labour areas and regions voted heavily against the government led by the two ‘big butchers’, Cameron and Osborne, with only Northern Ireland, Scotland and London voting for remain”.<sup>11</sup> And, for *The Socialist*, the Socialist Party’s newspaper; “the size of the working class vote for Leave represented—in essence—a revolt, a cry of rage, against the low pay, cuts in public services and insecure housing”.<sup>12</sup>

Is this true though? Or is there an element of wishful thinking involved here?

The best analysis of why people voted the way they did came from Lord Ashcroft’s exit poll, which talked to over 12,000 people straight after they had cast their vote. It is the gold standard of polling accepted by most Brexit commentators including Kimber quoted above.<sup>13</sup>

Ashcroft came up with some disturbing facts for those who would like to read into the result a vote against austerity, which by extension, should eventually benefit the left.

- Two out of three Labour voters voted Remain. (I suppose that voting Labour rather than Tory counts as the minimum entry level of class consciousness.)
- A majority of those in work voted Remain, irrespective of whether they were in part-time or full-time work.
- Two-thirds (67 percent) of those describing themselves as Asian voted Remain. Four out of five black voters (73 percent) voted Remain, and 70 percent of Muslim voters did so too. These voters obviously understand the real dog-whistle message during the referendum campaign.
- The generally accepted idea that working class areas voted massively for Leave is only partially correct; many did, but traditional working class areas in London delivered the highest Remain votes (peaking at 75 percent in Haringey and 78 percent in Hackney and Lambeth). Remain won in most of the great working class regional capitals (Bristol, Cardiff, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.) Only three cities of similar importance voted Leave and even then they did so by tiny margins (Birmingham, Sheffield, Nottingham). Working class Scotland voted massively for Remain of course.

The central issue to grasp in all this is that the working class was emphatically not monolithic; different sections voted very differently, and we need to understand why, and make sure we are aligned with the right part.

Ashcroft found something else interesting. Those who said they paid a great deal of attention to politics were evenly divided between Leave and Remain. But those who said they paid little or no attention to politics voted Leave by 58 percent to 42 percent. It is tempting on this basis to suspect that the 2.8 million who did not bother to vote in the 2015 general election but did so in the referendum—by definition low-information/low-engagement voters—voted massively to leave. It is striking that of the 20 areas with the highest increase in turnout, all were Leave areas.<sup>14</sup> This 2.8 million rise in turnout is more than the wafer-thin Leave majority.

There is something else too. If the Leave vote was a populist uprising against Tory austerity, where did it suddenly come from? After all, in the election the previous year the Tories actually achieved an overall majority. They did this despite standing on their five-year record of austerity and promising more of the same—the Tory manifesto proposed cutting public spending and welfare by enough to end the budget deficit by 2018/19 and even run a budget surplus by 2020. Although their outright majority partly reflected the decimation of the Liberal Democrats' vote, and was surely helped by the uninspiring nature of the Labour campaign around Ed Miliband, it remains true that there was no generalised anti-austerity outburst. In fact, there were even a dozen working class areas where, in 2015, the Tory vote rose and the Labour vote actually fell.<sup>15</sup> Each was to deliver an emphatic Leave vote a year later.

So what was the vote really about? Alex Callinicos's 2015 article warned "the referendum is about the EU as a whole, not just immigration. Socialists in Britain will have to take a stand on the entire project of European integration".<sup>16</sup>

But Ashcroft's pollsters asked people why they voted the way they did in the referendum. And it turns out that, for a very large slice of voters, immigration was exactly what it was about. Nearly half (49 percent) of Leave voters said the biggest single reason for wanting to leave the EU was the argument about sovereignty—"the principle that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK". One third (33 percent) said the main reason was that leaving "offered the best chance for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders".

Immigration looks like a proxy for racism for many of these voters. Just 14 percent of Leavers thought immigration was a force for good, a massive 62 percent said it was a force for ill. Remainers, however, saw immigration as a force for good by 57 percent, and a force for ill by only 17 percent, with 26 percent seeing it as a mixed blessing.

The sovereignty argument doesn't tell us enough of course about what laws people would like to make but felt that the EU prevented. Possibly, for some, it seemed a more polite way of talking about immigration. In the United States, the segregationist politicians of the 1960s Deep South couched their racism in terms of sovereignty—or states' rights; "the federal government has no right to interfere in the laws and affairs of the sovereign state of Alabama" or some such. It was so much racist rubbish; everyone knew exactly what laws the state of Alabama wanted.

Austerity, NHS cutbacks, zero hours contracts, privatisation, the housing crisis, just did not come into what Leavers told the exit pollsters.

Still, it is a fact that a large section of the working class, the C2DEs in marketing speak, voted to Leave in something approaching a two to one ratio and that requires addressing. One way to do so is to note that the Brexit revolt—if such it was—was, from the point of view of socialists, an odd one, in that:

- It was disproportionately old: Ashcroft tracked how the younger you are, the more likely you were to vote Remain. But a majority of those aged over 45 voted to leave, rising to 60 percent of those aged 65 or over. A recent report from Warwick University, arguing that austerity did indeed cause Brexit,<sup>17</sup> is likely to be wrong because of this factor. Austerity, together with its evil twin, Quantitative Easing, disproportionately hit the young (through rising rents, exclusion from owner-occupation, insecure jobs and student debt) while pensioner incomes did much better, partly due to the triple lock.<sup>18</sup> Yet young people were by and large pro-Remain and pro-Corbyn—it was the retired who were the bedrock of Brexit support. (Neither did austerity differentiate between Remain and Leave areas—many Remain voting big cities were huge losers from austerity, a point this report missed).

- It was disproportionately white.

- It was disproportionately based in declining small/medium sized towns and rural areas. Some of these declining areas are ones where the Labour vote has, in fact, been gradually slipping for years.<sup>19</sup>

If this counts as a popular uprising, or the material for one, it must be comprised of a demographic unusual in working class history.

But of course, unusual is not the same as impossible. Kimber quotes Lenin to the effect that “to imagine that social revolution is conceivable...without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie with all its prejudices, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression...to imagine all this is to repudiate social revolution”.<sup>20</sup> Quite true. And fortunately to apply this to the Leave voters of 2016 is to some extent a testable proposition. Was this an incoherent but nevertheless progressive tide of the kind Lenin discussed? Or something else?

If it were, then we might expect to see the boost to workers’ confidence reflected in some industrial upturn. And indeed, strike figures for 2016 were twice as high as in 2015. Unfortunately, of the 145,000 increase on days lost over 2015, 129,000 of them were due to a single dispute, that of the junior doctors.<sup>21</sup> And the next year, strikes fell to the lowest figure since records began in 1893 with just 77 strikes involving 33,000 workers.<sup>22</sup>

Or, if not in strikes, perhaps more workers found the confidence to join a union, an important but much “safer” and lower-level statement about your position in class society. In fact there were 275,000 fewer trade unionists in 2016, a 4.2 percent fall on 2015’s figure and the largest annual fall recorded since the official statistics were first presented this way in 1995.<sup>23</sup>

Did it lead to new bases of support for organisations such as the SWP? Well, a useful map<sup>24</sup> on the party website showing party activities showed nothing in such Leave strongholds as Mansfield, Sunderland, Blackpool, Stoke-on-Trent, Middlesbrough and Hartlepool.

Given the disproportionately aged Leave base, perhaps it is unlikely to expect that it would lead to an upsurge in union membership. But still, perhaps this “revolt against the establishment” (Kimber’s term) did lead to a generalised political upturn. Not at all—it turned out to generate greater support for the Conservative Party at the 2017 election in Brexit voting areas. The Tories actually improved their position in many traditional Labour areas, for example the Potteries, the former East Midlands coalfield, and the north east. Remember my assumption that voting Labour is a basic entry point to class consciousness; whatever the manifold failings of Labour, a vote for the Tories is an outright vote for the ruling class and for the status quo. Yet the abysmal level of class consciousness today is such that the Tories actually won five seats from Labour—in Walsall, Stoke-on-Trent, Middlesbrough, Mansfield and North East Derbyshire. Brexit was to blame for this. Lord Ashcroft’s General Election poll<sup>25</sup> found that Tory voters regarded Brexit as (at 48 percent) the biggest issue in the election. Labour voters, however, were more concerned by the NHS (32 percent), the cuts (11 percent) and only then by Brexit (8 percent).

Labour, conversely, won many seats in the south, some for the first time ever. Labour performed much stronger in Remain areas, especially in London, and despite Corbyn’s carefully cultivated ambiguity on the issue. There really was a major political upturn in 2017; but we felt it in Canterbury and Kensington, in Warwick and Battersea—not in Stoke or Sunderland. Younger voters, not Brexit-supporting older ones, formed the core of the Corbyn upturn.

In any case, there is another big problem too. The proponents of a radical interpretation of the Brexit vote still have to come up against the Marxist truism that it is not possible to infer the class nature of a political movement simply from the class composition of its members. The largest section of the 1970s National Front consisted of waged (usually manual) workers, and it won its greatest electoral successes in working class areas. But there was, of course, nothing remotely progressive about it.<sup>26</sup>

Lenin warned against this fallacy when talking about the British Labour Party: “Whether or not a party is really a political party of the workers does not depend solely upon a membership of workers but also upon the men that lead it, and the content of its actions and its political tactics”.<sup>27</sup>

Just look in this context at who led Brexit: Nigel Farage the former commodities trader, Jacob Rees-Mogg the fund manager, Boris Johnson the journalist and political dilettante, Arron Banks the insurance magnate. What, pace Lenin, is the real content of the hard Brexiteers—the Nigel Lawson who talked of Brexit completing the Thatcher revolution?<sup>28</sup> The authors of *Britannia Unchained*, including Dominic Raab, Liz Truss and Priti Patel, who claimed: “The British are among the worst idlers in the world. We work among the lowest hours, we retire early and our productivity is poor. Whereas Indian children aspire to be doctors or businessmen, the British are more interested in football and pop music”<sup>29</sup>?

Summing up, I believe there is quite enough evidence to show that much of Kimber’s “revolt against the establishment” actually came from a vastly expanded section of the reactionary, Conservative-voting working class, massively energised by the racist Leave

campaign, and inspiring those who usually do not bother to vote. Both sections were motivated by a nostalgic and reactionary nationalism with no progressive characteristic whatsoever.

These working class conservatives, pro-Monarchy, pro law and order, anti-immigrant, often anti-union, have always been with us. Consider the February 1974 election, called at the very height of the class struggle during a miners' strike, the Tories still—astonishingly—picked up 17 percent of the vote in Hemsworth, 18 per cent in Barnsley, 23 percent in Pontefract and Castleford and 26 percent in Rother Valley—all constituencies in the heart of the Yorkshire coalfield.

Two vignettes—snapshots admittedly—illustrate more about these voters in the context of Brexit. The British Election Study, based on 23,000 voters, found that the probability of voting Brexit rose from around 20 percent for those most opposed to the death penalty to 70 percent for those most in favour. A recent poll found that 60 percent of Brexiteers thought leaving the EU was more important than peace in Northern Ireland—with all that implied.<sup>30</sup>

If my analysis is correct, then the left (excluding Momentum) made the wrong decision. It had a formally correct analysis on the nature of the EU but fell into abstraction because it did not take into account the extreme weakness of left-wing forces and the inevitable nature of the Leave campaign in a downturn that has lasted decades.

Now, to some extent we can ask—so what? Why rake over these old and very divisive coals? Especially as the depleted revolutionary left of 2016 could never have changed the result of the vote; even Momentum could not do that. It is tempting to argue that what's done is done and we need to move forward to the struggles ahead. "The line of division must not be whether you voted Leave or Remain but whether you now back Corbyn against the right," in the words of Socialist Worker.<sup>31</sup>

On the one hand this is true. But consider this; the stakes are getting higher all the time and various dystopias—medicine and food shortages, the collapse of much of the car industry, a sharp increase in inflation—are now being discussed in everyday terms in the bourgeois press in a way that has not happened since the talk of military coups in 1974. If any of them come to pass after a (quite possibly accidental) no-deal crash-out, the political temperature will rise very rapidly indeed. For significant numbers of people it will be obvious that Brexit is to blame.

There will be opportunities for those who foresaw this and warned against it, and prepared its cadre for the arguments and struggles just over the horizon. A classic example from bourgeois politics; look at how Winston Churchill, an arch reactionary, was accepted as a wartime leader because people remembered that he had warned—at the price of great, but temporary, unpopularity—against Nazi rearmament and appeasement.

The gate will also be open, of course, for very sinister forces, already building up Britain's own Dolchstoß, the stab-in-the-back legend which so helped the Nazis rise to power. Millions of Brexit voters are going to be very disappointed by the difference between what they thought they would get and what they in fact got, and will be looking for someone to blame.

As it is, the extra-parliamentary left is in great danger of being compromised by its support for Brexit as the political climate shifts. And there is evidence that it is shifting. Some snapshots to consider:

- A Sky data poll found 50 percent backing for a second referendum, with only 40 percent opposed.<sup>32</sup>
- A regular YouGov poll found majority support for a referendum on the exit terms.<sup>33</sup>
- Another regular YouGov tracker found that 72 percent of Labour voters said the referendum result was wrong.<sup>34</sup>
- Pressure for a second referendum is growing in the Labour Party, and growing in Momentum too, which, despite the fact that it supported Remain, successfully manoeuvred to prevent such a debate at last year's Labour Party conference in order to avoid embarrassing Corbyn.<sup>35</sup>

As Brexit approaches, it is to be expected that these figures will continue to rise. Yet for Socialist Worker, nothing has changed and there seems to be no sense of self-reflection; no regular comparison of the party line with the reality on the ground. It continues to oppose a second referendum, or a vote on the terms of exit, saying that the issue with the growing calls for a People's Vote was that "the problem is, ordinary people have already had a say. They voted to leave the EU." As if the narrow 2016 vote was not won by lies and—as we now know—fraud.<sup>36</sup> As if there were anything democratic about a referendum where millions of European immigrants were disenfranchised and where, unlike in the Scottish referendum, 16 year olds couldn't vote. It isn't just the SWP; here is the Morning Star, continuing to insist that the establishment "was defeated essentially by the men and women of no property who revolted against being taken for granted", yet not considering what issues they were revolting about.<sup>37</sup>

Put bluntly, we are in a hole and still digging. Socialist Worker is still siding with a reactionary demographic for whom the EU was actually a convenient proxy for all sorts of apparent evils. For more evidence on this, if it is still needed, we can revisit the Ashcroft findings. Leave voters thought the following were a bad force in society, immigration (80 percent), multiculturalism (81 percent) social liberalism (80 percent), feminism (74 percent), the green movement (69 percent) and the internet (71 percent). Some 51 percent did say capitalism was a force for evil, but so did 51 percent of Remainers.

There are now beginning to be consequences for this lack of clarity. On 23 June 2018, 100,000 people marched against Brexit, completely dwarfing the NHS march the following week. It seems reasonable to suppose that many on that march will have agreed with the left on a wide range of issues. But for seasoned veterans of Central London demos it was an unusual feeling to be on a large march with no left-wing paper sellers and leafleters. (At least Healy's sectarians gave out leaflets at the 1968 anti-Vietnam war march explaining why they were not marching!)

Two weeks later 250,000 people marched against Donald Trump—and the contradiction suddenly became worse for the traditional left. For many (most?) people on that march Trump and Brexit are, if a measure of crudity might be permitted, two cheeks of the same

arse—both signs of racist reaction with no progressive roots whatsoever.

It is important to understand that the class enemy is entirely clear about this—Farage told the BBC (in January 2017): “If I speak to Trump’s team, Trump’s close advisers, or even to the president-elect himself, none of them think Trump would have won if Brexit had not happened”.<sup>38</sup> The fascists marching to demand that Tommy Robinson be freed from jail carried banners supporting Trump and Brexit. The links between Brexit fundamentalists and the Trump administration are becoming closer week by week. Rees-Mogg—who supported Trump before he was elected president—noted that the latter “appealed to voters left behind by the metropolitan elite and he exudes confidence about his own nation and a determination not to be a manager of decline, which also inspires the Brexiteers”.<sup>39</sup>

Yet the traditional left, so right about Trump (and the rising fascist movement) is currently forced to tell angry people who might be attracted to their political outlook that they are against Trump but pro-Brexit. Opposition to Brexit is growing, yet just what is the left saying to the 700,000 people who marched for a People’s Vote on 20 October 2018?

Imagine a worse case situation in the spring, a chaotic Brexit has led to queues on the M20, factory layoffs, food shortages and high inflation after a currency collapse. We will be forced to tell workers that all this is very dreadful and should be fought, but, ahem...we actually supported Brexit. It won’t wash.

The good news in all this—and yes, there is some—is that the very weakness of the extra-parliamentary left means that a rethink can be carried out without too much impact and upset. While there is time. If the desire is there.

### **Wayne Asher**

*Wayne Asher is a former member of the International Socialists.*

### *Notes*

1 Lenin, 1972, pp52-58. It first appeared 22-24 September 1917.

2 International Socialism, 1975b.

3 Morning Star, 2016.

4 Guardian, 2017.

5 International Socialism, 1975a.

6 Mason, 2016.

7 Quoted in Pope, 2016.

8 Callinicos, 2015, p99.

9 Quoted in Kimber, 2016a. Her comments, together with her voting for Article 50, were not appreciated in her massively pro-Remain constituency, Hackney North and Stoke Newington.

10 Kimber, 2016b, p22.

11 Taaffe, 2016.

12 Sell, 2017.

13 Ashcroft, 2016. Ashcroft is, incidentally, a pro-Brexit Conservative.

14 Carter, 2018.

15 These areas were: North-West Leicestershire, Barrow-in-Furness, Stourbridge, Great Yarmouth, Rugby, Nuneaton, North Warwickshire, Sherwood, Amber Valley, Stoke-On-Trent North, Kettering and Telford.

16 Callinicos, 2015.

17 Fetzner, 2018.

18 In 2017, pensioner incomes after housing costs outstripped those of working families for the first time ever—Wilson, 2017.

19 They were also areas where the British National Party had shown strength. At the 2010 general election there were 26 seats where the BNP got 7 percent of the vote or higher—all but two of them (in Leeds) were in Leave areas six years later.

20 Lenin, 1916, quoted in Kimber, 2016b, p23.

21 ONS, 2017.

22 ONS, 2018.

23 Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2017.

24 Go to <https://socialistworker.co.uk/public/events>

25 Ashcroft, 2017.

26 Sparks, 1979.

27 Lenin, 1959, p460, quoted in Gluckstein, 1999.

28 Lawson, 2016.

29 Kwarteng and others, 2012, p61.

30 University of London, Birkbeck College, 2016.

31 Kimber, 2017.

32 Go to [www2.politicalbetting.com/index.php/archives/2018/07/30/if-todays-skydata-poll-is-on-the-money-brexiteers-should-begin-to-worry/](http://www2.politicalbetting.com/index.php/archives/2018/07/30/if-todays-skydata-poll-is-on-the-money-brexiteers-should-begin-to-worry/)

33 Coates, 2018.

34 Go to [www2.politicalbetting.com/index.php/archives/2018/05/02/yougovs-brexit-tracker-how-opinion-has-moved-since-the-june-2016-referendum/](http://www2.politicalbetting.com/index.php/archives/2018/05/02/yougovs-brexit-tracker-how-opinion-has-moved-since-the-june-2016-referendum/)

35 Crerar, 2018.

36 Robinson, 2018.

37 Morning Star, 2018.

38 BBC News, 2017.

39 Withers, 2018.

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## Brexit blues

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### Alex Callinicos

The British political elite, grappling with the process of leaving the European Union, face two fundamental contradictions. The first arises from the balance of power between the remaining EU-27 and Britain. Since British capitalism is so heavily dependent on access to European markets, the EU has had the whip hand in the exit negotiations. Hence the withdrawal treaty and political declaration on future relations between Britain and the EU that was signed off on 25 November was mourned in London and celebrated in Brussels.<sup>1</sup> One can argue about how good or bad a deal it is—some of the cleverer columnists on the Financial Times have swum against the stream in arguing that Theresa May and Olly Robbins (the civil servant who did the detailed negotiating) managed to extract quite a lot from their chief EU counterpart Michel Barnier.<sup>2</sup> But its content was largely dictated by the relationship of forces and British capitalism's interest in remaining closely connected economically to the EU. The price of this connection—and of keeping the border between

southern Ireland and the northern Six Counties open—has proved to be a significant degree of integration into, and therefore subordination to, EU institutions without the influence that comes with membership. To that extent, the Brexiteers' complaints about "vassalage" have some validity.<sup>3</sup> There is a huge gulf between their ambition of "taking back control" and the outcome that the realities of the situation dictate.

This contradiction is largely a consequence of a more fundamental one. There isn't really a viable place for British capitalism outside the ambit of the EU, despite the fact that the referendum on 23 June 2016 opted for Brexit. One can see this through the lens offered by three historical moments. First, there was the initial effort by the Tory government in the mid-1950s to boycott and sabotage the negotiations leading to the establishment of the European Economic Community, soon followed by nearly 15 years of efforts by successive prime ministers to join in recognition of the fact that neither the mythical "special relationship" with the United States nor the disintegrating Empire offered a viable global orientation for British capitalism.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, Margaret Thatcher's government presided during the 1980s over the destruction of large portions of British manufacturing industry; the resulting reconstruction of capitalism in Britain depended on access to the European Single Market, which Thatcher was instrumental in creating for transnational corporations investing in Britain and investment banks based in the freshly deregulated City.<sup>5</sup> Thirdly, the launch of the euro in 1999 offered the City a further boost since, despite Britain keeping the pound, it dominated trade in the single European currency.

Britain's semi-detached status—in the EU, but still closely aligned to the US, outside the euro, but home to Europe's most important financial market—was the ideal position from a British capitalism that is no longer in the Premier League of imperialist powers but that continues to operate globally.<sup>6</sup> But what Brexit has dramatised is the conflict between this fundamental reality and the hugely divisive domestic political effect of Britain's membership of the EU. As the immensely pro-European journalist Hugo Young acknowledged, "entry was meant to settle Britain's national destiny, but in politics it settled nothing. It was immediately an agent of fracture, not of healing, a propensity it has never shaken off".<sup>7</sup> Initially, Europe divided the Labour Party, with the left opposing membership of the EEC and a section of the pro-European right breaking away to form the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1981. But the combined impact of the role played by divisions over Europe in Thatcher's fall in 1990 and Britain's humiliating exit from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism under her successor John Major in 1992 made the EU a toxic issue inside the Tory Party.<sup>8</sup> More than 20 years later, David Cameron thought he had a cunning plan to rid the Tories of the European incubus by holding a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU. In the event, of course, he succeeded only in bringing to an end that membership and his own premiership.<sup>9</sup>

As numerous commentators have said, Brexit has put Europe's toxicity on steroids, pulverising the political cohesion of the government (ten ministerial resignations since July) and the Tory backbenches, forcing May first humiliatingly to call off the House of Commons vote on the deal scheduled for 11 December and then into a confidence vote that she failed convincingly to win; it also poses an awkward dilemma for Jeremy Corbyn. It's clear to most involved—including May herself—that her slogan of a "global Britain" is pure fantasy. Donald Trump's unilateralist hostility to the EU seemed to offer the Tory right

an alternative path for British capitalism, but he would push a hard bargain for any future trade agreement and, even if ultimately a favourable deal were struck, this would be unlikely radically to reduce Britain's dependence on European markets (though the City will probably flourish under any conditions).<sup>10</sup> In any case, Trump doesn't offer a coherent alternative to the traditional strategy of US imperialism, which has been to support European integration within the framework of the Atlantic alliance; from the point of view of the main sections of the US ruling class, Britain has adopted a policy of self-harm in abandoning its traditional role as Washington's key ally in Brussels.

The hard Brexit advocated by Tory ultras such as the preposterous Jacob Rees-Mogg would disrupt the cross-Channel supply chains on which the British economy runs. How then to stay close to the EU while respecting the vote to leave? This is the difficulty with which May has been struggling, and that Corbyn was able to avoid by taking a position of studied ambiguity designed to finesse the divisions among Labour activists and voters and focus attention on the Tories' troubles; now that the deal has been struck, and as May's own position rapidly erodes, he is finding it much harder to sustain this stance. The difficulty confronting May and Corbyn is all the more acute because both have interpreted the referendum result as a rejection of free movement for European citizens. This—dictated in May's case by her own core prejudices, but a pragmatic move on Corbyn's part in large degree in response to pressure from trade union leaders and Labour right-wingers—has made striking a deal with the EU harder, because free movement is one of the “four freedoms” that have hardened into a legalistic dogma that Brussels seeks to impose on its neighbours.<sup>11</sup> But it also panders to the anti-migrant racism played on by the Tory right and UKIP during the referendum campaign.

Despite the widespread condemnation of the deal, especially in the Tory Party, May seems genuinely to believe that she can, in the end, get it through. Her calculation was probably that, although the deal is no-one's first preference—Brexiteers want a clean break with the EU, Remainers not to leave—it can succeed if enough MPs see it as an acceptable second best, offering enough of a break for some Brexiteers, and enough continuing engagement with the EU for most Remainers. Instead, she has succeeded to push many hitherto loyal Tory Remainers into opposition alongside the ultra-Brexiteers. But part of her calculation clearly has been that it may be possible to extract more concessions from the EU. Hence her dash to meet Continental leaders after postponing the 11 December vote. Anyone who succeeds her in 10 Downing St if she falls would almost certainly pursue the same course.

How likely is the EU to offer Britain anything more? Its leaders have of course insisted that the 25 November deal is final, but to answer the question we need to dig a little deeper. The EU-27 have taken a tough bargaining line with Britain, partly in order to make an example that will deter any other member state from trying to leave. But there are probably more important considerations stemming from the nature of competition in contemporary capitalism. A number of commentators have pointed out that Trump's obsession with tariffs is a bit old-fashioned. Major trading powers clash over the systems of regulation that govern access to their respective markets. Barack Obama conceived the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as a means of ensuring that the crucial Asia-Pacific region would be dominated by a regulatory system that would constrain China.

More to the point, the eurozone crisis may have dramatised the increasingly dysfunctional

character of the EU as a monetary and political union, but Brussels has been extremely effective in developing a system of regulations that govern the European Single Market and in exporting them to the rest of the world. The Financial Times noted more than a decade ago:

Sometimes voluntarily, sometimes through gritted teeth and sometimes without even knowing, countries around the world are importing the EU's rules. It is a trend that has sparked concerns among foreign business leaders and that irritates US policymakers. But whether they like it or not, rice farmers in India, mobile phone users in Bahrain, makers of cigarette lighters in China, chemicals producers in the US, accountants in Japan and software companies in California have all found that their commercial lives are shaped by decisions taken in the EU capital.

"Brussels has become the global pacesetter for regulation," says David Vogel, a professor of business and public policy at the University of California, Berkeley. Prof Vogel points out that even the US—the world's most powerful nation and the biggest economy—is finding it increasingly hard to escape the clutches of the Brussels regulatory machine: "The relative impact of EU regulation on US public policy and US business has been dramatically enhanced. Even if a country does not adopt the [European] standards, the firms that export to the EU do. And since most firms do export to the EU, they have adopted the EU's more stringent standards."

The EU's emergence as a global rule-maker has been driven by a number of factors, but none more important than the sheer size and regulatory sophistication of the Union's home market. The rapid expansion of the economic bloc to 27 nations with a total of more than 480 million largely affluent consumers has turned the Union into the world's biggest and most lucrative import market. At the same time, the drive to create a borderless pan-European market for goods, services, capital and labour has triggered a hugely ambitious programme of regulatory and legislative convergence among national regimes.<sup>12</sup>

The conflict between the EU and US regulatory regimes was a major reason why the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) that Washington and Brussels sought to negotiate was in trouble well before Trump won the presidency and swept it and the TPP aside (though the latter survives under Japanese leadership). The slow-down in global trade growth since the crash (which Trump's tariff war with China may be accelerating) is likely to exacerbate the conflict between rival regulatory regimes.<sup>13</sup> One mechanism through which the EU exports its regulations is by concluding association agreements with neighbouring states. Stephen Adams, a former EU trade official, says that "modern association agreements...are designed to turn EU regional partners into regulatory satellites".<sup>14</sup> Thus the European Commission is currently trying to renegotiate a series of bilateral deals that Switzerland made with the EU in the past that gave it access to the Single Market while retaining the right to negotiate trade agreements with other countries—exactly what May has been trying to achieve for Britain. This report in the Financial Times gives a flavour of Brussels's efforts to reduce Switzerland's margin for manoeuvre:

Frustrated by Swiss evasiveness last year, Jean-Claude Juncker, European Commission president, finally lost patience and asked his team to "find me a stick", according to one senior EU diplomat. "And they did."

By extending EU market access for Swiss equity traders—but pointedly limiting it to just a year—the Commission was able to manufacture the sort of leverage that would be taken seriously in Bern. One finance executive in Zurich warns that a blow-up with Brussels over share trading would “rip the heart out of the Swiss financial system”.<sup>15</sup>

So Britain has been trying to retain access to the Single Market at exactly the moment when the EU has been determined to tie this to subordination to its regulatory regime (and the prospect of Brexit has itself strengthened this impulse). The bargaining advantage was always firmly on the side of the EU-27, whose economy is six times the size of Britain’s. But it’s important to see that, despite this asymmetry in bargaining power between the two sides, Britain, still the fifth biggest economy in the world and site of the most important international financial centre, is perceived as a threat to the EU-27. France, while actively seeking with some success to poach financial business from the City for Paris after Brexit, took seriously the not so veiled threats by May and chancellor Philip Hammond to turn Britain into a kind of European Singapore, where deregulation and low taxation would undercut EU-based firms. Maybe fearing that a Trump administration hostile to the EU might encourage Britain to act as a deregulated offshore spoiler, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark successfully pushed for the transitional arrangements in the withdrawal treaty to include maintaining a “level playing field” between Britain and the EU-27 and allowing the Commission and the European Court of Justice to police state support for industry (a shot across Corbyn’s bows as well).

This dimension of inter-imperialist competition will continue to inform negotiations on the crucial final trade agreement between Britain and the EU. “The power is with us,” gloated Martin Selmayr, Juncker’s ex-chief of staff who earlier this year was controversially promoted to secretary-general of the European Commission, on the eve of the agreement between London and Brussels: the deal has been designed to put Britain under pressure to make further concessions on fishing, continuing payments to the EU and trade regulation.<sup>16</sup> None of this bodes well for any British prime minister seeking changes to what has already been agreed. EU leaders have so far ruled out the option of a legal declaration offering an interpretation of the backstop that might reassure Tory backbenchers that the backstop intended to ensure that the intra-Irish border stays open won’t last forever.

May and her first Brexit secretary David Davis laid much hope on those member states who would be damaged by a no-deal Brexit, either because they export to Britain (most obviously, Germany) or would be hit if Britain abruptly stopped paying into the EU budget (for example, Poland).<sup>17</sup> But London’s efforts to play EU member states off against each other have been completely unsuccessful. Angela Merkel, once the strong woman of Europe and ever the object of illusory hopes by supplicant premiers (not just Cameron and May, but also Alexis Tsipras), but now preoccupied with the rapid decay of her chancellorship, has toed the tough line taken by the Commission and Barnier. Maybe the actual prospect of a hard Brexit if May’s government faces total collapse might concentrate minds in continental capitals, but the combination of bullying and bungling characteristic of EU policy-making doesn’t encourage anyone to bet the bank on this.

The political calculus in both London and Brussels points to other options. The default one is that Britain will simply crash out of the EU on 29 March without a deal. Since this is

anathema for British capitalism, and since there isn't a parliamentary majority for a hard Brexit, ways of stopping this are being feverishly explored—buying time by suspending article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty; and using this breathing space either to negotiate a different kind of association agreement, perhaps “Norway plus”, modelled on Norway's relationship to the EU which would keep Britain in the Single Market, subject to the ECJ, and maintaining free movement, or to hold a second referendum. Either option would represent a major political defeat for the Brexiteers, but they have made themselves vulnerable through their failure to agree on either a coherent alternative to May's plan or, until very late in the day, a strategy for removing her. Even if Boris Johnson somehow manages to exploit the political chaos to clamber into the Tory leadership and perhaps even the premiership, his performance since the referendum has confirmed that he is no Churchillian man of destiny, but an opportunistic, racist buffoon.

If the Remainers have a moment, it is now. Their hand has been strengthened by the ECJ ruling that Britain can revoke its article 50 notice to leave the EU unilaterally, without the agreement of the 27. The People's Vote campaign held a huge demonstration in October calling for a second referendum, having previously been endorsed by the Labour Party conference. Its ostensible justification—requiring a popular vote on May's deal—has receded in the face of the real motivation—restaging the Brexit referendum. Their arguments are shabby. Consider this effort by Guardian columnist Polly Toynbee, once a -diehard SDPer, now doyenne of the Labour right:

Indeed, slowly the pendulum has swung: YouGov's 20 November poll asking “In hindsight, do you think Britain was right or wrong to vote to leave the EU?” shows 47 percent saying right, and 53 percent wrong. Prof John Curtice comments on relatively few switchers: the good old grim reaper carries off old Brexiteers, replaced with passionate young Remain voters. Some 600,000 Britons die each year, while while 700,000 reach voting age. YouGov founder Peter Kellner finds that, due to demographics alone, by 19 January, just before we depart, the Leave majority will have vanished without a single switcher...

The prospect of another referendum fills me with dread, though I marched with the rest. The polling figures are far too close to predict the result. The campaign ramping up Brexit racism and hate, the bullying, false promises and fact-free mendacity will be vile. Will the BBC be as pusillanimous as before, giving equal weight to facts and nonsense? Rows over setting the vote question and months of campaigning will be excruciatingly divisive. But then a Remain result would see it all over and done with: May's plan will lead to years more ferocious wrangling over the final deal.<sup>18</sup>

This is pretty contemptible. Toynbee acknowledges that the referendum would be “divisive”, but seems mainly worried that not enough Leave voters will have had the good grace to die off and allow Remainers to resume their traditional role dictating British foreign policy (on which they have an excellent record, with architects of the Iraq War such as Tony Blair and Alastair Campbell leading the campaign for a second referendum). Advocates of a “People's Vote” are indeed in a contradictory position. They argue (falsely) that the vote to leave on 23 June 2016 was a racist vote, and also argue (with partial truth) that the result encouraged racism. But they advocate another referendum, even though the Tory right, UKIP (now remodelled under Gerard Batten's leadership in alliance with the alt-

right and Tommy Robinson) and open Nazis will rely on anti-migrant racism even more than the first time round. But Remainer ultras seem happy to pay the price in heightened racism in order to keep Britain in the EU.

There are two fundamental arguments against a second referendum. First, the polling arithmetic hasn't changed the fact that British society is deeply, and more or less evenly, divided in its attitude towards the EU. Even if the Remain camp won this time, it would leave almost half the electorate feeling robbed of the choice they took in June 2016. Secondly, the racist right—Tories, UKIP, alt-right and open fascists—are best placed to exploit the resulting bitterness. In principle, Corbyn could relate to this mood, given his background as a critic of the EU in the tradition of Tony Benn. But his hands are tied by the strength of support for Remain in the shadow cabinet, the Parliamentary Labour Party and the Labour rank and file. Robinson's decision to call a demonstration in central London against "Brexit Betrayal" on 9 December 2018, two days before the scheduled House of Commons vote on the deal, reflected a recognition of the opportunity opening up for the far right. In the 1970s, the National Front emerged as Britain's first major fascist movement since the Mosleyites in the 1930s by exploiting Tory supporters' sense of betrayal at the Conservative government's decision to let in East African Asians. Contesting May's failure to deliver hard Brexit could offer an even bigger opening for the rapidly realigning far right.<sup>19</sup>

Brexit has proved to be a uniquely divisive issue. It doesn't just polarise society and split the major parties. It also divides the radical and revolutionary left; indeed, the disagreements that developed in the run-up to the 2016 referendum have been the most embittered for many years. The rational response is to acknowledge that we deeply differ in our assessment of the EU, try to respect each other's arguments, and above all not to allow the disagreement to prevent us standing together on the many issues where we agree. Unfortunately, not everyone has responded in this way. Thus the left-Remainer campaign Another Europe is Possible demanded that the anti-racist and anti-fascist counter-demonstration to Robinson's march on 9 December should take an anti-Brexit stance. One of the organisers justified this divisive move thus: "the left now faces a choice. As the far right and the Brexit project intersect, it can connect these dots and fight against the politics of Brexit while presenting its wider radical vision for society. Or it can stand aside from history".<sup>20</sup>

The problem here is partly the suggestion that there is a single "Brexit project" with its own coherent "politics". In fact, we see that the Brexiteers don't have a unified view of Brexit or how to achieve it: Johnson and Davis left the cabinet, while Michael Gove has been hanging on, apparently supporting the Norway Plus option. There are many different theoretical and programmatic bases on which to oppose the EU, including some powerful cases made from the left.<sup>21</sup> One of the great benefits of having Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader and John McDonnell as his shadow chancellor has been their willingness to explore an alternative form of Brexit that would take advantage of the liberation from the EU's neoliberal straitjacket that it could offer. Worse still, making Brexit a necessarily racist "project" dismisses the millions of working class people who voted to leave in June 2016 as natural supporters of the far right. This is politically criminal. Anti-Brexit trade union leaders, painfully aware of how many of their members voted to leave, have been careful to

avoid this kind of contemptuous dismissal. Fortunately, the pressure for unity produced an anti-fascist and anti-racist counter-demonstration on 9 December that swamped Robinson, Batten and their followers.

Beyond these more specific points is a more fundamental question of priorities: which is the more important issue—the EU or racism? 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.<sup>22</sup> On that basis we supported a vote to leave in 2016. Despite the criticisms made of this stance elsewhere in this issue, we see no reason to change it. 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. The referendum wasn't something that the left had campaigned for, but was the product of a bungled manoeuvre by Cameron. This deep political and constitutional crisis is something that has been foisted on the rest of us thanks to the divisions inside the Tory Party.

The plight of British capitalism is unlikely fundamentally to change in or out of the EU: the Treasury and Bank of England projections that any version of Brexit will leave Britain economically worse off compared to staying in are only as good as the assumptions on which their models are based, and these have often proved wanting.<sup>23</sup> The prospect of Brexit has simply highlighted the limits of the reconstruction of British capitalism under Thatcher, Major and Blair, but these limits would still be there if the Remainers had won on 23 June 2016. The dynamics of global crisis will continue to work whatever happens on 29 March, and working people will still face attacks and need to fight back in or out of the EU.

Racism is a different matter. We have seen it surging since the latter years of the Blair government and intensifying since the crash and the Great Recession in 2007-9. Brexit gave the far right greater confidence, but it didn't create the racist surge on which they feed. Accounts that seek to explain this surge by the 2016 referendum ignore the growth of Islamophobia over the past few decades and particularly in the era of the "war on terror". Islamophobia indeed has become the dominant form of racism today, and it is notable how leading figures in the far right target Muslims and denounce the "Islamisation" of Europe. The agitation of both the English Defence League and the Football Lads Alliance was directed chiefly at Muslims. Trump, immediately on taking office, sought to impose the Muslim ban on the advice of the alt-right maestro Steve Bannon. Robinson has acquired martyr status for the far right for his lying campaign accusing Muslims of being the main perpetrators of child abuse.

So we see the same racist surge across Europe and the US and, as the interview with Valério Arcary elsewhere in this issue shows, in Brazil. This is a mortal danger, not only because the suffering it causes from racist attacks, the deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean and the Sahara, the sheer mental and physical distress caused by everyday state and popular racism, but also because of how the far right, including genuine fascists such as the Austrian Freedom Party, is using anti-migrant racism to break into the political mainstream. Trump let the genie out of the bottle, but now he has powerful imitators in the likes of Matteo Salvini in Italy and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. This is the issue—combating racism and the far right. By comparison, where you stand on the EU is a secondary question.

By refusing to accept this logic, some left Remainers are putting support for the EU ahead of fighting racism and fascism. Maybe the stress of the past few years has turned some of them into left liberals who have bought into the ideology of “Europeanism” and sincerely believe the EU to be a motor of progress. Others may hope that campaigning against Brexit will give them the edge against other sections of the radical and revolutionary left. But many left Remainers are much better than this—accepting the left critique of the EU but opposing Brexit in the mistaken belief that in current conditions it is impossible to campaign against the EU on a socialist basis. We disagree about this. But there is no reason that we can’t stand together against the main enemy—the bosses and the racist far right that the crisis of their system is strengthening.

One reason why it is important to avoid further damage to the left is that the Brexit debate can break out of the internecine struggle within the ruling class that it has predominantly been. In February 1994, towards the end of a presidency that had steered France decisively in a neoliberal direction, François Mitterrand warned: “Some people are suffering a lot: beware of fundamental revolts, when reason can no longer do anything”.<sup>24</sup> This warning has been amply confirmed, most recently thanks to the bungled attempt at authoritarian neoliberalism by Mitterrand’s latest successor Emmanuel Macron and the gigantic, totally unforeseen movement of the gilets jaunes that it has provoked. Commenting on the clashes in the centre of Paris on 1 December, an experienced journalist wrote:

I’ve lived in France for 22 years and have witnessed street protests by workers, farmers, wine producers, truck drivers, railway employees, university students, sixth-formers, teachers, youths in the multiracial suburbs, chefs, lawyers, doctors and police officers. Yes, even police officers.

I have never seen the kind of wanton destruction that surrounded me on some of the smartest streets of Paris on Saturday—such random, hysterical hatred, directed not just towards the riot police but at shrines to the French republic itself such as the Arc de Triomphe. The 12-hour battle went beyond violent protest, beyond rioting, to the point of insurrection, even civil war...

...while Saturday’s crowd was mostly white (there are many black and brown gilets jaunes) this movement shows, so far, few outward signs of racism or extreme nationalism. The great bulk of the movement represents genuine economic and social distress in a peripheral and middle France which, with some reason, says that it is despised and fiscally exploited by the country’s thriving cities. Part of the French media suggests that Saturday’s protests were hijacked by ultra-violent sects of the hard right and hard left. This is also misleading.

There were groups of masked, young men among the 5,000 or so people on the Etoile and its radiating avenues but they were a minority. The great majority of the rioters were, by my reckoning, men and some women in their 30s and 40s from suffering rural towns in northern or western France and the hardscrabble outer suburbs of greater Paris. They came dressed and armed for combat.<sup>25</sup>

More important than the destruction wrought that day are the scale and causes of the movement and the capacity for self-organisation beyond the established parties and even the trade unions that it has shown. A Bloomberg journalist has speculated that Britain could see its own gilets jaunes:

what happens if traditional pathways for affecting change no longer work? What happens, say, if the political sphere is so unstable that there is no clear policy vision; if government not only ceases to be responsive but is no longer even coherent? Britain may be about to find out.

The 2016 Brexit vote, like the election of Macron and the protests against him now, represented a rejection of the established political order and a burbling dissatisfaction with the status quo... But the risk to the UK government from Brexit is actually worse.

The arguments for leaving the European Union were substantial and debate-worthy; but it's fair to say that years of austerity, low productivity growth, declining or stagnating wages and rising inequality also made Europe a useful scapegoat. And yet the problems underlying the 2016 Brexit vote can barely get a government hearing, as the preparations and negotiations for withdrawal have become all-consuming. Meanwhile, Brexit divisions threaten to stoke populist anxieties with unpredictable consequences.

Macron, despite his missteps and flaws, at least told voters that the change he was going to bring would be painful at first. Contrast that with Prime Minister Theresa May's "Brexit means Brexit and we're going to make a success of it." May made promises to Brexitters that she couldn't keep, including total control of laws, money and borders; she promised Remain voters that access to EU markets would be maintained when that was not in her power.<sup>26</sup>

Amid political and perhaps economic turmoil, with the political class close to a Mexican standoff and big business looking on helplessly, either, or indeed both, sides in the Brexit debate could explode out of a sense of betrayal. The far right are trying to prepare for such an explosion. The radical and revolutionary left too should avoid getting trapped on one side or other of the debate within the ruling class and instead stand ready to promote and help shape "fundamental revolts".

## **Alex Callinicos**

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### *Notes*

1 See the remarkable attack by the former governor of the Bank of England, Mervyn King—King, 2018.

2 Sandbu, 2018, and Münchau, 2018.

3 For example, on the withdrawal treaty, Steerpike, 2018.

4 See the account of this painful learning process in Young, 1998.

5 There is a highly jaundiced take on this transition in Edgerton, 2018, chapters 18-20.

6 See Norfield, 2016, although he still places Britain in the Premier League.

7 Young, 1998, p258.

8 Callinicos, 1997.

9 Callinicos, 2016.

10 The detailed assessment in Stafford, 2018, suggests that, while some financial activities will be split, with work shifting to the continent, London will continue to dominate key areas such as trading in equities and derivatives and to provide the physical data infrastructure for a huge mass of international financial transactions.

11 The other freedoms are of goods, services and capital: see Barnard, 2016.

12 Buck, 2007. See also the overviews in Barnard, 2016, chapters 1 and 15.

13 See, on the acceleration in the trade slowdown, Roberts, 2018.

14 Barker, 2018a.

15 Atkins and Barker, 2018.

16 Barker, 2018b.

17 I am grateful for the Polish example to a paper by Aleks Szczerbiak, “The Impact of the Eurozone, Migration and Brexit Crises on Euroscepticism in Party Politics”, at the Department of European and International Studies research seminar, King’s College London, 28 November 2018.

18 Toynbee, 2018.

19 See on the far-right realignment Raw, 2018.

20 Chessum, 2018.

21 For recent examples, see Lapavistas, 2018, Elliott, 2018 and Blakeley, 2018. See also the discussion in Callinicos, 2018, pp13-16.

22 See the reaffirmation of this stance in Callinicos, 2015.

23 See the sceptical discussion of the BoE forecasts of doom by the anti-Brexit Paul Krugman—Krugman, 2018.

24 <http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/947002000.html>

25 Lichfield, 2018.

26 Raphael, 2018.

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• ISR Issue: 161. Posted on 13<sup>th</sup> December 2018:  
<http://isj.org.uk/brexit-blues/>



