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Britain

Brexit vote is a disaster, but the struggle goes on

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This statement was issued by Socialist Resistance, British section of the Fourth International on 24th June 2016, following the referendum.

The Brexit vote to leave the EU is a victory for the right-wing xenophobes and a disaster for the struggle against austerity in Britain. It is a victory for racism and a mandate to strengthen the borders of Britain against migration.

We say that it is a disaster not because we have the slightest illusion in for the EU or its institutions—we regard it as a neo-liberal bosses club. Nor because we have any time whatsoever for the reactionary official ‘remain’ campaign led by Cameron, who with his so-called renegotiation set out to worsen the conditions of workers in this country including migrant workers. It is because an exit from the EU at this time and in this way will push the political situation in Britain sharply to the right and weaken the struggle against austerity. It will also be a disaster for every migrant, refugee, and minority in the country.

It is interesting that Cameron said in his resignation speech that there will be no change in the status of EU citizens in this country – ‘at the present time’.

The millions who voted for Brexit did so because they accepted the argument that the worsening of living standards and public services were caused by immigration, not by austerity imposed by a Westminster government. Nor did the Remain camp blame the British banking and finance establishment for the 2008 economic crisis.

As Left Unity puts it in their statement: “This referendum came from pressure from the far right – driven by anti-immigration sentiment, fuelled by racism. This has been the most reactionary national campaign in British political history, resulting in an open emergence of the extreme right.”

They are absolutely right. The atmosphere was poisoned, hatred whipped up, and an MP assassinated by a fascist shouting ‘put Britain first’, one of the top themes of the mainstream exit campaigns.

Whilst Jo Cox's assassination was a deeply tragic event it was also direct result of the carnival of reaction generated by the referendum campaign. Jo Cox was a defender of refugees and a supporter of the remain campaign. The filth and bile pumped out by the mainstream exit campaigns, backed by the bulk of the media and right-wing politicians, has not only taken Britain back decades in term of racism and xenophobia but it created the conditions for a far right fanatic, with links to white supremacists, to gun her down in the street.

The referendum has legitimised racism and xenophobia as never before. Vile statements with echoes of the Tory racist MP Enoch Powell have been spouted with impunity and accepted by the media as some kind of fair comment. Powell's infamous ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech back in 1968 resulted in him being sacked by Tory leader Ted Heath and Powell being turned into a political pariah—Farage's racist poster ‘Breaking Point’ resulted in some mild and belated criticism, entirely as a result of the assassination of Jo Cox. Similar images have been published repeatedly in the papers without comment or objection. A complaint has been made against the Daily Express on the basis that it had migration headlined on its front page for 17 days in succession.

Some sections of the left and the labour movement recognised these dangers. The launch of Another Europe is Possible was an important step. Corbyn and McDonnell, Momentum, Left Unity and Ken Loach, most Greens and especially Caroline Lucas worked hard to stem the racist bile. The majority of trade union leaders took the right

view” and both UNITE and UNISON put out important material against racism and defending migrant workers. Matt Wrack of the FBU and Manuel Cortez of TSSA played particularly important roles. That is to their profound credit.

Most of the radical left, however, supported an exit vote and the so-called Lexit campaign – which had zero influence on the entire referendum. It peddled the illusion that a left exit was on offer when it was not, and falsely claimed that were Cameron to be forced out it would open up opportunities for the left. Even now, after a victory for the Farage and the Tory right, those in Lexit such as the SWP claim that it was a “revolt against the rich and powerful” and that the danger from racism “is far from inevitable”.

They failed to recognise the dangers that the mainstream exit campaigns, led by right-wing xenophobes, represented. They were oblivious the racism and hatred that would be generated by them, the reactionary impact this would have on the political situation and the balance of class forces, and dangers involved of being in any way associated with them” particularly in the case of an exit vote.

They chose to ignore (even when challenged) the damaging outcome that an exit vote would have for the 2.2m EU citizens living in this country who’s status would have been threatened as a direct result. Yet they are organisations that have opposed the racism and xenophobia for the whole of their existence. Rock Against Racism struck a massive blow against racism in the 1970s, and for which the SWP can take great credit.

Immediately the result was announced, Farage was on the media crowing about an historic victory for the liberation of Britain and outlined his reactionary vision for a new Britain. He was treated as the leader of the winning side. He said that Cameron would have to go forthwith – which he did a few hours later – and that the new Tory Prime Minister would have to be a Brexiter in order to carry out the mandate of the referendum.

A leadership election will now be triggered in the Tory Party to be completed in advance of the Tory Party conference. We can then assume a general election will be called soon after with a manifesto designed to implement what they will claim is the mandate of the referendum: a clamp-down on immigration, a strengthening of the borders, and no doubt a restricted status for EU citizens living in the country.

An election at the end of the year under conditions where the political situation is moving to the right is very dangerous. The left needs to rapidly gear up for it, and so does the Labour Party.

Jeremy Corbyn played a principled role during the referendum campaign – calling for a vote to stay in but with no illusions in the EU or its institutions. His interview on Sky TV News in the final week, for example, was filled with opposition to xenophobia, privatisation and austerity in front of a predominantly young and engaging audience. Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell made a radical call against austerity and racism at a large “Another Europe is Possible” rally in London with Matt Wrack of the FBU, Caroline Lucas and Yannis Varoufakis.

But the mainstream media mainly presented the referendum for months as predominantly a battle between the two wings of the Conservative Party. Many Labour MPs hostile to Corbyn went along with that and they appeared on platforms as subordinates to the Tories. Thirteen years of the pro-austerity Labour government of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown and five years of ineffective opposition under Ed Miliband played their part in the disillusion of Labour voters. Labour councils in power for decades have failed to stand up for local populations under attack. Hostility to the lack of affordable housing, the downgrading of local health services, cuts in school budgets and so on were allowed to be deflected into the Right’s xenophobic campaign against migrants.

In some parts of the country – often where Labour and the left is best organised – the Labour vote swung to Remain: in London eg Lambeth, scene of recent frontline battles around library cuts, voted 79% for remain; in Bristol where a

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Corbyn supporter dramatically snatched the Mayoral role only seven weeks ago there was a Remain majority; in some of the largest northern cities – Manchester, Liverpool and Newcastle – there were Remain majorities. But in the vast majority of Labour heartlands in England and Wales where local Labour Parties have been moribund for decades and where the Party machine is firmly in the hands of the right of the Party, Labour voters protested against their condition by voting Leave.

The former Labour heartlands in Scotland in opposition to Labour's unionist position have now swung behind a more left talking Scottish National Party and every single one of the 32 local districts in Scotland voted to Remain, also creating a constitutional crisis that may lead to a second independence referendum.

Now Corbyn faces challenges from the largely hostile Labour Parliamentary Party for his alleged failure to mobilise the vote sufficiently. Yet it was the areas in which the right were in control of the Party where the Labour vote failed to be galvanised by the need for a Remain vote against austerity and xenophobia. The rank and file of the Labour Party and unions needs to fight strongly to defend Corbyn against the Parliamentary Party and any moves to remove him.

If Labour is to win an election, likely to come at the end of the year, against a Tory Party led by a newly invigorated and right-moving Boris Johnson-Michael Gove leadership with a manifesto to curb immigration and claiming the authority of the referendum, it can only do so with a radical left programme that opposes austerity in all its forms and supports the right of migrants and all workers.

If Corbyn is prepared to fight on such a platform, which we expect he would, the left should get fully behind him.