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Britain

Divided Britain in disastrous referendum vote

- IV Online magazine - 2016 - IV497 - June 2016 -

Publication date: Saturday 25 June 2016

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After a bitter and deeply reactionary campaign, Britain voted to leave the EU by 52% to 48% on June 23. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) leader, Nigel Farage, is celebrating his victory together with his chums on the hard-right Eurosceptic wing of the Tory Party. His far right friends across Europe, from Marine le Pen in France, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and similar people in Germany, Austria, Italy - and places beyond - are rubbing their hands in glee while working out how best to capitalize on this triumph. Conservative Prime David Cameron has resigned with effect from the autumn and it will be his successor - almost certainly prominent "Brexit" Boris Johnson- that will lead divorce negotiations with the EU. Those that are now in the ascendancy in the Conservative Party are even further to the right than the defeated leadership of Cameron.

Turnout was high at 72.1% – despite torrential rain in parts of the islands - higher than at any general election since 1997 (when it was 77.7%) The result shows a deeply divided Britain. More than 70 % of those under 30 voted remain. Scotland and the North of Ireland voted remain – though the turnout in Scotland at 67.2 was lower than average and way down on the massive show of 84.6% in the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. The constitutional implications of these differences are not yet completely clear but Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has said that a second Scottish independence referendum is now highly likely.

Wales, where Labour has taken its supporters for granted for decades and even after the election of left leader Jeremy Corbyn last summer little has changed in terms of that approach, voted to leave. In England the pattern varied, but for example, in the North West, the big cities of Liverpool and Manchester voted remain but the smaller towns voted to leave. The working class and Labour's traditional supporters are left deeply divided. The centre of British politics, which moved dramatically to the left when Jeremy Corbyn was elected last year, has now moved dangerously to the right.

This was not a referendum the left chose – but a concession made by David Cameron to the Eurosceptic wing of his own party. It was always clear that the debate would be dominated by two reactionary camps baying at each other – as Fire Brigades Union General Secretary Matt Wrack pointed out between people arguing about whether they could exploit working people more effectively by staying in the European Union or by leaving it.

The referendum was always going to be a carnival of reaction. The question that dominated the debate and was always going to do so was the issue of migration. Racist claims by mainstream politicians filled the airways and were rarely challenged by journalists. In terms of what is seen as 'acceptable' in terms of racism, it feels like Britain in 1966 – not fifty years later. Migrants – not right wing governments in Britain – were painted as the cause of all ills; from unemployment, low wages to decaying public services. The old tactic of divide and rule was employed extremely effectively.

One week before the referendum the toxic nature of this debate was made clear when Labour MP Jo Cox, a prominent supporter of 'remain' and a passionate campaigner for the rights of refugees was gunned down in her Yorkshire constituency. Her murderer is a man with a long involvement in far right organisations who shouted 'put Britain first' as he brutally attacked her. Not only is this the name of a far right organisation – but it was one of the slogans of leave campaign.

And while the right focused on and used the question of migration to whip up prejudice they had other angles to their populism too. A lot was made of the amount that Britain pays into the European Union budget – with false figures and

partial information flying around. One particularly cynical use of this was the claim that the £350 million that Britain a week that Britain supposedly spends on the EU could be spent instead on the National Health Service. This is from people who have pushed the privatisation and starving of funds of that vital service. Donald Trump's style and approach is not a million miles from that of these people.

And of course the right in the Labour Party are now using this as yet another opportunity to go for Jeremy Corbyn - this time tabling a vote of no confidence. It's not at all clear how far this will get as other prominent right wingers aren't convinced this is the right time to move as Corbyn remains as popular as ever in the Labour Party as a whole. Corbyn was not the reason 38% of Labour voters plumped for leave. As Socialist Resistance argue: 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. [1]. Rather it was the years of neglect under New Labour in particular compounded by the attacks of the Tories subsequently.

Many of us who campaigned for a remain vote in this referendum did so not because we have any illusions in the EU or its institutions - we were always clear it's a bosses club. After all having David Cameron and former right wing Labour leader Tony Blair both arguing for remain was hardly a recommendation for taking that view either. But as the Socialist Resistance statement on the result says : 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.

Many of us who worked for remain believed and continue to believe it was a tactical decision – a question of how best to support the struggles of working people in Britain and internationally – which includes of course migrants. We were and remain concerned about the impact of a leave vote on the thousands of citizens of other European countries living in Britain, who are undoubtedly worried about their fate now (most EU citizens in Britain did not have a vote unless they are citizens of Commonwealth countries i.e. Cyprus, Malta and Ireland). And the fact that we already hear of posters appearing in Cambridgeshire telling Polish workers to go home is proof that we were tragically right.

The racism that has been pumped out during the months of campaigning will have a long term effect as well on all migrants wherever they are from. Some in the mainstream leave campaign courted people from former British colonies in Asia by cynically – if correctly – talking about how Fortress Europe discriminates against them. The clear implication was that if Britain were to leave the EU, we could let in more migrants from elsewhere. But what is planned is higher border fences, literal and virtual – as well as more scapegoating of people whose families have lived in Britain for generations

As the Left Unity statement on the outcome says:

We call on all those who reject this disastrous turn in British politics to unite to oppose racism, to defend the rights of migrants and to fight to protect and extend workers' and other rights that are now under threat. We reject the 'divide and rule' methods of our ruling class, setting one worker against another, wherever they come from, and turning one community against another. The problems we face result from the neo-liberal, deregulatory, anti-working class policies imposed by successive British governments, not from immigrants and refugees – our fellow working people. We have been proud to share this position with the Labour leadership, the TUC and the overwhelming majority of trade unions and we will work together to take these principles forward.

Further it will be crucial for the left in Britain, often semidetached from political developments elsewhere in the continent to redouble its efforts to strengthen its links in solidarity across the continent. In the very immediate future I am certainly looking to the elections in the Spanish State to show that united we stand.

[1] See [Brexit vote is a disaster, but the struggle goes on.](#)