

Observations on Brexit and Lexit in the UK EU membership referendum

Workers Solidarity Movement

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ANARCHISM AND DIRECT DEMOCRACY

1. Anarchists are generally hostile to decision making mechanisms that demand people put their faith in others to make decisions on their behalf without mandate or recall. We favour systems of direct democracy where the people either discuss and vote on an issue directly, or delegate other people to meet up for such discussions but these delegates are both mandated and recallable.
2. However, we insist that even a perfect democracy has no right to oppress a minority. There can be no democratic mandate for racism, sexism or homophobia.
3. Anarchists generally advocate abstaining from the decision making mechanisms allowed for by the boss class as for the most part these, in order to preserve the power of that class, are built around systems of indirect decision making. From parliaments to local councils the general rule is that lawmakers cannot be mandated and they can not be recalled.
4. A referendum can be an exception to this because referendums may allow the people to directly make a decision, if only at the level of selection between the choices offered. However it's not unusual for the choices offered to be no real choice at all.

UK REFERENDUM

5. The UK referendum on continued EU membership is one where little real choice is actually on offer. Crudely the choice could be said to be one between a UK under the control of the British bosses and a UK under the control of British bosses with some oversight by EU bosses. The parts of the left that are invested in the issue on both sides have advanced various arguments as to why one or the other of those setups might result in more favourable legislation for workers in the UK with citizenship. This isn't a gamble we find at all useful and on that level we would simply abstain or spoil our votes in the referendum.
6. The referendum does not just effect the UK and UK left but also the left in Ireland, including southern Ireland. In particular the somewhat successful 'good cop, bad cop' routine of recent governments has led some on the left to believe that austerity was largely a result of the EU imposing its will through the Troika. This is despite the fact the Troika role started in November 2010 while austerity began started with the 2007/8 one. In that context it is not surprising that the years of the crisis have seen a strengthening and expansion of anti-EU sentiment in the left and water charge movements in the south.
7. We think this is built on the mistaken premise that austerity would somehow have been kinder if it was implemented by the southern establishment without EU involvement. But leaving that aside, the point to be made is that because of our very different but intertwined histories a UK departure from the EU would have very different implications than a southern Ireland departure. Brexit as advocated would be a turn back towards the politics & economics of the British Empire both in terms of the commonwealth and the post colonial relationship the south had with Britain. This is not an attractive proposition, indeed were the south to Exit with the UK the danger would be that the economy would be stripped back down to a subservient cheap food producer for the cities of the UK.

8. This also sets aside the significant cost for people living in Ireland who do not have citizenship of either the republic or UK. This population, which is now a sizeable section of the working class here, including some of the most marginalised sectors, may lose easy access to the UK and with that lose access to travelling for abortions there. Asylum seekers and people without papers are already in that situation with horrific results as some have been forced to carry through unwanted or unviable pregnancies.
9. Returning to the UK what is very obvious from then Brexit campaign is that in the current context an exit would be on a right wing, racist basis. The core idea that has dominated the campaign has been 'taking the country back' and the need for even stricter border controls than those the EU already imposes. Controls that have killed 10,000 people since 2014. In the situation were even parts of the far left have already capitulated to these sentiments, repeating them with a left gloss, it is clear that a post Exit UK government would at the very least turn towards a migration system designed to end free movement within the EU and replace it with a boss friendly points system that favours the white former colonies even more so than is currently the case.
10. This has already been signalled in the determination of who gets to vote in the referendum and who does not. Migrants to the UK, who are the ones likely to suffer the consequences of Brexit are excluded from the vote. Except for those from Ireland and the commonwealth, i.e. those least likely to be effected are the only migrants with a vote. As if to underline the point, most of the very large population of people with British citizenship who have migrated to other countries will also get to vote, providing they have been registered in the UK at some point in the last 15 years.
11. The run up to the referendum and the referendum campaign itself has right wing nationalist and racist positions within the population and political parties. In the preceding week this reached the extreme of the fascist assassination of Jo Cox and, that same day, the unveiling of an official leave campaign poster that reflects the sort of racist hate imagery used by the Nazis in the 1930s. But these are just the extremes of a widespread shift to the right demonstrated by Economist polling that shows for the first time the vast majority of voter segments identify Immigration as the most important issue.
12. The referendum opened with sections of the far left deciding to also support an Exit position, the so called Lexit (for Left-Exit). This appears to have been an electoral opportunist calculation that an Exit would damage the government, perhaps forcing an election and that in the election 'the Party' might make some minor gains. This is dressed up for public consumption in welfare state nostalgia and NHS protection as if the reality was anything other than the welfare state has been dismantled not by the EU but by successive domestic governments. And that the NHS is likewise targeted not by the EU but by the Tories. Those leading the mainstream Exit campaign are the same people who have argued against minimum wages and limiting working time. If Lexit was originally foolish opportunism choosing to continue to advocate a Lexit vote now that the reality of the campaign is clear is criminal stupidity. We do hope the stakes are not so high but it is worth recalling that this sort of foolishness is not new, in the early 1930s the German Communist Party coined "After Hitler, our turn!".

FOR INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY AND A PROGRESSIVE DEMOLITION OF THE EU

13. The EU is properly understood as part of the modern state rather than some separate entity above it. The state has layers of decision making bodies to make rules to impose on us, each layer with its own characteristic. And layers of court bodies to impose those rules with finally layers of armed personnel to impose them. Demands for reform that simply amount to shifting powers from one layer to another change nothing fundamental – indeed post EU Britain would not eliminate international treaties but simply have them at another level.
 14. For the left in Ireland, a tiny country on the margins of Europe, there is no road to freedom that does not involve a common struggle with workers across Europe and the planet. Retreating into nationalist isolation under the likes of Denis O'Brien is no alternative. For the left in the UK a return to the nationalist colonialism of Empire is even less of a way forward. The path forward will involve the demolition of the EU but not on a nationalist country by country basis. That demolition can only be progressive if it's the work of the working masses of the European continent, regardless of their citizenship, and hand in hand with those on the open prison that is the European periphery.
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(More) Thoughts on the EU referendum

The EU is just one of the many ways that capitalism is maintained; it's fundamentally neoliberal and imperialist and if this was a referendum for it to be destroyed we be calling for it to be.

That's not the case though, no matter how much people want it to be.

Claims that we should leave in order to smash Fortress Europe are complete ludicrously – smash Fortress Europe by creating Fortress Britain and reinforcing borders? We know the freedom of movement stuff generally only applies to white europeans and we're not insisting otherwise but more borders and another fortress is not going to destroy Fortress Europe.

This is a racist referendum, even getting to this stage of a referendum is a massive victory to UKIP, the BNP, Britain First and all the other racists, fascists and xenophobes; the very people who will undoubtedly benefit from a Leave Vote.

What's the Left strategy here? If we leave it's not a left victory, no matter how articulate the argument, and it would be delusional to think so. So, those who have campaigned for a Lexit, what's your strategy if we leave and the racists are validated, and their movement is seen to be gaining momentum?

A remain vote will not destory them but it will send a message to people of colour and migrants living here that we're not all racists.

Pleas from those on the left to "remember Greece" and vote leave today are sorely confused or willfully ignorant about how capitalism works. Capitalism is not just a European system; it's global and it has many mechanisms to crush any rebellion to it. The EU is one of those mechanisms, but if it wasn't the EU and IMF who shut down Syriza it would have been the Army

as seen in Chile 1973. Either way, power is not in parliament, it's in the markets, and the markets have many options available to them for shutting down rebellion, leaving the EU won't change this.

Today, when voting, we need to balance the forces. In the official campaigns capital is represented on both sides and there are racists on both sides. You can be guaranteed, however, that every racist, fascist and xenophobe will be voting leave as part of a strategy to get closer to the Britain they remember or dream of from the heyday of the empire.

Dover would tell us that we can handle the fascist backlash but the 300% rise in attacks against Muslim women in Britain since the Paris bombings tell us otherwise. We can assemble en masse and give the fash a kicking but all the day to day, insidious and invisible attacks tell us otherwise. We're not crushing fascism, we're not crushing misogyny.

It is possible to vote remain and to hate the EU at the same time.

The strategy today must be an anti-racist one. We must work to destroy the racism and xenophobia that brought us to this point.

Another world is possible, whatever the outcome, organise for it and send the racists packing.

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Work on this text began too late for us to agree it by simple majority vote. It failed to reach the needed supermajority for it to be published as WSM policy because a minority felt that the language used in relation to Lexit supporters was too harsh. So it's published here as an opinion piece that is indicative of where our views on the questions lie.

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