

On the United Kingdom's expected withdrawal from the European Union

1. Imperial decline and a crisis for the ruling class

Brexit cannot be understood or analysed outside of the context of a more general crisis of British imperial decline. This decline was managed, for the last part of the last century, through greater integration into European markets and the establishment of the City of London as a key strategic node of European integration and financial power; hence the dependence of a large section of British capital on a strong relationship with the EU. However, this strategy of managing British capital represents the interests of the dominant sections of the British ruling class; and the decline of British state power has produced contradictory effects – crucially, certain subordinate sections of British capital have not been best served by a strategy of European integration.

Alongside the ideological pressures of British nationalism and the political pressure of actors invested in the remnants of British colonialism (as, for instance, in the case of Ulster Unionism), the contradictory effects of British imperial decline have ensured a political division which has been manifested (in a deflected form) in an opposition between 'Europhile' and 'Euroscptic' sections of the British ruling class. These positions should not be seen as coherent blocs, but rather as the convergence of different political tendencies; i.e. the convergence of certain objective interests of small capital and fantasies of imperial nostalgia have coalesced a base opposing EU membership.

Due to largely contingent political events, the 2016 referendum represented a profound crisis for the hegemony of the British ruling class and represents the political (i.e. parliamentary and constitutional) manifestation of a long-term crisis of British imperial decline, set against the backdrop of the Great Recession. We must avoid the trap of imagining that the contradictions of which Brexit is a symptom can be resolved by a new government or a new referendum, or by any future relationship between the UK and EU.

2. The North of Ireland

In the North of Ireland, Brexit has exposed most acutely the contradictions of British imperial decline. The issue of the Irish border has laid bare the absurdity of the partition of Ireland, and demonstrated clearly that the Good Friday Agreement, while suppressing some of the symptoms of the British occupation of the North, has entirely failed to resolve these contradictions. We have a duty as British anti-imperialists to vociferously oppose the British presence in Ireland and the sectarian Good Friday Agreement, including the Unionist veto on

unification it contains. We must support any calls for a vote on Irish unification arising out of the Brexit crisis.

3. The European Union and the British State

The EU represents an agreement between nation states that enables them to integrate their markets and form a trading bloc that can compete and cooperate with other imperialist powers. The coercive powers of the EU in reinforcing neoliberal policy and the border regime are provided through the individual states' institutions of governance, economic pressures from the major capitals within the EU, and the EU's central financial and legal institutions.

The British state is an apparatus of bourgeois dictatorship that both reproduces social relations to the detriment of the working class and serves to unite British capital under the hegemony of the British ruling class and against competing capitals.

Neither the EU nor the British state can be reformed. The EU and the British state can, and for the most part do, mutually reinforce one another. For this reason, the 'interests' of the British state and those of the EU should not be taken to be straightforwardly oppositional. Making this mistake has contributed to binaristic analyses favouring either a Leave or Remain position. For this reason, reformist strategies such as a left nationalist Leave position or a 'Remain and reform' platform are fundamentally flawed (for instance, the Morning Star line and the Another Europe is Possible campaign respectively).

4. The 2016 referendum

The terms of debate in the 2016 referendum were set by the right. The official Vote Leave campaign cynically identified immigration as the cause of 'strain on public services'; the conduit through which the EU was identified as the engine of poverty, disempowerment and austerity was migration. Similarly, the Leave.EU campaign and UKIP portrayed the EU as abetting 'Islamist' terrorism and as allowing migration that was taking the UK to 'breaking point'. Against this, the dominant case for Remain made only a limited defence of EU freedom of movement and was primarily structured around a defence of the status quo and of business interests. Cameron's pledge to negotiate a 'brake on immigration' in the event of a Remain vote demonstrates that the Remain campaign had no intention of mounting any challenge to anti-migrant discourse.

The question whether any referendum should be re-run is a tactical one not a matter of principle; neither should the question of the referendum's 'legitimacy' be decisive. Another referendum would likely mean another wave of competitive

racism and nationalism that could diminish the possibility of shifting the terms of public debate.

5. Racism and the right

The referendum process undoubtedly stoked nationalism and racism as media and Parliamentary discourse amplified the talking points of the hard right. However, attributing the resurgence of the hard right purely to the referendum risks losing sight of international political trends within and beyond the EU, as the legitimacy of the neoliberal centre wanes in the aftermath of the Great Recession. In any case, the hard right cannot be countered by appeal to the institutions of the EU, which are complicit in enabling its ascendancy.

6. Borders and migrant solidarity

A key purpose of revolutionary politics is to forge the working class as a unified political force by overcoming the internal divisions continually established within the working class by capitalism; primary among these is the system of nation states and their border regimes. This means that the British proletariat is constituted by workers, migrant and non-migrant, struggling in deflected ways against the British state as the ultimate representative of the British ruling class, and is not in any regard defined by UK citizenship.

While Remain voters were more likely to oppose the ending of EU freedom of movement, this was not generally rooted in an opposition to borders. Both the UK and EU have an appalling record on migration and a global imperialist role which contributes to forcing migration.

Internationalism forms the core of revolutionary politics and we stand unequivocally against all legislation or deals between the UK and the EU that restricts movement and any intensification of border enforcement (including all possible deals being currently advanced by parliamentary parties, and a 'no deal' outcome under the current Government). We are opposed to all practices by employers, landlords, public services and so on that adversely affect migrants.

7. The balance of forces

We should not expect the balance of class forces to be immediately and decisively changed for or against us by any outcome of the Brexit negotiations. The UK withdrawing from the EU is a legal procedure and should by no means be confused with the social contradictions of which it is a symptom, which are political and can be contested through political struggle.

Working class organisation and class struggle are both weak in Britain. Despite some inspiring exceptions, there has not been a general recovery in workplace organisation, union membership or strike statistics, or other forms of class struggle and organisation such as social movements. Given the high probability of increased economic turmoil in the near future, we can expect an intensification of exploitation, poverty and repression as firms, public services and the repressive institutions of the State scramble to respond to the ramifications of withdrawal from the EU.

On the other hand, the ruling class has lacked a coherent strategy for capitalism in Britain and the role of the British state. Few managers are experienced in dealing with collective resistance on any scale. A long period of ‘compression’, with the intensification of work, has built resentment but not yet found an effective outlet. The decline of union organisation both makes resistance more difficult and reduces the capacity of the bureaucracy to hold it back when it emerges.

8. The Conservative Party’s management of Brexit

Despite the fact that the Conservative Party is divided over the question of how to manage Brexit, they are united in their orientation towards defending the disparate interests of capitals and their shameless attacks on migrants. The Tories’ Immigration White Paper announces a pay threshold for migrants that clearly disproportionately impacts lower earners. The proposal for migrants to be limited to a one-year stay ensures businesses access to labour while maximising workers’ precarity and hindering links with workers’ organisation in the UK.

The Tories’ U-turn on fees for EU citizens shows they can be defeated on immigration issues and we will proactively support initiatives and organisations that seek to overturn anti-migrant policies, including the requirement to seek ‘settled status’, relating this as far as possible to the ongoing marginalisation of non-EU/EEA migrants and those who are barred from any legal status.

9. The Labour Party

Corbynism has shifted the Labour Party significantly to the left. On the other hand, the Corbyn leadership of the Labour Party has not led to an increase in extra-parliamentary political activity but rather an increased focus on parliamentary manoeuvres and electorally focused campaigning.

The Labour policy on Brexit is centred around creating the conditions for McDonnell’s semi-Keynesian economic policy aimed at modernising capitalism.

Any consistent migrant solidarity will necessarily involve opposition to Labour's definitive support for immigration controls.

The rise of Corbynism has punctured the neoliberal consensus, reducing the feeling of inevitability about right-wing policies, and weakening the argument that 'There Is No Alternative' and raising the hopes of millions of people. We favour the election of a Corbyn-led Labour government, which could raise expectations, might create more favourable conditions for struggle, could expose ruling class resistance and would test left reformism in the eyes of the working class.

10. Tactical considerations

rs21 does not have the weight to influence the outcome of the current debates around Brexit. We do not lead or have significant influence over any forces that can change the overall outcome. Our major roles will be propaganda (arguing with people who support both sides in the debate and putting forward a revolutionary socialist analysis) and campaigning against state and popular racism and nationalism. We are not trying to put out a programme for how a Leave or Remain scenario should pan out, or a strategy for 'managing' the Brexit crisis.