The Brexit working class counter-revolution: British lefties who are rejoicing today risk being engulfed by a right-wing firestorm

by Harsh Kapoor, 6 July 2016

After 1945, in war-ravaged Europe, its economically drained people, saw peace as crucial for democracy; and the route taken was economic integration. The Treaty of Paris was signed in 1951 to set up the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), and in 1957 the Treaty of Rome had six countries forming the European Economic Community (EEC). It was a project of the elites to engage in creating economic cooperation, and for social stability, and it took decades to grow into what became the EU of today. European unity, abolition of the borders that separate the peoples of Europe, a European Parliament where directly elected representatives from 28 member states from all political streams from across Europe meet and debate issues of import, are commendable gains made in the EU experiment — these are progressive social gains. Why would any sane person or political formation want to roll them back?

For all its early social democratic promise and internationalist virtues, Yes, EU's policies over the past decade or so have become sharply driven by an economic governance model based on austerity and neoliberal policies (what was called monetarism in the 1960's). EU needs demokratisation and change.

Britain joined the EEC in 1973, but with reservations and in a halfhearted manner; and even decades on, they did not join the Eurozone, had restrictions regarding the schengen pact, etc. Unlike many other European states, Britain has a long tradition of Euro-scepticism.

Euro-scepticism has been around on the left, and got big with the British Conservatives, particularly after 1988, and Thatcher led the charge; but it had its votaries in the left already in the 1970s. The most adored figure of the Labour left in Britain, Tony Benn, had been an opponent of the EEC (sadly he had even shared an anti-EU platform with Enoch Powell at that time). In 1975, in the United Kingdom’s referendum on Europe, 47.5% of Labour supporters voted to leave the EEC — at least a third more than in the referendum of 23 June 2016.

In 2013 David Cameron promised Britons a referendum on whether the UK should remain within the European Union. Euro-sceptic, right-wing United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) won just a single seat in parliament in the 2015 elections, but its influence set the Brexit vote in motion. (UKIP got some 3.8 Million votes in the 2015 election)

There was a massive campaign by the right in Britain and its simple anti-EU, anti-immigrant
Brexit is a triumph of national chauvinism and is damaging to the left. We have seen a dramatic spurt in instances of racism all over Britain. All this is a shot in the arm for the far right.

Europe’s far-right parties have hailed the UK’s vote to leave the European Union as a victory for their own anti-immigrant and anti-EU stance and have vowed to push for similar referendums in their own countries. Marine Le Pen of France’s far right National Front, in an op-ed in the New York Times, described the Brexit vote as a courageous act of the British, and said that now it’s time for a people’s spring across Europe. Le Pen and her counterparts from far right parties have a big resonance among sizeable sections of the labouring people.

The EU has been weakened by the fallouts of the 2007 financial crisis, and now Brexit threatens it in a big way with ricochet effects in different parts of Europe. The EU will be under the huge stress of being pulled apart not by any left-driven idealism of the people but by brute hyper-nationalism and inward-looking politics of fear. The right wing is far better at selling nationalism, and the left shouldn’t be playing this game.

International capital and the big banks that face damage will weather this storm. Trade unions will not in any way come out strengthened by Brexit. The EU has been weakened, with a country that was the second largest economy of Europe, contributing 15 per cent of its overall GDP, leaving. Britain lost more money in the 48 hours after the referendum than it ever contributed in the past decades when it was part of the EU. The British economy has apparently shrunk to become the 6th largest in the world, ceding its place to France which has now become the 5th largest.

Most disturbing in all this is the unmistakable working-class character of the Brexit vote. Like the Labour Party, the British trade union leaders have shown themselves to be out of touch with the views of their own members. The Labour Party is reeling from the fact that voters in areas that have traditionally voted Labour swung heavily behind Brexit. Labour Party’s leader Jeremy Corbyn (he like Tony Blair voted against joining EEC in the referendum of 1975), a long-time Euro-sceptic, has defended his conduct amid criticism of his lukewarm support for the Remain in EU campaign. (Weeks before the referendum a leaked memo from ‘Britain Stronger In Europe’, a group campaigning for the UK to stay in the EU, pointed out that some 50% of the Labour Party supporters didn’t know whether their party was for Brexit or in favour of the EU.)

EU technocrats running EU affairs far removed from ordinary citizens is a problem, but this is true also of technocrats in national governments and the UN. Ultranationalist parties, far left props with a nationalist tone had an echo that dragged in a large section of Labour and working class voters to its side. A genie of ugly nationalism got un-bottled. On June 23, 2016, the Leave EU campaign won the referendum.

Terror in th Streets 1916 drawing by George Grosz
groups and anti-globalisation movements within Europe have rubbed shoulders at anti-EU campaigns for the past many years, and they share a common repertoire.

The nationalist groups conveniently club together of anti EU-ism with anti-immigrant propaganda, xenophobic fear of migrants giving them a better sales pitch than for the left salesmen. Many on the left denounce racism but have hardly taken this problem head on. Workers and union members, and the unemployed, in large parts of Europe are racist: but unions haven’t run mass campaigns to address this. Widespread unacknowledged everyday racism exists in Britain. Great Britain is a “tolerant” country, immigrants have been tolerated, not really integrated. Britain is divided and ghettoised thanks to institutionalized multiculturalism.

These are dark times in European politics. The backdrop for this crisis dates to the 2008 financial meltdown that affected the world economy and the Eurozone. Across Europe the economic crisis fuelled the rise of quick fix, ‘anti political’ and ‘anti-systemic’ movements and also of the far right while taking away the sheen of the old established mainstream political parties, leading to loss of influence. Nationalist and far right parties that have been on the margins have been slowly but systematically growing across Europe. Many of these ultranationalist parties with xenophobic and retrograde social agendas have been getting mainstreamed by repackaging themselves in Europe. France’s National Front was formed in 1972 and was on the margins, but today it has some 30% of the national vote share. In the UK we have had many Euro-sceptic and right wing formations, the fastest growing one being UKIP and ‘Britain First’ (emanating from British National Party and the English Defence League).

Across the continent, from Switzerland (Swiss People’s Party), Belgium (Vlaams Blok now Vlaams Belang), the Netherlands (Party for Freedom), right down to the south in Italy (Northern League, Tricolour Flame, New Force etc), Greece (Golden Dawn), the far right groups have crafted a comeback. In the once famous social democratic north from Austria (Freedom Party) to Denmark (Danish People’s Party) and Sweden (Swedish Democrats), far right parties have made huge forays. In former socialist bloc countries from Poland (Law and Justice Party) to Hungary (Jobbik party), and Serbia (Serbian Radical Party) there is a huge resonance of the far right. What was unthinkable a decade ago has come alive even in Germany. An anti immigrant formation called Pegida has drawn thousands to its ranks; even more worrisome is the mainstreaming of Alternative for Germany (AfD), an ultra right wing formation with a presence in a few of the german state parliaments, polls suggest that its vote share is now bigger than that of the leftwing Die Linke. Memories of Fascism and the terrible price that Europeans paid seem to have been set aside. However corrupted the European Union project was about ensuring free movement of people across Europe, the creation of the schengen and the rollback of borders was indeed a marvellous project. The forces of the left remained in their national cocoons and never really built a cross-border solidarity movement in the past decades. Why should the left in the 21st century oppose European capitalist integration any more than opposing the merger of two companies? Shouldn’t they have been arguing for ground level Europeanisation of the union federations? NO, they prefer the prison house of the nation state.

Sections of the British Left Getting a High on Nationalism
In 2009, ‘No2EU’ a left-wing Eurosceptic electoral alliance (Socialist party, Communist Party of Britain and National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT)) was formed in the UK. It participated in the 2009 European Parliament elections and the European elections in 2014 with the party name "No2EU". It campaigned for Britain’s withdrawal from the EU.

Like the No2EU nuts other reckless fabulists of the British far left pushed a Left Exit (Lexit) campaign that was led by the Socialist Workers Party — saying that withdrawal from the European Union would strike a blow to the interests of dominant sections of British capital, and to European elites, opening opportunities for workers’ struggle in the United Kingdom. Similarly there was a Labour Leave campaign from within the Labour Party campaigning for Brexit (it has been revealed that this group was funded by right wing and Conservative Party donors). The left-wing fight against neoliberal globalisation sits neatly juxtaposed to the strategy of right-wing movements and turns the left into allies of Farage (UKIP), Le Pen (National Front), Wilders, et al. Large numbers of Labour voters have voted for UKIP (something similar has been happening in France, where large numbers of socialist and communist voters have switched to the National Front).

A Modern Cross Border Euro-Left

In 1972 Tom Nairn had shown unique moral courage from the new left in critiquing dominant socialist opinion on British entry to the Common Market and argued that the Left was betraying its principles by siphoning discontent into nationalistic opposition to Europeanisation.

Decades on in 2014-2015 the courageous Greek socialists of SYRIZA took the bull by its horns and did not wish to leave the EU; even their left wing never demanded this as an option. The European Central Bank gave the Syriza govt a very tough time by imposing a very hard austerity regime but they stood their ground; there was no Grexit. That’s the kind of forward looking left politics we need despite huge odds in the current day EU that is hollowed out of its social aims. A left of the future has to be open to a European strategy beyond borders and should struggle for democratisation of the EU from both within and outside the EU.

In that tradition a radical challenge to LEXIT-type nationalism (peddling ‘socialism in one country’) should be seen in the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DIEM25) campaign run by Yanis Varoufakis (the former Greek Finance Minister) to promote a radical, internationalist vision of a Europe-wide movement to democratize and transform EU structures from within. But it has had few takers in Britain.

—a vote to leave the EU in the UK’s referendum in June 2016 would lead to the disintegration of the European Union and a return to the xenophobia, racism and ultra-nationalism of the 1930s. - Yanis Varoufakis tells Owen Jones (Guardian Video - 15 April 2016)

EU did some good for the UK

The Jacques Delors Commission played a crucial role in securing the adoption of the Community Charter of the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers in Strasbourg in 1989.

The EU has played a limited but crucial role in extending and expanding rights at work in the UK, reversing decimation of industrial relations heralded under the Thatcher government - from protection for part time and temporary workers, protection of workers rights in event of mergers and acquisitions (called TUPE regulations under UK law) to protection from discrimination from rights for working parents to the right to paid holidays and regular lunch breaks, etc.

Though it is widely said in left circles that the European Court of Justice leans towards corporate interests there is a long stream of cases in fields such as equality law, transfer of undertakings law, insolvency law and free movement of workers law in which the [European] Court has leaned in favour of giving as extensive an interpretation as possible to workers’ rights (see E. Ellis, EU Anti-Discrimination Law (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005).

UK’s labour market remains one of the least regulated in the developed world, and the limited checks and balances from the EU were good for workers. The exit from the European Union is
The Irish peace process got support from the European Union. The EU Peace programme provided huge support to Northern Ireland institutions, industry and initiatives such as Intertrade, Peace and Tourism Ireland, which were successful in bringing together communities both north and south of the border to promote cooperation between contending interests. It helped stabilise the Peace Agreement of 1998. Brexit will mean the creation of an external border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. Are people prepared for a border to be back, once a course highly militarized border?

**Latent Racism, identity politics, crisis and expanding influence of authoritarianism:**

The 2015 British Social Attitudes Survey provided a sense of who would vote for Brexit. “The 2015 report by NatCen Social Research found the years of austerity since the financial crash of 2008 have entrenched the class divide and hardened attitudes on a range of political subjects, including possible anti-establishment feelings towards bureaucracy and government — and also immigration.”

Yes there was a big campaign of fear mongering about a migrant tidal wave and it sold well. Denial of working class racism is irresponsible. Supporting toleration, multi-culturalism keeping differences rather than uniting people on common rights, and jointly fighting racism is not the same thing. The left better wake up, if only to save its ass. A right wing fire storm is starting in Britain and playing identity politics wont douse the flames.

John Pilger prescribes this Brexit style direct democracy and called on socialists to rejoice in it. Peddling this form of plebiscitism is dangerous business. Does he remember the Referendum Party of millionaire right-winger Jimmy Goldsmith? Referendums are rarely fought on facts, and more often on quick fix slogans. Imagine a national referendum for mass expulsion of migrants from Britain — after bombarding the public with anti-immigrant propaganda.

British socialists who supported Brexit have blown up an opportunity to forge alliances with workers from across Europe to fight neoliberal politics by building a pan European network. They have exited the EU but they haven’t exited capitalism. They would do well to remember that capital on British shores isn’t necessarily English, it is multinational; London being the hub of finance capital, Britain will now get into a deeper embrace of unfettered neo-liberalism; there will more cuts and austerity. The Brexiers promised let ‘the people take control’, but they will now see this is as a short-lived orgasm.

**France:**

While the campaign for Brexit was going on in the past weeks in Britain, there was an unprecedented workers’ mobilization across the English Channel in France against a change in the labour law supposedly to be in conformity with EU regulations.
In 2009, a case was opened against France for breaching EU rules which stipulate that its deficit must not exceed 3 per cent of GDP. This ‘excessive deficit procedure’ can result in a fine of billions of euros, and in the case of France, a severe loss of face to its EU partners.

The ‘excessive deficit procedure’ is in the so-called ‘Six-Pack’ set of EU rules in 2011 — a key part of the austerity-focused economic governance package. The unions have massively challenged this but the sad irony is that vast sections of the French working class which stand for their rights also happen to be voting for the far right parties. Far right parties have become a big pole of attraction for workers in France. Research is beginning to demonstrate that far right parties do very well during times of crisis.

It is important to note that the extreme right formations have very deftly co-opted and absorbed the Left critique of neoliberal policy of European Union technocrats and deployed it in their own discourse and manifestoes. The left continually ties to demarcate itself from the far right but given the similarity of the isolationalist, nationalist stance facts don’t seem to matter. The National Front in France is a draw for a lot of workers and what was once a communist audience.

Looking at it from India:

Don’t people remember the political language of the Hindutva driven ‘Swadeshi Jagaran Manch’ (SJM) which used to challenge globalization, foreign direct investment? It was difficult in the 1990s to distinguish between the discourse of the Azaadi Bachao Andolan run by the unorganized left, the reactionary SJM and also that of sections of the organised left. That was some time ago.

Today, the right wing BJP-led government in India has very successfully pushed its hyper patriotic and ‘spot the antinational’ politics. The left & progressive forces have their swan song ‘nationalism’ saying the nationalism of the right is rotten but ours is good;
Do people of the left in India not recall what was the 'Adhikari' resolution of the undivided Communist Party of India which saw the mass mobilization by the Muslim league for Partition of India where the main message was Hindus and Muslims are separate nations as something worthy? The left very rightly highlights the dirty role played by the Hindutva right but decided to keep silent on its own rationalization of Partition of India. Isn't it time in 2016 to do public self-criticism of its posture on 1947 partition? It is never too late.

Nationalism & Patriotism remain holy cows; while campaigning and challenging the right wing government, they haven’t pushed against communalism or identity politics among the labouring poor and working class which are divided along communal lines. Trade unions and mass organisations duck the identitarian and communalism questions. Can anyone tell us if there was a national strike call in India from the Left and the rail, postal, electricity and sea port workers went on strike on Gujarat 2002 pogroms or to call for a no war pact with Pakistan?

Anti imperialism and nationalism call the shots in the discourse of the left, internationalism is out of fashion. National interest and national sovereignty remain key words in the vocabulary of the Indian Left, which simply does not have a South Asian vision. SAFTA and SAARC were produced by the South Asian political elites, not by any call from the left. The left here that made noise not long ago about the horrors of Syrian refugees fleeing to Europe have all been for closed borders and the deportation of Bangladeshis from India and haven’t called for the Indian government to accept Rohingyas, Syrians, Afghans, Pakistanis.

This is pathetic ‘This doesn’t sell politics’? Does the left have ambitions to re-invent itself and get into the 21st century mode and take on globalization without getting into the standard defensive nationalist mode? Why cant it drive the creation of the first cross-border trade union in South Asia? When will it announce a public policy that left run governments in India will provide refuge and shelter to trade unionists, writers, journalists under assault from the far right and fundamentalists in Burma, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri-Lanka or Iraq, Syria and even the UK?

Comrade General Secretaries, please, break free, will you, you have nothing to lose but your chains.

References:
PES (2014) Towards a New Europe - PES Manifesto https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/partyofeuropeansocialists/pages/1101/attachments/origin._adopted_by_the_pes_election_congress_en.pdf?1394819127


Jason Heyes (2016) 'Why Brexit would be bad for employment rights', The Conversation, March 8


Barry Finger (2016) Brexit: A Victory for the Populist Right, New Politics (June 25) http://newpol.org/content/brexit-victory-populist-right


The Brexit working class counter-revolution: British lefties who are rejoicing today risk being engulfed by a right-wing firestorm. 6 July 2016, by Harsh Kapoor. A Troubling Culture War Between India and Pakistan | Rozina Ali. 15 November 2016. Sri Lanka: A Tribute to Rajani Thiranagama - A Beacon for the Left. 9 December 2014, by Rohini Hensman. Ishtiaq Ahmed, Yasser Lalif Hamdani exchange on the Venkat Dhulipala's book, 'Creating a New Medina'. 24 April 2015. State racism and sexism in post-war Sri Lanka | Chulani Kodikara. Video: Nationalism In Digital India - Who Defines and Who Decides | Dehradun Community Literature Festival 2017. 25 April 2017. Kashmir and Postcolonialism. Brexit supporters on the left would have a lot in common with Americans who are against trade deals like the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Argument 4: The EU was a good idea, but the euro is a disaster. The United Kingdom has had a significant faction of euroskeptics ever since it joined the EU in 1973. But until recently, this was a minority position. The intellectual case for Brexit is mostly focused on economics, but the emotional case for Brexit is heavily influenced by immigration. EU law guarantees that citizens of one EU country have the right to travel, live, and take jobs in other EU countries. British people have increasingly felt the impact of this rule since the 2008 financial crisis. The Brexit working class counter-revolution: British lefties who are rejoicing today risk being engulfed by a right-wing firestorm. 6 July 2016, by Harsh Kapoor. India: Violence of Class in Noida - crackdown after protest by domestic workers - Selected Reports and Editorials. 18 July 2017. India: Bulletin of the Communist Platform, No. 1 (1977).