

Brexit and tactics on the European Union

In politics as in war tactics and strategy are not the same thing. Our overall strategy and perspectives depend upon a general theoretical analysis. Tactics on the contrary are determined by concrete considerations, which will inevitably differ at different times and from one country to another.

Our general position in relation to the EU has remained the same for decades. The European Union from its very conception was a reactionary capitalist block dominated by the big banks and monopolies. Originally dominated jointly by the German and French bourgeois it is now under the domination of the German ruling class.

Lenin and Trotsky pointed out that on a capitalist basis the unification of Europe was a reactionary utopia. The reactionary anti-working class nature of the EU is sufficiently demonstrated by the merciless oppression of the Greek people, and the relentless pursuit of austerity policies and attacks on the working class everywhere.

But the utopian nature of the idea of a unified capitalist Europe has now also been exposed. We pointed out nearly two decades ago that in the event of a deep slump all the national contradictions and centrifugal tendencies would re-emerge, leading to the breakup of the European Union. This was shown by what happened after the economic crisis of 2008.

European capitalism finds itself in a deep crisis, with mass unemployment and little or no economic growth. The crisis of the Euro has not been resolved, nor has the crisis in Greece. The Schengen Agreement is in ruins. These were supposed to be the two basic pillars of the process of European integration.

To add to the general chaos, we have the flood of millions of refugees fleeing wars, conflicts and misery. This has had a destabilising effect in many countries, feeding the poisonous fumes of racism and xenophobia. Under conditions of deep economic crisis and mass unemployment, the capitalist system cannot provide jobs and houses or integrate the mass influx of refugees. It therefore becomes a simple matter for the fascists and racists to blame unemployment and homelessness on foreigners, a poison to which the bankrupt reformist labour leaders have no answer.

In reality, the movement towards greater European integration has been halted and is going into reverse. The Leave vote in the British referendum is only the most obvious expression of this fact.

It is no accident that the right reformists, the direct agents of Capital in the Labour movement, have taken up the banner of the EU as a central part of

their programme for the defence of capitalism. While the right wing reformists have been largely exposed and discredited by their policies, the left reformists try to gain support around their proposal of “reforming the EU”, for a “social Europe,” etc. This idea is shared by most of the left reformists including Tsipras, Iglesias, Die Linke, the French CP, and so on. Others oppose the EU on nationalist grounds but without breaking with capitalism. The Stalinists and fellow travellers have the worst position of all. Nationalism and chauvinism are in the DNA of all types of Stalinism flowing from the reactionary theory of Socialism in one country. The idea that breaking away from the EU on a capitalist basis would solve the problems of the working class is false. It leads directly to the swamp of bourgeois and petty bourgeois nationalism and it is a deception of the working class that plays into the hands of the most reactionary elements.

Others, like Varoufakis, attempt to “theorise” the idea of “reforming the EU from within”. This is merely an extension of the utopian idea peddled by the left reformists that it is possible to reform capitalism nationally and internationally. This is entirely false in theory and disastrous in practice. We must fight against this utopian idea, counterposing a revolutionary socialist policy.

Our policy in relation to the EU has always been clear. WE ARE AGAINST THE CAPITALIST EUROPEAN UNION AND WE COUNTERPOSE TO IT THE SLOGAN OF THE SOCIALIST UNITED STATES OF EUROPE. That was the position of the Communist International in the lifetime of Lenin and Trotsky, and that must be the position taken by every section of the International. We stand for a free, voluntary, democratic federation built on a socialist basis. These are in general outlines some of the strategic considerations of our attitude to the EU. However, in order to respond adequately to specific circumstances, it is not sufficient to repeat the general ideas. We must take into consideration all the concrete features in every given case.

Brexit

In order to decide our tactics in Britain it was necessary for the British comrades to determine the precise balance of forces and the different tendencies involved in the referendum campaign. It is important to note that the initiative for this referendum was not the result of any pressure from the working class or the labour movement, which until the last very moment was indifferent to it and puzzled by it. The

initiative came from David Cameron who wished to solve the split in the Conservative Party between the pro-European wing and the chauvinist “Little Englanders”. In the end, Cameron achieved the opposite of what he intended. The referendum campaign opened deep wounds in the Conservative Party that will be difficult, if not impossible, to heal.

The mood of the masses in the referendum campaign was one of extreme confusion from start to finish. The division was not on class lines, nor on left-right lines. Many poor unemployed workers in the north of England and Wales voted to leave, largely as a protest against austerity, poverty and a desire to kick the Establishment. But most of those in work voted to remain, including London and the other big cities (Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool).

Scotland voted overwhelmingly to remain as did the majority in Northern Ireland. The Black and Asian population voted massively to remain, as did 74 percent of the youth and 80 percent of the students.

In the previous referendum of 1975 the entire left (the Labour left, the Communist Party and the Trade Unions) were opposed to what was then called the European Economic Community. That determined the tactics of our tendency, which gave critical support to the No vote, which Ted Grant clearly characterised as a tactical vote. This time the circumstances were entirely different. Both the Labour Party and the Trade Unions supported the remain campaign (only a handful of Labour MPs supported Leave). Jeremy Corbyn, who was always against the EU in the past, was pushed by the Labour right wing into supporting the Remain campaign on the basis that it was Party policy. Our support for Corbyn against the right wing and the ruling class is not conditioned by the position he took on the EU referendum. But we must educate our cadres and contacts in the nature and limitations of left reformism, of which this is a clear example. Corbyn attempted to compromise with the right wing on the EU issue in order to avoid a split. In reality, this achieved the precise opposite. The right wing viciously attacked Corbyn precisely for his failure to advocate support for the EU, leading to an open conflict that has split the Labour Party from top to bottom.

This kind of “mistake” is characteristic of left reformism which constantly attempts to compromise with the right wing that shows no desire to compromise but aggressively pursues an openly pro-bourgeois policy on the EU and all other questions. Corbyn's mistake on the EU issue contains the seeds of other and more dangerous mistakes in the future. In reality, it is not a mistake at all, but an inherent

tendency of left reformism to capitulate to the pressures of the right wing and the bourgeoisie that ultimately ends in betrayal. The case of Greece is a very clear example of this.

On the one side was the Remain camp led by Cameron, representing the decisive majority of British Big Business and the City of London. On the other side, the Leave camp represented the most reactionary Thatcherite wing of the Tory Party in alliance with the racist Ukip of Nigel Farage.

The campaign of the Leave camp was 100 percent reactionary, appealing to the basest prejudices of the most backward layers of society and manipulating proletarian feeling against the establishment and austerity. Initially, the “respectable” wing (Johnson and Gove) kept a distance from Farage's racist outfit, but in the end they all sang from the same xenophobic song-sheet. The main plank of the Brexit campaign was anti-immigration.

In the given circumstances the British comrades, having carefully weighed up all these factors, decided that it was not possible to support either side in the referendum. They consistently put forward the slogan: no to the bosses EU, for the Socialist United States of Europe, while maintaining an implacable criticism of both the Remain and Leave campaigns, exposing the lies and demagoguery of both.

In working out our tactics, it is important to decide what audience we are aiming for. In Britain, our main audience was not the unemployed workers of the north east but the youth, the overwhelming majority of whom supported Remain for all kinds of confused reasons.

It is perfectly true that there were progressive and reactionary elements present on both sides. But for that very reason, it was necessary to leave a door open that would permit us to enter into a dialogue with both sides. The tactics adopted by the British comrades succeeded in this.

We have had no negative response to our message, either during or after the referendum campaign. People were prepared to listen to us from both sides. By contrast, the Taaffite sect has entered into crisis and may split, mainly because of its sectarian attitude to Corbyn and the Labour Party, but also because of widespread malaise over their support for Brexit.

International implications

The result of the British referendum has caused shock waves in Europe and beyond. It has given a powerful impetus to the centrifugal tendencies precisely at a time when anti-EU sentiment is building up in many countries as a result of years of austerity, particularly in the south European countries.

The danger is (as we saw in Britain) that this feeling can be taken advantage of by right-wing, racist and even fascist parties and organizations. Marine Le Pen in France has greeted Brexit with enthusiasm, and is demanding a referendum on the EU in France. The same is true of Geert Wilders in the Netherlands. Only a firm class lead by the mass workers' organisations can cut across this poisonous trend. But the reformist leaders drag their feet, acting as an obstacle for the development of a mass movement against the EU on left lines.

Here the role of leadership is fundamental. If Tsipras had based himself on the massive support he got in the Oxi referendum to challenge Merkel and the Troika, he could have carried through the expropriation of the banks and monopolies with the enthusiastic support of the masses, not just the working class but the peasants, petty bourgeois and other exploited layers. This could have enabled him to make an appeal to the workers of Europe to come to the aid of the Greek people. It could have been the beginning of an all-European mass revolutionary movement. Instead, he betrayed the movement and capitulated to the EU. This had a depressing effect, at least for a temporary period, on the left in Greece and other countries.

Britain is not in the eurozone, and therefore the British workers do not necessarily blame the EU for their economic difficulties. But things are very different for the workers in Italy, Greece, Spain and Portugal. They see a direct relationship between the austerity policies and the EU in general and the Euro in particular. Many workers in these countries welcomed the Brexit vote as a slap in the face for the bosses in Brussels.

This feeling of hatred towards the EU by the workers has a progressive and potentially revolutionary character. If it is given a correct leadership, it would pose a serious threat not only to the EU but to capitalism itself. In the event of a referendum in Italy, there is little doubt that the Italian people would vote to leave the EU. This would have the overwhelming support of the workers and youth who we are trying to win.

Under these concrete conditions, the Italian Marxists would be obliged to give critical support to the vote to leave the EU, while at the same time campaigning under the banner of the Socialist United States of Europe. This slogan would undoubtedly get an enthusiastic echo among the advanced workers and youth.

While we should study carefully the objective conditions in each separate case, it is most likely that our position in future referendums in Europe

(particularly, but not solely, in southern Europe) would be on these lines. It is necessary to campaign actively in the labour movement to advance this policy, putting demands on the labour leaders, demanding that they break with the capitalist EU and advancing a clear socialist alternative.

Our main fire must be directed against the right reformists who defend the capitalist EU, just as they defend the capitalist system in general. But we must also criticise the left reformists, like Corbyn, for their inconsistencies, weakness and vacillations. In criticising the left, however, we must not fall into the trap of ultra-leftism, like the sects who constantly shout about betrayal. The way to expose the left reformists is to explain positively what they should do. The workers then will draw their own conclusions.

It goes without saying that at this stage most of our propaganda is directed not towards the masses (who we cannot reach) but to the most advanced layers of workers and youth. While many would accept the idea of leaving the EU, they will have illusions that by doing so they will solve their problems. These illusions are being fed by left reformists such as Lafazanis in Greece and by the Stalinists everywhere.

The idea that the workers of Greece, Italy, Britain or any other country can solve their problems simply by leaving the EU (or the Euro) on a capitalist basis is false from start to finish. We must explain patiently that on a capitalist basis there is no future for the working class, inside or outside the EU. We must stand clearly for socialist internationalism and combat the nationalist and patriotic prejudices encouraged by the Stalinists and left reformists.

After Brexit

Despite the clearly reactionary character of the Brexit campaign, the result was a shock for the ruling class both in Britain and on a world scale. It has destabilised the existing order, deepened the economic crisis and exacerbated all the existing contradictions.

Like the referendum campaign itself, the immediate effect in Britain was contradictory, with elements of reaction mixed up with potentially revolutionary elements. There was a sharp increase of anti-immigrant attacks and hostility towards foreigners among backward layers of the population. But it also had effects which were positive from the revolutionary standpoint. It deepened the crisis of both the Conservative and the Labour Parties. The Blairite right wing that dominates the Parliamentary Labour Party attempted a coup against Corbyn, alleging that he was insufficiently enthusiastic for the remain

campaign. This provoked an immediate reaction from below.

As a result, the situation in Britain has been rapidly transformed. 130,000 people joined the Labour Party in the space of a few days and mass meetings of Party members have been held all over the country to defend Jeremy Corbyn against the right wing assault.

This opens up new possibilities for the British Marxists. Our main task in Britain now is to play a most active role in the struggle that is unfolding in the Labour Party, while still developing our very successful work among the youth and students. In Britain the question of the EU has passed to a secondary plain compared to the extremely sharp class struggle that is being fought in the ranks of the Labour Party and Trade Unions. Our tactics therefore must reflect that change and this should be discussed in future meetings of the IEC.

The revolutionary movement in Europe is unfolding at an unequal pace and assumes different forms in different countries. While the question of the EU is now relegated to secondary position in Britain (although it has not entirely disappeared) in other countries of Europe, it will assume an increasingly important role. The class struggle can be reflected in countries like Italy, Greece, Spain and

Portugal – perhaps France also – can be reflected in the form of struggle against the EU. We must prepare our forces for this eventuality.

The fight against the EU is therefore an integral part of the programme and propaganda of the International and particularly of the European sections, as a necessary fight against one of the most important tools by which the ruling class implements its policies.

In struggling against the EU it is essential at all times to uphold the banner of the complete class independence of the proletariat, combating all reactionary, chauvinistic and xenophobic tendencies and tendencies of adaptation to the EU. We stand unconditionally for the defence of working class unity above all lines of nationality, ethnicity, gender, religion or language. It is not the business of the proletariat to erect new frontiers but to carry out the radical abolition of all frontiers, not just in Europe but in a world scale.

- Down with the EU, which is a tool of the bosses!
- For the Socialist United States of Europe!
- For the World Socialist Federation!
- Workers of the World Unite!

IMT World Congress, July 2016