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Britain and the EU

Brexit crisis: for unity and solidarity in Europe, against racism and social dumping

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This statement was adopted by the Bureau of the Fourth International on 28 June 2016.

1. The result of the British referendum is a further stage in the crisis of the EU after Greece and the migrants crisis. A large majority of voters in England and Wales has voted for "Brexit", imposing "Leave" on the whole of the United Kingdom despite the contrary vote in Scotland and the North of Ireland – a factor of crisis within the British state potentially leading to a second independence referendum in Scotland.
2. The xenophobic discourse stigmatising East European immigrants used by the main spokespersons of the "Leave" campaign, whether Boris Johnson (Conservative Party) or Nigel Farage (UKIP), dominated the campaign. They thus succeeded in capturing the deep-rooted social exasperation among broad popular layers – those who have been the main victims of austerity, job losses, benefit cuts. This exasperation turned against the elites (in Westminster or Brussels). Unhappily, at a mass level, this rejection of the EU does not express at the moment a progressive anti-austerity radicalism, but a rejection of European migrant workers, scapegoats for job losses; mixed with a rejection of the European Union seen as responsible for the attacks they have suffered. This has led to public expressions of racism and xenophobia that had become unacceptable since the 1970s when, among others, the Anti-Nazi League helped to turn back the tide of mounting rightwing extremism.
3. The dynamics that led to the calling of the British referendum – notably the development of UKIP, bolstered by the Eurosceptic right wing of the Tory party – mean that the terrain on which the referendum debate was carried out in Britain was extremely unfavourable to the left. The Labour Party was torn between a traditional rejection of the EU – as had been the case in the previous referendum in 1975 – and pressure from trade-union forces and others saying that the EU's policies had been a shield against some of the worst excesses of neo-liberalism combined with the desire to reject the rightwing anti-immigrant xenophobia of the Leave campaign. Labour voices calling for leave received greater media coverage than the party's official position of Remain. Despite this only 37% of Labour voters supported Leave.
4. The mainstream "Remain" campaign appeared as that of the élites, of an arrogant City, playing on the fear of catastrophe in the case of a "Leave" vote, while millions of British workers have already experienced a social disaster imposed by the very same people as those that tried to convince them to stay in the EU.
5. In this situation it was inevitable that the left campaigns – Another Europe Is Possible (AEIP) for voting yes to staying in the EU, and Left Leave (Lexit) for voting no – would have a very limited hearing. Nevertheless AEIP had strong support from Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, the leadership of the Green Party, and many left trade union activists notably Matt Wrack, General Secretary of the fire fighters union (FBU), as well as thousands of activists around the country.
6. The result of the vote therefore leaves all workers and students from EU countries in Britain, and in the first place those from Eastern Europe, in a very precarious material situation, and feeling vulnerable to expressions of the xenophobia whipped up during the campaign. Physical attacks on migrants – most notably Polish people – have already occurred. Similarly, the jobs and buying power of all British workers will suffer from the consequences of the monetary manoeuvres around the pound sterling and all eventual measures taken by the EU. Far from being part of a progressive plan of rejection of austerity and capitalist policies, the "Leave" vote will lead to an even more reactionary drift of a new Conservative government, facing a Labour Party weakened by referendum with a strong campaign against Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the party by the Labour right.

7. The initiatives taken in Britain immediately after the referendum to demonstrate solidarity with all migrant workers are therefore very important and should be continued and extended. Despite the differences on the referendum, the task now is to organise in the broadest unity possible against austerity and in solidarity with migrants, and to resist the rightwing Labour campaign against Corbyn and the left.

8. "Brexit" structurally weakens the EU and has provoked a crisis of direction at the top whose consequences cannot be predicted. Month after month, the consequences of pro-austerity dictates are made clear to the ruling class: the votes for revolt of the Greek people in January and July 2015, the strong French mobilization against attacks on labour laws, and recent days have seen heavy losses for Matteo Renzi in local elections in Italy.

9. The total lack of democracy in the functioning of the European Union, the accumulation of social exasperation faced with attacks by right and left governments, is expressed whenever the popular electorate has the opportunity. The European Union is destroying social protection and legislation in each country, is pushing for competition of all against all, pushing casualization of all workers throughout the EU.

Unfortunately, the labour movement in Europe, and primarily the CES, is not playing its role of a bulwark and weapon for international solidarity and defence of social rights. There is not yet a Europe-wide progressive dynamic to turn that frustration into a general challenge to capitalist austerity.

10. The EU is a bourgeois institution that we do not believe is reformable and would indeed have to be destroyed to create a new basis for inter-European cooperation on the basis of solidarity among the exploited and oppressed.

11. To turn this crisis of the European Union to the advantage of the exploited and oppressed would require a level of political cohesion and social weight of radical anti-capitalist forces that has to be totally rebuilt at a Europe-wide level.

12. In this situation our tasks are multifold:

- * At a European level to encourage all initiatives combating austerity (Madrid conference etc) imposed by the EU while clearly explaining the responsibility of national bourgeoisies at nation-state level, denouncing the setting of workers of different countries against each other and fighting for an upward harmonisation of social rights and wages;

- * Fighting together against the payment of illegitimate public debts and against undemocratic treaties like TTIP and CETA;

- * Popularising and organising solidarity with all struggles of those populations fighting concretely against Troika imposed policies (Greece, Portugal...);

- * Renewing our efforts in solidarity with migrants and their demands to be given the right to residence, work and benefits in the EU, for opening of borders and strengthening our links with migrant organisations.

- * Promoting and nourishing the debate among the European radical left on perspectives for building a new – anticapitalist, antiracist, ecosocialist, feminist – Europe.