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Britain

Jo Cox and the well of hatred

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Labour MP Jo Cox was brutally murdered outside her constituency surgery in Yorkshire one week before the referendum on whether Britain should remain a member of the European Union, by a man with long involvement in fascist activities. Cox was visibly campaigning for a Remain vote and also had a history of activism around support for refugees.

Socialist Resistance sends its sympathy and solidarity to the family, friends and comrades of Jo Cox. We have much in common with the idealism that shone through her political commitment. She spoke movingly in parliament about migrants and how she saw her own children in the faces of babies in refugee camps; while we did not agree with her support for air strikes she raised her voice loudly in defence of Syrians attacked by jihadi butchers and Assad's murderers; she was a friend of the Palestinian people and had no qualms about being photographed in front of Westminster holding their nation's flag; although she didn't support Jeremy Corbyn, she nominated him for the Labour leadership ballot because she understood how crucial it was that the views he expresses were heard in the debate. Her death at such a young age [1] is a loss to progressive politics in Britain and an incomparably greater loss to her family.

Jo was the 59th woman to be killed by a man in Britain this year. Male violence against women is a chronic feature of British society and we cannot exclude it as one element in the killer's motivation.

There seems to be less doubt about the other things that drove him. The man who has been arrested is reported to have had mental health problems and to have shouted something like "put Britain first" when carrying out the attack. If he'd been shouting "Allah akbar" the coverage would have been dominated by his religion rather than his mental health. It's also reported that he has a long history of links with violent, ultra-right racist groups and had bought manuals on making weapons from them.

Whoever killed Jo Cox did it for political reasons. People with mental health problems do not live quarantined from the rest of society and political debate in Britain has been dominated by one topic for the last several months – immigration, and particularly how it's linked to British membership of the European Union.

The racist tabloid press has been carrying lying, sensationalist front pages relentlessly with made up stories about "swarms" of immigrants, "rapist" immigrants, "job stealing" immigrants. And at the same time leading Brexit campaigners have been saying exactly the same things in fractionally more polite language. The exception being Farage who stood smirking in front of a poster redolent of Nazi pogrom incitement on the morning Jo Cox was murdered.

Farage, Gove, Johnson and Hoey have made the EU referendum into a plebiscite on immigration and racism. Comrades on the left who argue that working class people who vote for Brexit are expressing some anti-establishment protest are oblivious to the fact that they are actually being swept along in the slipstream of a racist, hard-right campaign. What other meaning is there to the England football fans' chants of "f**k off Europe, we're all voting out" or their taunting of refugee children by flinging coins at them?

But this coarsening of politics isn't just limited to Johnson and Farage. David Cameron, Zac Goldsmith and most of the Tory leadership tried to smear Labour's mayoral candidate Sadiq Khan as a terrorist sympathiser during the election campaign. Cameron used that very phrase to describe Jeremy Corbyn for his principled opposition to air strikes on Syria.

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Labour leader Corbyn described Jo Cox's death was "an attack on democracy from a well of hatred". He's right. And the people who've been drawing from that well of hatred are all those politicians who've been using racism and anti-immigrant rhetoric in the referendum debate and those who seek to stigmatise dissent and principle by throwing insults. We have to stand up against this.

The forces of the far right and of xenophobic hostility towards migrants have become emboldened and encouraged by the Leave campaign. A Leave vote would be a disaster for the labour movement and for every migrant and minority in the UK. The labour movement and left needs to understand the stakes, exemplified in the murder of a prominent Labour politician by an almost certain racist, and have the courage to challenge this carnival of reaction by advocating a massive Remain vote. Jo Cox understood this.

[1] She would have been 42 on June 22 2016 and leaves a husband and two young children