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The Brexit Election Labour Lost. The Relentless Smear Attacks against Jeremy Corbyn

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The chorus of smear attacks on Jeremy Corbyn was so vile and relentless that it is unseemly to blame him personally for the defeat of his party in the December 12 parliamentary elections. Perhaps Labour's defeat was inevitable. But with a different strategy, it would have been a defeat with more promise for the future.

Tactically, Corbyn's great error was to submit so blandly to the smear campaign accusing Labour of anti-Semitism. The "danger to Jews in Britain" was totally imaginary and should have been vigorously denounced as politically motivated slander. If Corbyn did anything to promote anti-Jewish feeling in Britain, it was by allowing self-appointed spokesmen and women of a small minority to destroy the reputation of party members whom he should have defended. But not even the smear campaign's identification of British Jews with unquestioning defense of Israel can endanger the secure position of Jews in British society.

But Corbyn's strategic error was the total failure to develop a Labour-friendly Brexit strategy. His campaign failed to project his program into a post-EU context. Instead, he accepted the prospect of a second referendum that would reverse the first one. A prospect of endless confusion and division.

Comparison with France

Adapting a left policy to leaving the EU would have been much easier here in France. Since enactment of the post-World War II Resistance Council program, France has had a very special attachment to its public services, understood as both a national asset (providing a favorable environment for business and daily life) and an egalitarian method of redistribution of wealth. The Macron regime's attacks on public services are a major cause of the massive Gilets Jaunes street protests and trade unions strikes. Macron's program to introduce a uniform national retirement scheme, aside from its prospect of more work for less pension, is also an attack on public services, since it would undermine the esprit de corps necessary to perpetuate the publicly useful professions needed by key public services such as nursing, education, energy production and rail transport.

Active opposition to Macron's policies is raising awareness that all these unwelcome reforms have been dictated to France by the European Union, in order to promote privatization and unimpeded competition of private capital. The unwelcome retirement measures are simply one of the items dictated by the *Grandes Orientations des Politiques Economique*s or GOPE (Broad Economic Policy Guidelines in English) determined by an unelected bureaucracy in Brussels and imposed on Member States.

In France, popular unrest is thus fostering increasing criticism of the EU. A "Frexit" would

easily take on a socializing coloration because it would be so closely tied to the prospect of rescuing public services and key economic sectors from privatization. The successful mixed economy of the Gaullist years survives as the memory of a better system than neoliberalism. Return to such a system is impossible within the EU.

Ideological Defeat

In the UK there is no tradition of a successful mixed economy as in France. Nevertheless, Corbyn campaigned for renationalization of the railroads and preservation of the National Health Service, which were the achievements of the Labour Party after World War II, parallel to similar social advances in France. But he failed to link his strong defense of public services to independence from the EU. Such linkage could have been the basis of a "left Brexit", in clear opposition to the EU drive for massive privatization and lower labor costs. In the absence of a socio-economic left Brexit, there was no vigorous counter to the notion that the working class voted for Brexit only to oppose immigration for reasons of racism and xenophobia – the line pushed by the Blairite open society crowd, which hates Corbyn and cares more for "minorities" than for the British working class.

Corbyn's failure to take a strong stand illustrated the ideological weakness of the left faced with globalization. Much of the left has allowed its traditional "internationalism" to be redefined as "open borders". This apparent generosity toward outsiders in fact is highly compatible with the demands of globalized finance capital. Old-fashioned Socialist internationalism meant solidarity with workers in their struggle against the capitalist ruling class in each and every country where they lived and worked. Open borders means weakening the position of workers everywhere, and strengthening global capitalism.

Corbyn's desire to compromise with his enemies led him to capitulate to those who consider that the primary if not unique task of "the left" is to decry "racism" and "anti-Semitism". Such a left merely provides a moral cover for global capitalism by demonizing popular resistance as "populism".

I have the impression that in Britain, many more or less progressive people wanted to stay in the EU out of fear of being left alone with their own horrible ruling class, with its MI6, its aggressive imperialist traditions, its virtual caste system. "Europe" seemed more gentle and "social" than Britain itself – even though the task of the EU is to wreck the social state to make way for the global reign of finance capital.

Aside from economic or social issues, the vote to leave the European Union was a profound expression of fidelity to Britain's democratic institutions, to the right of British citizens to make their own laws. The British were never comfortable with accepting regulations and directives drafted in Brussels. They were never totally "in" Europe, having rejected the euro and the Schengen rules on borders. A party that is unwilling to govern a nation reclaiming its sovereignty has disqualified itself.

Failing to embrace Brexit and give it a social program was a fateful timidity. It meant handing Brexit to Boris Johnson. A BoJo Brexit appears more than likely to strengthen the UK's imperialist ties with the United States and Israel and pursue drastic privatizations at home. And it seems most unlikely to set an appealing example to citizens of other European countries whose dissatisfaction with socio-economic decline under EU direction is growing.

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