

THE SWP (GB), IT'S MEMBERSHIP AND LEXIT

Three years ago the SWP, together with the CPGB, smaller left groups and some trade union leaders formed a block called LEXIT. Its' purpose was to encourage workers to vote Leave in the EU in the Referendum. This was clearly a position which harmed the interests of the international working class and which cannot go unpunished ideologically. And yet despite the lessons learnt over the three years since the referendum, what is most damning, is that the base of the SWP, its members, have not rebelled against this position despite the fact that it has cut them off politically from the best elements of the British working class.

The SWP is an organisation of two parts. Its body, that is its members, is quite muscular and sinewy. They are involved in a number of, "on the ground" worthwhile campaigns in the spheres of racism, immigration, Palestinian rights, anti-fascism and even some exemplary trade union work. Its head however suffers from Arteriosclerotic Dementia and has done so for a considerable period of time. This condition results from the lack of flow of ideas to the brain, that is the starving of actual new ideas in the brain accompanied by a dissociative state (problems with reality). The democratic conduits have lost their elasticity and the whole process is clogged by mediocre leaders and professors occupying and rotting in position thereby inhibiting interactions between the body and the brain.

Unfortunately this chronic condition can be traced back as far as 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall. This is what Socialist Worker had to say about the events at the time. *"(We) welcomed the revolutions. Under the slogan, "Neither Washington nor Moscow but International Socialism," we had long supported workers against the regimes. For us, Russia and its satellite states in Eastern Europe were societies which had the exploitation of workers at their very core. They were "state capitalist". The ruling class—the state bureaucracy—operated in a similar way to capitalists everywhere."* In other words an anti-capitalist revolt was in progress.

<https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/39323/Revolutions+of+1989%3A+how+the+old+regime+was+torn+down>

What were the later reflections of the SWP on the outcome of this so called revolution? *"The whole region was shaped in the interests of Western capitalism. In 1990 large institutions, such as the IMF and World Bank, advocated "shock therapy" to restructure capitalism. In reality, this meant all "shock" and no "therapy". Through privatisation and foreign investment they bought up the most profitable firms and the rest were left to sink or swim. In the period after 1990 factories closed down, while unemployment rose, and workers' wages were held."* *"But by 1989 (Solidarność,) leadership eventually saw the "market" as the only way forward and helped to implement neoliberal reforms."* <https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/39324/Revolutions+of+1989%3A+there+was+lots+of+shock+and+not+much+therapy> These lines are quotes, which the SWP republished uncritically and without commentary.

There is one error in the above quote. Long before 1989 the leadership of *Solidarność*, had become agents of the West feted by the Catholic Church particularly in the USA fortified by CIA involvement. Years earlier the typical Hammer and Sickle on official Union banners had been replaced by the Christian Cross. The workers in COMECON not only hated their exploiters, nor could they live in the old way any longer, but they were also motivated by illusions in the market. And it was the latter aspect that gave direction to their struggles and ensured it would be led by counter-revolutionaries.

The SWP claims to follow in the tradition of Trotsky. But was it not Trotsky who first warned that the Stalinist bureaucracy would not hesitate to swop the insecurity of political privilege for the security of private property when the opportunity presented itself? It is of course a mockery and a sign of

ideological bankruptcy for the SWP not to seek to explain how a movement given one characterisation morphed into its opposite seamlessly.

Additionally it is a strange paradox when the majority of the old regime, even in the USSR, joins, rather than opposes the uprising. (There were exceptions of course such as in Rumania.) And here it is vital to compare what happened in Eastern Europe and Russia to China. Only in China did the regime unify in crushing the uprising in Tiananmen Square. Why? The difference in China was that the process of privatisation and capitalist restoration was well advanced, unlike in Europe and it had already given rise to structural changes in Chinese society. The uprising in Tiananmen Square was not a revolt against the old, as it was in Eastern Europe, but the new, the corruption and inequality that flowed from the re-introduction of capitalism in China. In this sense, it had an anti-capitalist content or at least an anti-the excesses of capitalism development.

Thus we had two sets of workers' uprisings, one in Europe and one in China, but their content or essence was completely different. It is unforgivable for anyone, including the SWP, who call themselves Marxists, to ignore the historical forces shaping any movement.

And so to LEXIT.

Just as we have to investigate the forces shaping the events of 1989, so we need to investigate the forces giving rise to the Referendum and its outcome. The historical driver for both the referendum and its outcome was the financial crash of 2008. The financial crash gave rise to compounded austerity. By compounded austerity we understand not only the cuts needed to bail out the banking system, but beyond that, the neo-liberal granting of tax cuts to the rich and their corporations. Add in the growth of tax dodging, and Britain experienced cuts in living standards and services second only to Greece. In Britain's case the Troika was the Tories, the City of London and the CBI.

The general law surrounding capitalism in crisis, is that it gives rise to centrifugal and disintegrative forces. These forces are without exception, reactionary. They are characterised by the intensification of nationalism and racism as "countries seek to look after their own" (sic). This hardly needs elaboration as the effects have been so stark and clear over the last few years with the rise of right-wing populism and the deployment of razor wire at borders. Indeed the dominant narrative during the Brexit campaign was the issue of immigration.

The referendum represented these disintegrative forces. Had the Referendum been called during prosperous times, rather than parlous times, the vote would have gone the other way. The NHS bus would have been scoffed at. The biggest error Cameron made, one which Toffs including Marie Antoinette are prone to, is to misunderstand the condition of the masses, the failure to appreciate how deep austerity had bitten and how much services and housing had been hollowed out.

But what made Brexit possible was not simply austerity but the political exploitation of austerity by those who benefited from it. This has to be seen in a double sense. Firstly, the Tories turned from being supporters of the EU into its opponents when Thatcher and her heirs discovered that far from being able to drive Europe to the extreme pole of neo-liberalism, Britain was finding itself constrained from doing so. Therefore despite the prosperity that flowed to Britain from membership, particularly via the City of London which became banker to Europe, a section of the party began to argue British interests would be better served out of Europe.

That is why it is wrong to say that the drive to disassociate Britain from Europe is driven by the needs of small capital, rather than what is the case, sections of large capital. We need only look at who was funding the Leave campaign. It was not countless individual donations of £20 from shopkeepers, it

was large donations by industrialists, venture capitalists and hedge funds. They are the happy-clappy strange tongued wing of neo-liberalism. Their credo is small states, fragmented states, states just on the verge of failing. These are the states made vulnerable, the ones where taxation, regulation and import controls can best be manipulated and reduced. Strong states are an anathema to them, including large states like the USA and China.

It is here that we find the abject failure of the SWP to understand what is in play. They argue consistently that the protections now found in the UK were not granted by the EU but won in the UK by means of working class struggle. Even if this was true, which in part it is, the reason this section of capital supporting Leave wants out, is that it would be easier to unwind these protections if Britain left, if they had full blown control of legislation. It is a discussion not about the origins of these rights and protection but their demise. What the SWP forgets is that Britain already has the harshest anti-union laws in Western Europe, that in the space of thirty years it has become one of the most right-wing political countries in Europe. That it was Britain above all, who drove the right wing agenda in Europe.

Secondly, most of the leaders and financiers behind the Leave campaign are the tax dodgers that created this mess in the first place. When it comes to paying tax they are true internationalists, moving their money around and burying it in tax havens. As inequality has soared, so taxation has become increasingly dependent on the rich because of their monopolisation of wealth. So while they and their loud mouths preach patriotism, they break the first rule of a patriot: "the obligation to pay your tax in the motherland for the good of the motherland".

The PCS union whose members work for the tax authorities (HMRC) calculate that up to £120 billion worth of tax is not paid to the exchequer each year. Had all taxes due been paid since 2008, and, adjusting for inflation and the size of the economy, the tax take would have been roughly £1 trillion more or £100 billion per year. In comparison, turning to the other side of the ledger, the cuts have only amounted to half this figure or about £40 billion per annum: "***The Chancellor's decisions will follow almost a decade of spending cuts. On a like-for-like basis, departmental spending is more than £40 billion lower in 2018–19 than in 2009–10 and has fallen to a share of national income last seen in 2000–01.***" <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/13854>

The balance of \$60 billion per annum would have avoided the cuts. But more, there was enough to improve services and fully fund the NHS, while building two million, yes two million additional homes. So why does the SWP whinge on and on about Brussels being the problem, the effect of which leads them down the whining road towards popular fronts with capitalists and busses.

Here is the rub. The very people that economically profited from austerity, who created the conditions that disturbed the working class, are the ones that are now seeking to exploit it politically. They are using the victims of austerity as cannon fodder for their hidden agenda. This is the political terrain which the SWP inhabits. Little wonder that Aaron Banks, the multi-millionaire financier for the Leave campaign, could not keep his contempt for groups like the SWP to himself. "*One only has to consult Arron Bank's Bad boys of Brexit to realize that for right-wing Brexiteers the purpose of Lexiteers were to appear as 'useful idiots' for the leave campaign and would quickly disappear from view as soon as the referendum was concluded.*" <https://marxistsociology.org/2018/12/lexit-did-it-ever-really-exist/> Useful Idiots indeed. It shows that even if you are a professor or a teacher with a university qualification this does not prevent you from being politically stupid.

The body of support for Brexit was the grey vote. This was the only demographic that voted by a large margin for Brexit. Intoxicated by the rotting fumes of Empire and kidnapped at home by the media, it

was predictable they would vote for the past. The second group were the victims of 2008, those workers, particularly in rural areas, whose lack of skills made them vulnerable to the labour market, and whose restricted finances limited their horizons. Of course there was the petty bourgeoisie as well, but it was the weight of the first two groups that swung it. (It was also, according to Lord Ashcroft's research, a sizeable protest vote which backfired, by those who did not want to leave Europe but wanted their voices heard.) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-anger-bregret-leave-voters-protest-vote-thought-uk-stay-in-eu-remain-win-a7102516.html>)

The progressive step for revolutionaries would have been to oppose the disintegration of the EU on its Atlantic seaboard. This would have maintained the ties between European workers and British workers, and equally it would have retained the ties between English, Scottish and Irish workers. It would have made it easier to build unity against the multi-nationals and the renewed crisis of capitalism which began in 2019. Instead the referendum is pitting British workers against foreign workers as Brexit encourages divestment, it is propelling Scotland to a second referendum and it is threatening to spark sectarian war once again by threatening to deepen the divisions on the island of Ireland.

But Lexiteers retort, there is so much to gain from leaving the EU. According to the SWP the EU is "Fortress Europe" blocking immigration and setting up effective concentration camps filled with immigrants in surrounding countries. What will the effect be when Britain abandons this fortress? Ahem! It will be to build Fortress Britain instead. Does the SWP honestly believe that an independent Britain led by Brexiteers will be more open to immigration? Quite the contrary, the whole trajectory of the Leave vote was for more, not less immigration controls, and in its wake, racism has roared.

To attach oneself to this little Englisher mentality is to commit the most serious of errors. It is to play into the hands of national chauvinism. It is to become unavoidably contaminated by racism despite one's best efforts to distance oneself from it. We just have to look at the behaviour of some Lexit trade union leaders recently who feel more comfortable with their Brexit allies than with the "liberal elite".

Then the SWP points to the economic advantages. Trade with the EU has declined relative to the rest of the world. Leaving the EU would remove the trade chokehold freeing up Britain to trade with the rest of the world which is more dynamic. Where have we heard this argument before, oh yes, it is one of Farage's favourite sayings. But there is a fundamental flaw in this argument. Britain not only trades with Europe, but through Europe with the rest of the world. If British exports to the rest of the world have increased, this is partly due to the favourable trade negotiations concluded by the EU. When Britain leaves without a trade deal, it not only loses access to the EU but to all those countries with whom the EU negotiated these terms. And while Britain has become less dependent on the EU in terms of the trade of goods, it has become more dependent on the EU for the trade in services.

On the political side, we are told that the political structures of the EU are irredeemably undemocratic. *"European union institutions are designed to be undemocratic. The EU is even harder to reform than national governments are."* This is a game, revolutionaries should never indulge in.

<https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/42550/Launch+of+united+left+campaign+to+leave+the+EU>

Revolutionaries should always refrain from the temptation of choosing between capitalist states. We are not political rating agencies whose purpose is to score states. What does the SWP mean? Is the EU a -10 while Britain is only a -9? If anything, the Brexit negotiations have shown just how undemocratic Britain is. Only May and a handful of cabinet ministers, together with their little army of senior civil servants, engaged in the negotiations. On the other side, the EU was necessarily more transparent. And we should not forget that transparency is to politics what daylight is to plants, without it everything withers.

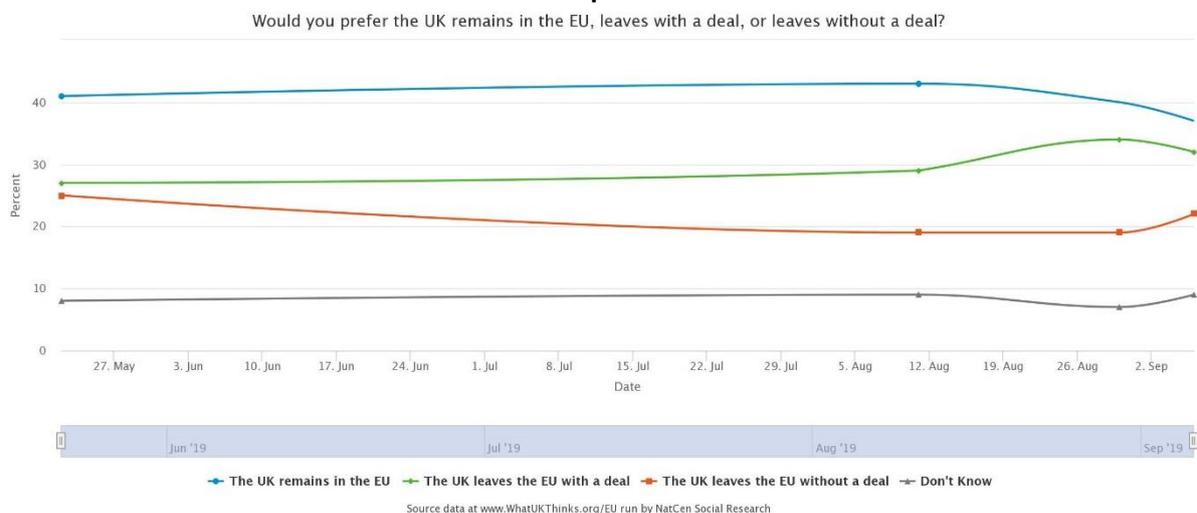
May fought to the bitter end to suppress the Parliamentary rebellion over ownership and participation in the Treaty. After all, she said repeatedly, it was the role of government to negotiate and propose laws, not parliament. Oops, she was reserving the same rights as the European Commission. So Britain reserves the privilege of being ruled by government but condemns the EU for being ruled in the same way. Except the commission proved to be more consultative, referring the clauses in the treaty to all 27 states for their consideration step by step. The argument that the EU is less democratic has been shredded by the behaviour of the May government, and, now the Johnson government's proroguing of parliament. It gives new meaning to taking back control. In one sentence: events have shown that the EU commission while being "unelected" was more consultative; the British government while being elected was less consultative (and that includes both the May and Johnson government.) A Hobson's Choice.

The EU is no better nor worse than the mother of parliament. At least it can't be suspended, even if all the many royal families in Europe ganged up against it. We need to win workers to the position that the enemy is at home, because without so doing, working class independence and unity is impossible to achieve.

The other argument proposed by the SWP relates to class war. The SWP has consistently argued that leaving Europe would provoke a political crisis which would undermine the establishment, drive out the Tories and foster class war. Presumably that is why they are supporters of a no deal Brexit which would mean by crashing out of the EU political effects would be intensified. This is opportunism of the worst kind, the one that grievously burns the hand that holds it.

The SWP badly misread the situation. While they babble on and on that the capitalist class is unified in its support of the common market, patently untrue, this has the useful purpose of deflecting analysis of whether workers are united in opposition to the EU. At the time of the Referendum, 60% of trade unionists supported Remain as did the majority of Labour supporters. Since then the proportion of trade unionists supporting Remain has increased. As the graph below shows, those seeking to remain, or to leave with a negotiated settlement, has averaged around 75% of those committed. The crashing out element has stood at only 25%. The SWP is in a minority, and as we shall see the minority it seeks to lead, is most certainly not the vanguard.

Graph 1.



<https://whatukthinks.org/eu/questions/would-you-prefer-the-uk-remains-in-the-eu-leaves-with-a-deal-or-leaves-without-a-deal/#>

Within that minority of 25%, the majority of workers who voted Leave did so because they believed it would bring more job security and opportunity. They did not vote Leave in order to bring chaos to this country. What happens when having left, they are disappointed by the failure to gain better and more jobs? What happens, if re-joining the world does not bring the opportunities the SWP argues for? Where do these demoralised workers go? Who do they turn against? All those left groups and trade union leaders who made false promises.

The SWP could learn a bitter lesson if Britain crashed out of the EU and it is this. It is one thing for workers to lose their jobs because their firm has gone bankrupt due to insolvency. It is quite another when the reason that firm has gone bankrupt is because of Brexit, which the employees opposed in the first place. The workers who opposed Brexit would rightly be angry, and they are the majority, and they would be entitled to take their anger out on the SWP. Why get caught in the middle of a working class, with angry Remain workers on the one side who lost their jobs and homes, and on the other, demoralised Leave workers who gained nothing from Brexit. In such an event the SWP will be crushed.

Revolutionaries cannot take sides. We are not for or against the EU, because we are against all capital. Supporting Remain does not mean taking sides, it is simply a stance taken which reduces the consequences of the capitalist disintegration dividing the international working class. All capitalists should appear the same to us, whether young or old, female or male, Chinese or American, light skinned or dark skinned. They all have one thing in common: by dispossessing us they have disempowered us, and by disempowering us they have been able to divide us.

To take sides hollows out any claims that it is the self-activity of the masses that makes history; the battle cry of the SWP from its inception. By taking sides, history is being made for the working class, not by the working class. A Britain crashing out of Europe will become a nasty little Britisher island in which the most extreme forms of exploitation will flourish. The position of revolutionaries had to be informed by (a) not taking sides, (b) but opposing Leave in order to assist the centripetal forces latent in the European working class against the centrifugal forces unleashed by capital. Is that so difficult to understand?

For the reader who would like to read up on the reasons the SWP support a Hard Brexit follow these two links.

www.leftleave.org/five-myths-about-the-eu/

<http://www.leftleave.org/seven-more-myths-about-the-eu/>

There is a final point that needs to be addressed. The SWP is nominally against immigration controls. They do exemplary work around Calais, and many of their members are proud to carry placards on anti-racist demonstrations declaring *"Refugees are Welcome Here"*. Now read the following sentence taken from their leaflet covering the five myths about the EU. *"Cheaper, more flexible and super-exploited imported labour has been used as a form of 'incomes policy', holding down wages as profits and dividends go up."* Why use the derogatory and demeaning term, imported labour? Polish workers have been reduced to imported comrades. What does this imply? That after Leaving the EU, imported labour will end. This can only mean, by implication, that the SWP supports tighter immigration controls which means as it always has, not only an abandonment of internationalism, but the obligations that go with it. It means pandering to small nation chauvinism.

Of course immigration controls is a burning issue. If the populist right has had its wings clipped, that is because the centrist parties, including Labour, have adopted many of their anti-immigrant

proposals. To revolutionaries, dabbling with immigration controls is the equivalent of juggling with double sided knives. Best avoided.

As always, the Left Idiots play into the hands of the right. Free movement in the EU is a myth because EU has always welded to movement to residency requirements. Here are the exact words of the 2004 Treaty:

(9) Union citizens should have the right of residence in the host Member State for a period not exceeding three months without being subject to any conditions or any formalities other than the requirement to hold a valid identity card or passport, without prejudice to a more favourable treatment applicable to job-seekers as recognised by the case-law of the Court of Justice.

(10) Persons exercising their right of residence should not, however, become an unreasonable burden on the social assistance system of the host Member State during an initial period of residence. Therefore, the right of residence for Union citizens and their family members for periods in excess of three months should be subject to conditions.

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1496157212325&uri=CELEX:32004L0038>

So the EU does not grant indefinite leave to stay in a member country nor the automatic right to benefits (unreasonable burden). It provides for only an unconditional three month stay in which to look for work. The average Brit would not have learnt this from the racist headlines found in the Mail and Sun, nor from the Leave campaign and their scares about Turkish immigration. The problem was not free movement. It was the exploitation of this free movement by British employers in general and Tony Blair in particular wot caused the crisis. They ignored the question of residency and burden which lubricated the flood of job seekers from Eastern Europe and to a lesser extent, Western Europe. At any time, the neo liberal British government could have enforced the residency rule, at any time it could have changed its benefit rules to ensure that unemployed migrants were not an unreasonable burden, as other countries in Europe did. And while the SWP does hold British employers responsible, this is only a reflexive and formal criticism of them.

The position of revolutionaries is clear. We support open borders. Does this mean we naively advocate workers should leave their home countries to become economic migrants? No. Just as we encourage workers in their workplace to unionise their firm to improve conditions and pay, so we urge workers in their countries, to fight for power and change. If workers jump from firm to firm, hoping to find a better firm, the fight to unionise firms would never have happened. Similarly if workers jump from country to country, political change will not occur. Supporting open borders is not the same as advocating mass migration.

The current debacle.

When Johnson prorogued Parliament the SWP joined the demonstrations. They celebrated the fact that at last the Remainers and Leavers had joined forces to oppose the establishment. Nonsense, the initial demonstrations were predominantly Remainers. The proof of this was to be found in the follow up demonstrations called by the SWP. True, on these demonstrations there was a sizeable Leave contingent, mainly the SWP, but that was because they were reduced to only 5 to 10% the size of the initial spontaneous demonstrations which followed the suspension of parliament.

In any case the movement they were celebrating was a popular front. A mish mash of capitalists and workers. Teaming up with Tories who had voted for austerity and the deaths of tens of thousands is nothing much to cheer about. The reason the movement did not expand into the workplaces was that

it soon became apparent, that far from a “coup”, it was a desperate last ditch stand by an inept prime minister who had been outmanoeuvred.

Despite the usual mantras of broadening the struggle, mobilising the unions and driving out the Tories, what is really disturbing about the SWP, is how little it has to offer at this crucial juncture. When it comes to actual tactics, they join the chorus condemning the Labour Party for not supporting Johnson’s call for an election on October 15. As parliament is suspended until October 14th, this would have meant that nothing could be done while the clock ticks down. Following the elections, Parliament would first have to deal with the structural issues of a new government such as electing a new speaker, leader of the house etc. Not until the Queen’s speech, whose earliest date would have been the 21st, would Parliament be open for the business of passing legislation, and then only after days had been spent stringing out the debate and vote on the speech. By then it would be so close to the 31st, that it was game over. Maybe Mail readers should now add a new subscription, Socialist Worker, when they next visit their local village newsagent.

The reason that Socialist Worker supports an immediate election, is that they are not opposed to a no deal Brexit. This leads them into the trap set by Johnson, to use an election as the means of leaving Europe undemocratically. An immediate election would have allowed Johnson to lead the Tories into the hustings claiming that Britain’s departure was now assured. Were that to be the case, it is likely that the Conservatives would win. The reasons are manifold, but the three most important reasons are. (a) The splits in the Tories could be papered over because Brexit was now “water under the bridge” and therefore no longer divisive. (b) The ground would have been cut from under the feet of the Brexit party. And finally, Mr Johnson could focus on how he is going to provide the British people with more police, nurses and teachers. From a buffoon he would be presented as a master tactician one as worthy as any found in ancient Greece.

Conclusion.

Brexit was a stern test for revolutionaries, one which the SWP failed comprehensively and irretrievably. If the SWP is to have a future it needs to break from its past. The members need to force a special conference with the purpose of booting out their sclerotic leadership. This goes way beyond just self-criticism. An error on this scale needs the severest remedy: all those in leadership roles who proposed Lexit need to be dismissed. They are a menace to the working class.

Unfortunately, this is unlikely to happen. This 60 year old organisation has had a continuous thread running through it, strategic disorientation. 1989 was not an aberration just as 2016 was not an aberration. Tony Cliff not only revised Marxism, he violated it. His theories on state capitalism, the permanent arms economy, on the nature of economic competition between the USSR and the USA, were not just plain wrong, they acted as a barrier to a real understanding of history. And of course those who cannot understand and explain history cannot make it, despite their erudite pretensions.

Until the SWP, Counterfire and other Lexit groups come to their political senses, they need to be ostracised. Internationalism is not about flowery words, it is about real world events and how to engage with them. Groups who support Lexit have abandoned the struggle for internationalism in the real world. They have attached themselves to that section of the working class who see a national solution to their problems, and, they have detached themselves from the most progressive elements of the English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish working class. They are nothing more than groups voluntarily holding on to a rope being dragged behind a truck driven by crusading neo-liberals. It is unedifying.

Brian Green, September 2019