

# Lessons from recent history at the Labour Euro Safeguards Campaign fringe event

With a Conservative government fully engrossed in the Brexit negotiations and dominating the newspaper headlines, Labour's take on Brexit has received comparatively little coverage beyond the divisions among its MPs in the recent vote on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and complaints that the party leadership stifled any debate or vote on its Brexit policy during its party conference.

Yesterday evening, the Labour Euro Safeguards Campaign held a fringe meeting in which a pro-Brexit position was articulated as clearly as in any Tory – or even UKIP – gathering. In the chair was John Mills, a long-standing member of CIB's Committee. The speakers were not as advertised, with Kate Hoey and Brendan Cilton being unavailable, although Tom Bewick, a Labour Councillor from Brighton & Hove City council who chaired the local vote.leave group last year, was a perfectly acceptable substitute.

Kelvin Hopkins MP, the first speaker, informed the meeting that he had led Luton's "No" campaign in the 1975 referendum. It is all too easy to forget that, in the history of euroscepticism in our country, Labour has a longer and in some ways, a far more distinguished record than the Conservatives.

The claim that Brexit was dreamed up by a set of public schoolboys who thought that "ruling Britain was their prerogative; they didn't want outsiders muscling in," as suggested by Simon Kuper in the *Financial Times* is revisionism pure and simple. Tony Benn, Kelvin Hopkins, Nigel Spearing and, indeed John Mills himself were all campaigning for the UK to leave the EU when the likes of Boris Johnson and Jacob

Rees-Mogg were still at prep school.

Labour Brexiteers have different emphases from their Tory counterparts. Yesterday, several speakers pointed out that their party's 2017 General election manifesto contained a number of re-nationalisation pledges that would not be possible to honour if we had voted to remain in the EU. No one mentioned Jacques Delors, but as far as LESC and its supporters are concerned, his "Social Europe" is dead and buried. The EU, we were told, is a neo-Liberal project committed to eroding workers' rights and responsible for the hollowing out of UK's industrial base. More than that, the EU is anti-democratic and would not allow a democratically-elected socialist government to implement its agenda, as evidenced by the savage treatment meted out to Greece.

There was no enthusiasm for remaining in the Single Market, in spite of the ambivalence of Labour's shadow Brexit spokesman, Keir Starmer. Free movement of people, said one speaker from the floor, dehumanised human beings, treating them as mere commodities. There was no love lost for free movement of capital either, which was blamed for the economic decline in some poorer member states, notably (again) Greece.

The meeting recognised that many young Corbyn enthusiasts were strongly pro-EU, but felt that they could be won round by pointing out that the socialist agenda set out in the manifesto – which they enthusiastically supported – can only be implemented from outside the EU. Likewise, the leaders of many trade unions, who predominantly supported remaining in the EU, were not behaving logically considering that workers' rights were better likely to be protected in an independent UK compared with the EU whose supreme court, the European Court of Justice, had sided with the employers rather than trade unions in the Laval and Viking Ferry disputes.

Both platform speakers and audience members recognised the challenges they faced in putting forward pro-Brexit arguments

to fellow party members, with several people admitting that their stance has lost them friends. What is more, as one speaker pointed out, more people voted to leave the EU than have ever voted for anything else, so does Labour respect democracy or not? It's not just ordinary party members who have faced criticism for raising this important issue. Caroline Flint, a former Europe minister, was heckled in Parliament for taking this stance. She represents a strongly pro-Brexit constituency and said "Since the result, I have argued leave and remain supporters should bury our difference and get on with it." Even if some of her parliamentary colleagues did not like her words, her principled stance was strongly endorsed by the speakers at yesterday's meeting.

The timing of this meeting was particularly interesting coming less than 24 hours after the announcement of the result of Germany's General Election. The headline story has been the success of *Alternative für Deutschland*, but another equally important development was the very poor showing of the German Socialist party, the SPD, who won a mere 20.5% of the vote. This comes in the wake of Benoît Hamon, the candidate from the equivalent party in France, the PS, polling a mere 6.36% in the first round of France's Presidential election. In the second of the two General Elections held in Greece in 2015, PASOK, the socialist party, came fourth with only 6.3% of the vote. In each of these countries, new left-wing parties of a more eurosceptic and radically socialist nature are making significant inroads into the traditional vote of the mainstream social democratic parties.

This hasn't happened in the UK, but the leftward shift in Labour under Jeremy Corbyn has brought a surge of new members into the party. Last night's meeting highlighted the common factor in this growing sense of alienation among traditional left-wing voters across Europe towards the historic socialist parties – the EU. How could a man like Martin Schulz, the former leader of the Socialist group in the European

Parliament, have campaigned so fervently for TTIP, the now abandoned EU-US trade deal? TTIP was widely criticised on the left for the power it handed to multinationals, so to repeat, why were the socialists supporting this deal? The answer is simple:- Europe's "mainstream" socialist parties, including our own Labour Party in the years from Kinnock to Miliband, saw commitment to the EU project as a far greater priority than fighting for workers' rights – or indeed, preserving our national democracies.

Add to this the depressing effects of mass migration from Eastern Europe on the wages of the working classes in the more affluent western European nations (including the UK) and it is unsurprising that white working classes have started to look elsewhere when casting their ballot.

The white working classes were instrumental too in securing the Brexit vote. Last year's Leave campaign was in many ways an unlikely and at times, awkward coalition, if coalition it can be called, but the distinctive feature of the UK is the substantial right-of-centre "Thatcherite" support for withdrawal, which has no parallel in any other EU member state. This unique combination of hatred of the EU on both the left and the right of the political spectrum was necessary to clinch the vote. Left and right have differing visions of what a post-Brexit UK should look like, but last night's meeting was a healthy reminder that without a willingness to put aside these ideological differences and work together to secure our independence, such debates about the future shape of our country would not have been possible at all.