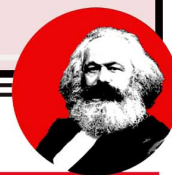


# RED PAGES

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## Brexit: Reject the fudge composite motion

Instead, the labour movement should fight for working class independence and unity in Europe

The row between Theresa May and the European Union over Brexit has been dominating the news during the Labour conference. That has led to an internal crisis in the deeply divided Tory Party, with May's position as leader under imminent threat.

In response to all this, the Corbyn leadership and sections of the Labour right have been able to find some common ground: the Tories are in disarray, which means that our priority must be to call for an immediate general election, so that a Labour government can negotiate a sensible deal with the EU "in the interests of the country".

The advantage of this from the point of view of both sides is that the question of a second referendum can for the moment be pushed to one side, although Corbyn has said

that a 'People's Vote' cannot be ruled out and he will abide by any decision taken by conference. In other words, a continuation of Labour's 'studied ambiguity'.

The demand for a general election settles nothing, of course – which is why sections of the Labour right have opposed it as a fudge. On the other hand, we all hate the Tories and want a Labour government as soon as possible, don't we? That's why the leadership is confident its position will win the day.

Loudest amongst the voices calling for another referendum are those of the right, including those who see the 'People's Vote' campaign as yet another chance to undermine Corbyn's leadership. The media coverage in advance of the conference and the publicity given to the de-

mands to reject Brexit demonstrates the existence of a coalition being built in the latest attempt at a slow coup. For example, Sunday's March for a People's Vote in Liverpool brought together sections of the Labour right, such as Liverpool mayor Joe Anderson and Liverpool Wavertree MP Luciana Berger, along with a rag-tag band of Liberal Democrats, rural Tory rebels and confused Green activists in an attempt to sway the conference vote. Similar moves are underway in the unions, as leaders like Tim Roache of the GMB lined up to call for a second referendum.

Unite's Len McCluskey has said that any new referendum should not include the 'remain' option – it should focus solely on the terms of **continued on p2**

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- The Socialist Party tries to affiliate to the Labour Party
- Voting recommendations on all constitutional amendments
- Why Marxists oppose referendums

Brexit. But what if the terms are rejected? However, for the majority of union bureaucrats, Brexit – particularly of the 'hard' variety – is viewed as likely to have adverse economic repercussions in Britain, such as higher unemployment and greater pressure on wages and working conditions. It is purely from this narrow perspective that they would like to see the decision reversed. In parallel with this, the likes of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty and its Clarion journal, with their 'Love Corbyn, hate Brexit' slogan, are openly calling for Brexit to be abandoned through a 'People's Vote'.

However, the TUC voted two weeks ago for the Corbyn position, stating only that another referendum should not be "ruled out". That is why today's Brexit debate will be on a composite that includes both the leadership's 'general election' call and the possibility of a second referendum. It will include the fudged

statement: "If we cannot get a general election, Labour must support all options remaining on the table, including campaigning for a public vote."

The composite is all that survives from over 140 contemporary motions submitted on Brexit. This followed a marathon meeting attended by around 250 delegates representing those who had put forward the various motions, which ended in the early hours of Monday morning. Once again, this episode exposes the democratic deficit within our party. Why can't we have the true debates out in the open, with different motions representing different viewpoints being properly debated?

There is, of course, a minority of both Labour members and union leaders – most notably the RMT – who take a pro-Brexit view, and it seems that only the CWU has adopted something approaching a principled position. General secre-

tary Dave Ward has insisted that we should not be "elevating the debate about a second referendum, or a 'people's vote', or on the details of our relationship with the EU, above all other issues."

He has pointed out that during the referendum campaign we "had a choice between two Tory alternatives: the status quo or a Conservative-led Brexit". To put it mildly, "it is a mistake to continue to allow the terms of the debate to be dictated to us in this way".

This is correct. Both the EU and the UK are run in the interests of capital, not the workers. What Labour should be proposing is a position of working class independence. Our call should be for a workers' Europe – neither a capitalist-driven Brexit nor the current capitalist-driven EU. Delegates should vote against both of those by opposing the Brexit composite.

## Request to affiliate: Ex-Militant wants to rejoin

The former Militant Tendency, now known as the Socialist Party in England and Wales, has applied to affiliate to Labour, and the SP has published correspondence on the matter between Labour's general secretary, Jenny Formby, and its own leader, Peter Taaffe.

This is of particular interest, since for more than two decades the SP insisted that Labour was now just another capitalist party – like the Tories or Liberal Democrats. But in its letter of April 6 the SP describes the election of Jeremy Corbyn as "the first step to potentially transforming Labour into a mass workers' party", standing on an "anti-austerity programme". So now "all genuinely anti-austerity forces should be encouraged to affiliate".

As an aside, why does the SP stress the need for an "anti-austerity programme" above all else? It does this even though it correctly states: "When the Labour Party was founded, it was a federation of different trade union and socialist organisations, coming together to fight for *working class political representation*": ie, nothing so limited as merely opposing spending cuts.

Eventually, on July 27, Jennie Formby replied, beginning her letter, "Dear Mr Taaffe". She pointed out that Labour rules prevent the affiliation of political organisations with "their own programme, principles and policies", unless they have a "national agreement with the party". Also groups which stand candidates against Labour are automatically barred.

In his next letter (August 23) Peter Taaffe answered the first point by saying that the SP wanted a meeting precisely to discuss the possibility of such a "national agreement". And, in response to the second point, he said the SP would much prefer to be part of an anti-austerity Labour Party "rather than *having to stand against pro-austerity Labour candidates*".

Following this, Jennie Formby replied rather more quickly. On August 29 – this time starting her letter "Dear Peter" – but she ruled out any meeting: "Whilst the Socialist Party continues to stand candidates against the Labour Party ... it will not be possible to enter into any agreement." Therefore "there can be no discussions".

It is good news that the SP has at last started to take Labour seriously. But obviously it needs to stop standing against *any* Labour candidates, including those who it says are "implementing savage cuts".

The second letter from our general secretary appears to leave the door open to the potential of affiliation by left groups. Such a change would be highly significant, possibly marking the return to the principles upon which Labour was founded in 1900.

Our party should change its rules in order to end *all* bans and proscriptions, all of which were introduced by rightwing leaders. It should indeed return to its founding principles – it needs to become a united front for the entire working class.

# No to ‘People’s Vote’!

Paradoxical as it might sound, Marxists have always argued that referendums are inherently undemocratic

The drive to commit Labour to a second referendum on Theresa May’s final Brexit terms is highly coordinated and well-financed.

It is true that to many a ‘People’s Vote’ seems like an attractive prospect. After all, during the referendum campaign we were told a pack of blatant *lies* by the Brexiteers: who could ever forget the infamous red bus claiming that leaving the European Union will create an extra £350 million a week to spend on the NHS? Further, a Tory ‘no deal’ Brexit would only lead to more attacks on the working class.

Therefore, why object to a second referendum? Paradoxical as it might sound, Marxists have always argued that referendums are inherently undemocratic, as they act to fool enough of the people enough of the time: eg, the 1998 Good Friday referendum, the 2014 Scottish independence referendum - and the 2016 Brexit referendum, of course. They all offered bogus choices. This does not mean, however, that we oppose *all* referendums *all* of the time, as ultimately this is always a *tactical* question. For example, Marxists supported the recent abortion vote in Ireland, as it represented a genuine gain for the working class.

Nevertheless, the general principle of hostility to referen-

dums stands. They are not a higher form of democracy than the process of electing well-tested working class representatives following extensive public debate. Referendums tend to divide the working class, weaken its party spirit and produce the

For Marxists there are some serious problems with Omov and so-called digital democracy, which has the effect of atomising members - making it easier for them to be manipulated by unscrupulous bureaucrats. Bear in mind the farce that was Jon Lansman’s Momentum coup - cynically presented as ‘democracy from below’

strangest of bedfellows – as when the Socialist Workers Party and Ukip lined up together in support of Brexit.

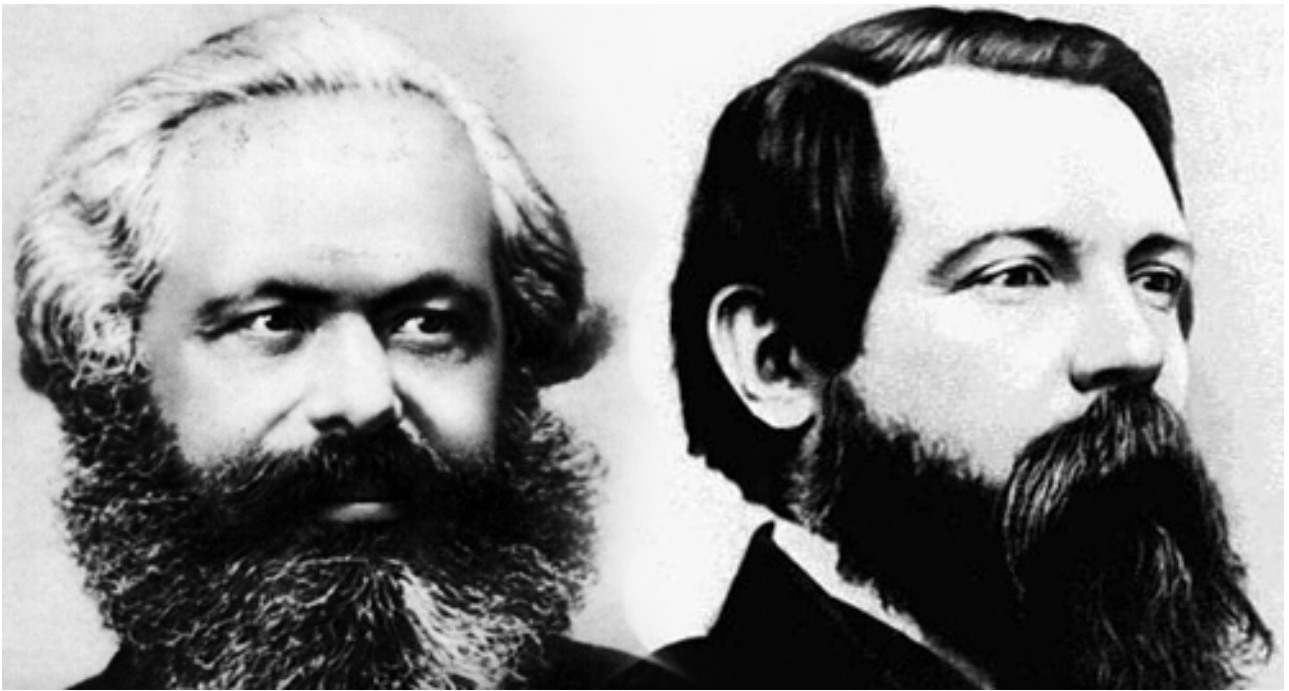
Karl Marx and Frederick Engels knew all about the undemocratic nature of referendums, given the bitter experience of Louis Bonaparte and his self-elevation to emperor in 1852, when each autocratic power-grab was legitimised by a referendum. In turn, opposing referendums became the common sense of the Second International, which dubbed them a “cruel trick”. In 1911 Ramsay MacDonald, future leader of our party, spoke in similar terms: referendums are “a clumsy and ineffective weapon,

which the reaction can always use more effectively than democracy, because it, being the power to say ‘no’, is far more useful to the few than the many” (the final phrase is, of course, particularly pertinent to the current Labour Party!).

The main argument against referendums is that there are very few situations where there is a simple binary choice in politics. Even assuming there is a straightforward ‘right thing to do’, its exact details are rarely obvious and there will be a wide range of contending ideas. But referendums reduce complexities to a mere option between black and white.

Also, Marxists want to strengthen the system of *party politics*. It is vital for the broad mass of the population to think about, organise around and vote for competing party outlooks - in the process bringing class divisions to the fore. Referendums do the opposite, *blurring* the fundamental conflict in society between class and class, and the corresponding conflict between party and party, between Labour or Tory.

All this explains why Marxists fight to *extend* representative democracy and the process of debate, through motions, detailed votes and binding legislation - which is why we call upon conference to reject all calls for a ‘People’s Vote’ and the pseudo-



### **Karl Marx and Frederick Engels knew all about the undemocratic nature of referendums**

democracy of referendums. We have the same essential approach to all those proposed rule changes seeking to expand the use of 'one member, one vote': members ought to be able to elect accountable representatives., whose duty it is to explore and analyse all the complications surrounding decisions to be made.

The Party Democracy Review contained recommendations for more "digital democracy" and "secure online voting systems", with a new sub-clause added on Sunday, which promised: "the NEC shall invite CLPs to take part in pilots of staggered meetings; electronic attendance, on-line voting and other methods of maximising participation".

However, for Marxists there are some serious problems with Omov. Just as we are opposed to

referendums, as a general rule we are also against plebiscites in the party. There is a good reason why the move to Omov for the election of party leader began with the likes of Neil Kinnock and culminated in Ed Miliband's Collins review - it was a rightwing ploy to dilute the working class nature of our party and atomise members by bringing the 'common sense' politics of the BBC or even *The Sun* into Labour.

The same goes for so-called digital democracy, which too has the effect of atomising members - making it easier for them to be manipulated by unscrupulous bureaucrats. Bear in mind the farce that was Jon Lansman's Momentum coup - cynically presented as 'democracy from below'. Omov, in Lansman's hands, was a profoundly unde-

mocratic plot against the interests of the membership - one that stymied Momentum's potential to be an effective, dynamic left trend in the party

Online voting also marginalises the role of the unions. Yes, the representatives of rightwing unions have played an entirely negative role on the NEC. But in general the affiliation of unions is an enormous *strength*. While bureaucratic union leaders should not be allowed to prevent the democratic selection of parliamentary candidates, unions have clearly played an important role in preserving the character of the Labour Party as a *workers' party*, even under Tony Blair.

For the working class, *representative democracy* is a powerful organising tool. We need to elect representatives who are totally accountable to and re-

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callable by our party, and empower them to take informed decisions on our behalf.