

News trades in hyperbole, but this alone cannot explain the panic pouring from our media outlets.

On the day after Britain's vote to leave the European Union, The Financial Times began its post-referendum edition by declaring that: 'Britain has swept away 50 years of foreign policy, turning its back on the EU in an extraordinary political upheaval that deposed its prime minister, sank its currency and reopened the possibility of Scottish independence.'¹

Martin Wolf went further: 'The UK is diminished and seems likely soon to be divided.' He wrote, 'Europe has lost its second biggest and most outward looking power. The hinge between the EU and the English speaking powers has been snapped. This is probably the most disastrous single event in British history since the second world war.'

The shock didn't go away. 6 months later, the same thunderous columns were written about an even bigger and more disastrous event: the election of Donald Trump as US President.

In the quagmire of the US political system, faced with a candidate who stood firmly in the bog of neoliberalism, the monster of Trump emerged. Responding with terrifying reaction and the promise to break from our failed economic model, Trump's victory was both a symptom of the crisis and a tonic to make it worse.

The dust never settled and if anyone thought things would return to normality, they were mistaken. At the annual gathering of the global elite in Davos, Gideon Rachman in the FT put the scale of the crisis like this: 'Listen to the speeches and the corridor conversations in Davos and it is hard to avoid the impression that the west—as a political concept—is on the point of collapse.'

This 'point of collapse' has come about as the political orthodoxy which has managed global capitalism for so long has suffered a series of setbacks.

The crisis that took off in 2008 has meant a fracturing of relations and fresh divisions among the ruling class. It can be witnessed in spectacular fashion in the US President's ongoing battles with the CIA, FBI and US Judiciary.

In Europe, this dynamic can also be seen in Theresa May's developing negotiations with the EU. In many cases, the right is trying to exploit the situation and take charge. Far from acting as a bulwark against reaction however, the forces associated with the EU and the liberal order are responding to their crisis of legitimacy by turning further to the right. This act of survival simply perpetuates the chaos and creates the conditions for fascists and the far right to flourish.

For ordinary people, there has been years of austerity. This has been met with resistance but also deep resentment and bitterness. Often, the political parties of the traditional left most closely associated with neoliberal capitalism have suffered. Radical left forces of the kind we haven't seen in decades have emerged. For many, these developments have been actively encouraged and welcomed. But for some, the shock of the crisis has provoked a different response, which hasn't embraced these new political movements but instead sought either to cling on to the liberal capitalist order or move over to the right.

¹ Financial Times Weekend Edition 25/26 June.

This article attempts to grapple with the nature of the crisis and the way socialists can respond.

The deep Atlantic shift

Theresa May's strategy should be seen in the context of her limitations post-Brexit. Her plan involves a shift away from what has been one of UK capitalism's key roles in the post-war period: an economy in the Western European model that was both in the EU and one of its greatest advocates of free market, neoliberal reform. In its place is a future much less certain for British capitalism.

This future is one outside of the world's biggest trading bloc, the EU single market, and one where even membership of the European customs union is in doubt.² It is a future of bilateral trade deals with Trump's America rather than the multilateral arrangements businesses are used to. And it is a future, in the words of Jeremy Corbyn, which threatens to see Britain turned into 'a bargain basement tax haven on the shores of Europe'.³ All in all, it is a proposed scale of change that has not been seen for generations.

This major shift is driven more by political necessity than it is economic. While business has not been in open rebellion against the Tories, there are more than just murmurs of discontent within the boss class about May's push for a 'hard Brexit'.

In the week following the prime minister's major Brexit speech, three of Britain's biggest industries – aerospace, automotive and chemicals – told a House of Commons select committee that withdrawal from the single market and customs union would damage competitiveness and affect investment into the UK.⁴

In March, the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (Rics) laid out the dangers to the construction industry involved in leaving the single market. Jeremy Blackburn, head of UK policy at Rics, said that the 'UK construction industry is currently dependent on thousands of EU workers [around 176,500].' A loss of access to the single market, he said 'has the potential to slowly bring the UK's £500bn infrastructure pipeline to a standstill.'⁵

These are situations that the Tories traditionally want to avoid. Major industries raising alarm bells about a central plank of the government's programme is not a good place for Theresa May to be in. There was a reason why most of the ruling class supported Remain during the referendum campaign. They rightly felt that their future was much more assured within the EU and saw the huge risks associated with leaving. But we now have a situation where the party that traditionally represents their interests is doing something they never wanted in the first place.

This is May's problem. She has both to represent UK capital whilst at the same time pursuing a course of action that could severely damage it. Failing to enact Brexit is simply not an option, as this would magnify the political crisis and likely lead to her downfall. May's

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-governments-negotiating-objectives-for-exiting-the-eu-pm-speech>

³ <http://www.itv.com/news/2017-01-18/jeremy-corbyn-may-plan-is-for-bargain-basement-brexit/>

⁴ <https://www.ft.com/content/df73c1c-e24b-11e6-8405-9e5580d6e5fb>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/mar/15/single-market-exit-brexit-uk-construction-sector-lose-175000-eu-workers>

decision, therefore, to pursue a closer relationship with Trump and break more ‘cleanly’ with the EU is a calculated risk, but one she feels is necessary given the circumstances. It goes further than that, however. It is also an attempt to utilise Brexit in order to reorganise British society so it is even more favourable to the rich. Or at the very least, it is about offloading any losses resulting from Brexit onto the shoulders of ordinary people.

This assault on ordinary people is not very different to that of her predecessor George Osborne or of several European countries. But Brexit creates both the opportunity with which it can take place, and the necessity for it to happen.

As Osborne used ‘balancing the books’ as an excuse for brutal austerity, May will use a nationalist argument centred on the need for UK Plc to thrive outside of the EU. However, she also understands that there is no mood among ordinary people to be subject to more pain. The referendum taught May a lesson that dishing it out like Cameron may well seal her fate in the same way. For this reason, the pace of attack has slowed since Phillip Hammond took over from George Osborne even if austerity continues at a catastrophic level. At the same time the imperative to attack workers could increase as British capitalism seeks to become more competitive outside the EU. Again, the reality of the referendum limits the scope of May’s plans and causes severe problems.

The Tories attack on immigration and freedom of movement is also necessary under May’s approach. As reports about shortages of labour in important sectors such as agriculture show, this is not economically driven. It is political and should be seen in the context of her Brexit strategy.

There are two mainstream interpretations about the outcome of the referendum. One is that it was a rejection of an out of touch elite, and the other was that it was mainly about immigration. While these interpretations have a basis in reality, they are often moulded together to draw simplistic and wrong conclusions about what the vote represented. For May’s part, it is useful for her to exaggerate the extent to which immigration played a genuine role as this allows her to say she is enacting the will of the people whilst also fostering division amongst a discontented working class.

May has paid lip service to the underlying social reasons behind Brexit but will not do anything to fix them, whereas immigration is an issue where she can appear to have much more control. She has also witnessed the crisis of the pro-capitalist liberal centre and the threat posed by the radical right. In response, she is trying to occupy a more chauvinist, anti-immigrationist and interventionist political space.

This might work for a time. The Conservatives poll advantage came through in the Copeland by-election and on the key issue of the Brexit bill, Tory dissent was kept to a minimum. However, none of this can hide the enormous challenge facing May and her government, or the wider uncertainty in the world in which it operates.

Her approach ultimately takes place in the context of defeat for both the Conservatives and the ruling class over the referendum. This defeat is compounded for the Tories because they ultimately were not able to deliver the result that best suits the class they exist to represent. This doesn’t mean May will automatically fail, but it does mean that she is open to enormous risk as she tries to manage ruling class interests whilst also pursuing a ‘hard Brexit’. This

pressure will only intensify and political events such as the Scottish referendum have the potential to wreak even more havoc. May's life is not going to get any easier.

To a certain extent, we saw this dynamic play out in her trip to see Donald Trump. The existence of Trump in the White House changes things for the prime minister. Whereas before, a Britain pursuing an aggressive break from the EU would have potentially isolated May, now she finds a partner in the world's largest economy.

You could argue that the election of Trump has strengthened May's hand in this respect, but it has only done so by placing it firmly in the palm of the US President, thus tying her political fate to a figure who has sparked broad revolt across the world.

In return for May offering a state visit, the new US president has promised that Britain would get a swift trade deal outside of the EU. Some Tory Brexiters have been cheering such a move, but as The Financial Times reported, this deal isn't nearly as simple as either side makes out. Her enthusiasm to see Trump and hastily offer a state visit is symptomatic of how the US President is in a much stronger position than his counterpart in Britain.⁶

May has little choice but to stand alongside Trump in this way because it is what her strategy demands. She has in effect fenced herself in, and having done so is now forced into a potentially awkward, close relationship with the new US administration. This, however, escalates the crisis at home. Within days of her US visit, millions of people and even senior conservatives attacked her approach to Trump. The difficulty she faces is highlighted even more sharply in the prospect of a second Scottish independence referendum. By adopting a position centred on a hard break from the EU in exchange for a closer union with America, May has handed the Scottish first minister Nicola Sturgeon a clear opportunity to push again for independence.

Trump and May

In Britain, following May's ascension to office, a new government was formed. The term cabinet reshuffle doesn't really do justice to what happened. Senior figures were swiftly and brutally sacked, departments closed and new ones opened, and the Pro Europeanism of Cameron's tenure replaced with the administration we have now. The scale of change was deliberately shocking and reflected the scale of the political crisis created by Brexit. In short, Cameron had been heavily defeated and not only did he have to resign, but the Tories had to swiftly reinvent themselves as party who could justify their ongoing power to an electorate who had decisively rejected their previous leader and chancellor at the referendum. Within a few days, Cameron was history. It was almost as if his tenure was all just a bad dream.

In America, the new Trump administration brought in so many new staffers which were so different to the last lot that large numbers of incomers had never been through the relevant security checks, creating a huge backlog before the inauguration.⁷ On Inauguration day itself, all foreign ambassadors were sacked even when no replacement had been found. At the end of January, Trump fired the acting attorney general Sally Yates after she refused to comply

⁶ <https://www.ft.com/content/9b2ab7ec-e3a6-11e6-8405-9e5580d6e5fb?segmentId=7d033110-c776-45bf-e9f2-7c3a03d2dd26>

⁷ <https://www.ft.com/content/23a4bec2-adda-11e6-9cb3-bb8207902122>

with his travel ban. And on 10th March, 46 attorneys were ordered to leave their posts. When the most prominent of these, Preet Bharara, refused the order, he was sacked.⁸

This was the swamp being drained. Not from the rich, of course, as Trump brought in the wealthiest cabinet in history and banks such as Goldman Sachs enjoyed new levels of political power. Even fringe establishment republicans such as New Jersey Governor Chris Christie were frozen out in place of right wing mavericks and even white supremacists. These bring the advantage of being both loyal to Trump and more enthusiastic about carrying through his radical agenda which he sees as integral to his political survival.

In both Britain and America, elements and figures of the permanent state apparatus have come under siege in a way rarely experienced in the post war era. In the UK, we saw this both in the attacks on the high court judges over the Article 50 ruling and in the hounding of Sir Ivan Rogers, the UK's top EU diplomat who was forced to resign his post.

This dynamic is more pronounced in America, where Trump and his closest allies are waging war against elements of the state in order to force through their programme. This was seen most dramatically when a federal judge overturned the Muslim travel ban. When Trump launched a viscous attack on the judge involved, his new Supreme Court appointee, Neil Gorsuch, distanced himself from the president.

The exposure of these fault lines at the very top of our social order is a sign of how deep the structural crisis is but also of the radical right trying to exploit the situation to take charge. This is by no means a simple task and they face sparking a backlash from within those elements of the ruling class which have no interest in being sidelined. The resignation of Michael Flynn is part of an ongoing crisis for the president, but it was precipitated by the intelligence service deliberately leaking information to undermine Flynn and Trump.

Tensions will continue to rise between Trump's administration and elements of the ruling class. But while this will exacerbate conflict between the President and Republicans in Washington, there is also a requirement for both parties to stay tied to one another in order to stop the party being plunged into greater crisis. Without a sustained response from below, there is no guarantee that Trump will fall of his own accord.

This whole situation was put quite succinctly by an official from the Bush administration, Stephen Myrow, speaking about the chaos surrounding the resignation of Michael Flynn:

Short of Putin being seen as having a remote control to control Trump, the Russia thing in and of itself is not what leads to an ultimate breakdown between congressional Republicans and the White House. There would have to be a lot of other contributing factors.

Most Republicans on the Hill have already assumed he's one step away from blowing himself up and have kept him at political arms' length.

But to the extent that the economy is still chugging along, and to the extent it serves their interests to be on the same page going in to the 2018 midterm elections, they're going to try to preserve a level of comity.⁹

⁸<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/30/justice-department-trump-immigration-acting-attorney-general-sally-yates> See also <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/323544-obama-appointed-us-attorney-fired-by-trump-after-refusing-to>

With this level of turmoil at the top, where the established norms of capitalist democracy are not being followed, there is clearly potential for resistance to have an effect either side of the Atlantic. However, there is also a risk that the most forceful and reactionary elements can seize greater amounts of control and terrorise their opponents.

It is this latter dynamic which has helped racism become a much more hardcore and dangerous force in Trump's administration. Trump has deliberately ratcheted up attacks on Muslims as a way of accelerating racism and reaction in general. The debate about to what degree this is fascism can mask what we can all agree on: that we are witnessing a rapid acceleration of reaction and racism in the office of US President that can lead to a much more dangerous fascist force.

May's approach is qualitatively different but not wholly unrelated. In her party's shameful dropping of any further commitment to house unaccompanied child refugees, and their refusal to guarantee the rights of EU citizen's post-Brexit, she is aping a part of Trump's agenda.

Greater levels of anti-immigrationism and islamophobic racism – although not new – will be a growing feature of the right's response to the crisis. This opens the space for fascist forces to emerge. It can obviously lead to a very dangerous place and must be fought.

The threat to ordinary people from global Trumpism is clear, but we shouldn't ignore the risks it is subject to. Trump's conflicts with the US ruling class have created chaos for his administration, but this has also come about as a direct result of determined and united opposition from below, (more on that later). The deeper the crisis becomes for his administration, the more politically toxic May's 'special relationship' gets. At the same time, her approach to Brexit has created immense difficulties at home. The dangers cannot be ignored. But in order to fight them, we must see our rulers' weaknesses too.

The Liberal Centre

In many ways, Trump and May both exist as a result of the crisis affecting the pro-capitalist, liberal centre. It is due to the utter failure of our system to deliver for ordinary people that the representatives of this order, Hillary Clinton and the Remain campaign, lost their respective plebiscites.

Despite this, some are now looking to the liberal centre to fend off the threat from the radical right.

Trump has shocked the world and made much of it rise up in revolt against him. The sight of Theresa May holding hands with him has heightened that tendency in Britain. The European Union is seen in this context as some kind of refuge. Angela Merkel has even been described as the new leader of the free world in this context.

Tied to this is Theresa May's determination to push for a 'hard Brexit' out of the single market and, it follows, into the arms of America. In this situation, the argument goes, the Tories would be free to assault employment rights and other protections as well as attack immigrants.

⁹ <https://www.ft.com/content/485046b8-f3a5-11e6-8758-6876151821a6>

This threat is real, but the general sense of panic around May's approach has often caused opposition to her government to focus primarily on the single market and the EU as defence mechanisms. Often, this has happened at the expense of the issues actually at stake such as worker and migrant rights. In other words, fighting to keep membership of the single market has sometimes been seen as the primary way in which to defend working class interests and fight racism, even if it means conceding ground on those issues.

For some, this stems from the idea that the EU single market, and the EU in general, acts as a kind of break on the worst excesses of the Tories.

Without the single market, we're told, we will be left with hardly any protections whatsoever. Also, because the EU single market involves a certain degree of free movement between member states, membership is seen as a guarantor of protecting this right and stemming the nationalist, anti-immigrant tide.

The left leader of Plaid Cymru Leanne Wood, a consistently strong voice on immigration, launched a petition demanding that Wales stay in the single market. But in the petition text, nothing was mentioned at all about defending freedom of movement or opposing May's racist scapegoating, declaring instead that 'Leaving the Single Market would undoubtedly have disastrous consequences for Welsh workers and Welsh businesses.'¹⁰

This position was reinforced when Wood joined the Welsh First Minister Carwyn Jones in launching a campaign to keep Wales in the single market. This time however, instead of failing to mention immigration, the pair conceded ground to the right by outlining plans that would only allow EU workers who already had a job to enter Wales, propagating the myth that lots of migrants are simply here to 'sponge' off the benefits system.¹¹

This pattern is seen to varying degrees amongst Pro-EU lefts and liberals across the board. The principle of defending the rights of migrant workers is quickly sacrificed in order to save membership of the single market, as if this in itself can protect us from the very worst policies of the right. Clive Lewis, the ex shadow cabinet member, launched a stinging attack on migrants in November only to be portrayed as some progressive saviour when he voted against the triggering of Article 50.¹²

The problem with tying an anti-racist defence of migrants to the EU is that you are often forced to sacrifice your principles in order to save an institution that is no friend of migrants or refugees. It becomes a political dead end.

On the Sunday before the final parliamentary vote on the Brexit Bill, a group of backbench Labour MPs including Chukka Umuna sent an open letter into the Observer saying that single market access should be retained even if it meant ending freedom of movement. 'Britain is Europe's second largest economy, its most significant military power,' they wrote. 'It should

¹⁰

http://www2.partyof.wales/smpetition?utm_campaign=singlemarketpet&utm_medium=email&utm_source=plaid2016

¹¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-38695528>

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/nov/15/clive-lewis-labour-eu-free-movement-corbyn>

not be beyond us to conclude a deal that retains our single market membership while reforming the immigration system.’¹³

The challenge of defending freedom of movement and migrant rights is tied to the issues of racism and xenophobia in general. All too often, the figures and institutions of the liberal centre increase racism by scapegoating Muslims or migrants from Eastern Europe (witness the Dutch premier’s attack on Turks on the eve of his re-election).¹⁴ The threat we face stems from this racism and is deep rooted within our society. So, the battle to retain and extend freedom of movement cannot be met by relying on the EU or the single market. It is weakened by the racism endemic in those institutions and must be fought for on an independent and anti-racist basis. The flag we must rally around should be defending and extending freedom of movement, not the stars of the EU.

Let us not forget either the regular horror of Europe’s relationship with refugees fleeing war and terror that sees scores of people drowned in the sea or forced back through a myriad of repressive measures.

It would be wrong to say that this was down to the single market alone, but not so wrong as to say that as an integral EU body, it could wash its hands of the situation. The issue is not whether or not leaving the single market or the EU will immediately improve the situation, but rather that in order to develop the political current that demands, clearly and loudly, ‘let them in’, we cannot honestly point to the EU and its institutions as being compatible with such a phrase, even though such a movement will comprise heavily of Pro-EU lefts and liberals. One of the most popular slogans on the anti-trump demonstrations has been ‘Refugees are welcome here’, we shouldn’t seek to limit the scope of that chant into the confines of the EU’s refugee policy. It would surely be better to develop it independently.

We also have to recognise that a crisis within the EU weakens its overall political authority, something it depends upon to enforce its external borders. In their battle to be let in, we should recognise the capacity of refugees to organise and exploit the weaknesses within the institution that is brutally keeping them out.

It is also not good enough to tell people that the EU and the single market protect jobs and living standards. The free market capitalism which is intrinsic to the single market has caused the opposite: the loss of decent jobs and wages for scores of working people across the EU. When factories closed following the financial crisis of 2008 (as companies moved operations abroad), workers saw good jobs disappear and never replaced. The argument given was often underpinned by same logic: this is just the way of the market. National government – backed by the rules of the EU single market – claimed they were powerless to intervene.

The result of this has not just been a decline in relatively decent jobs, but the assisted decimation of entire areas. A lot of the damage had already been done prior to 2008, but that’s not really the point. For the left to say in these situations that the ethos of the single market is good for jobs and good for workers would sound totally false. It is very similar to the argument of the official Remain campaign and in the areas most heavily affected by the changing winds of the market; it went down like a lead balloon.

¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/mar/11/arguments-against-single-market-membership-illustrate-a-lack-of-ambition>

¹⁴ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/01/23/dutch-prime-minister-warns-migrants-normal-gone-fends-populist/>

It is also an argument that does nothing but accept the logic that these communities have been confronted with for decades: that there is nothing that can be done to halt the decline and it is simply the way of the world. It's therefore no argument that anyone on the left can make. When the free market model has failed so dramatically, we have to be the ones demanding a radically better arrangement for working people, not be the ones trying to resuscitate the corpse so it can inflict even more damage. Instead, there is an enormous opportunity to argue for a radical left wing break with the neoliberal EU.

Finally, and briefly, there is the question of the environment, which again is often talked about as being doomed outside of the EU and the single market. Certainly, under May the environment wouldn't fare any better, but to counter this with saying that our only other option is to stick with the current set-up isn't nearly bold enough for what our rapidly deteriorating planet demands.

In an article titled 'The Hills Are Dead', the environmentalist George Monbiot details the terrible effect that just one area of EU policy, farming subsidy, has had on our environment. 'Destruction is not an accidental outcome of the subsidy regime; it is a contractual requirement,' he says, explaining how EU rules are a 'perverse incentive for habitat destruction.' In the end, he concludes that 'All the good things the EU has done for nature are more than counteracted by this bureaucratic perversity'.¹⁵

Now this may not be down to the single market per se, but the general argument that the EU and its institutions are necessary to fight environmental destruction is wrong. The task that faces us with the environment cannot be overstated but both May and the EU are barriers in this regard.

The awkward truth

As well as misleading people, the problem in reacting to May's 'hard Brexit' by rushing to defend EU institutions, is that we risk falling into a trap. May's strategy is divisive but potentially effective. It essentially demands that we either support her chauvinist agenda which presents a break from the past, or get behind the leaders of the European Union and, it follows, the status quo. This trap was set by May for Corbyn over Article 50. By not blocking Article 50, Corbyn avoided the trap and was able to focus more on the Labour amendments. If he had walked into it by joining forces with Tim Farron etc., Corbyn would have accepted May's false line of division and been politically much weaker to intervene in the political direction of Brexit over the next two years, essentially having cast himself out of the process from the beginning.

The first part of opposing May has to be a rejection of her binary choice outright. If we accept the idea that people will fall into one of these two camps then we risk driving millions of people further towards the Prime Minister and her disastrous programme.

This isn't because May is better than the EU (she is not) and if the choice was one or the other, most on the left would choose the EU. But if we essentially confine our choice and ultimately fall in behind the EU, we will sink in the current climate.

¹⁵ <http://www.monbiot.com/>

But we also can go further than simply critiquing the EU and say that the European ruling class of Angela Merkel, Donald Tusk, Mark Rutte, Guy Verhofstadt and Jean-Claude Juncker etc, are not worker's friends at all. The opposite in fact is true and we see it playing out now: they want to punish working class people in Britain for voting to leave and doing damage to the EU. You can see this in all the talk of making life difficult outside of the EU with trade barriers etc., regardless of the consequences it might have on the majority of ordinary people.¹⁶

It goes without saying that they are not talking about punishing Britain post-Brexit in order to tackle racism or to stand up for supposedly 'European' egalitarian values. Their motivations come from their desire to defend a capitalist institution that serves them very well whilst leaving the vast majority of people worse off. If working class people have to suffer in the cause of defending the EU – be they in Britain, Greece, Italy, Spain etc. – then it makes no difference to Angela Merkel and co. The circumstances under which economic punishment was unleashed onto workers on the southern continent may be different, but the impulses of the ones doing the punishing are very much the same. We have to reject the terms under which the EU wants to conduct Brexit. Just because they are coming into conflict with our own government, doesn't mean they're our friends.

Like the ruling class of the EU, May's government is also seeking to make working class people pay for any economic costs resulting from Brexit. This commonality between the aims of different capitalist elites is not new. Just as May's predecessors David Cameron and George Osborne sought to make ordinary people in Britain pay for the financial crisis of 2008, they did so in allegiance with the European ruling class who were determined to see Greeks carry the heavy burden of the Eurozone crisis.

The direction of May's administration is of course different to Cameron's as she tries to chart a new course for British capitalism outside the EU. This will see her compete more aggressively with the ruling class of Europe in a new phase of global politics defined by an era of crisis, but both will look to pass the costs of the crisis onto ordinary people.

Responding to this situation means a rejection of this logic in the clearest terms, i.e. 'we won't pay for the crisis of the ruling class'. This means rejecting the version of capitalism offered by May and Trump and that which is presented by the EU.

This isn't to say both versions are the same, or that Trump does not represent a terrifying shift into further reaction. It says that to answer Trump with a rallying call to defend the EU is no answer at all. The government of the pro-EU Francois Hollande, to take one example, saw Muslim women assaulted by police on a beach in broad daylight last year. Pointing to this as a response to Trump's ban on Muslims entering the US is totally inadequate.

Instead, we must be able to fight for a vision of society that is independent of both these versions of capitalism whilst also fighting back the rising tide of racism.

A Socialist Response

¹⁶ <http://www.independent.ie/business/brexit/uk-warned-it-cannot-have-its-cake-and-eat-it-over-leaving-the-eu-35379465.html>

We face enormous and immediate challenges. There are many but among the most pressing is the threat from fascists and the racist right, and fighting back against decades of neoliberal assault on ordinary people.

At the same time, the potential for a serious escalation of military conflict in our dangerous world is never far away and climate change represents a rapidly growing existential threat.

All of these are linked, but they require separate as well as joined up responses.

The racist right

To face down the threat from the fascists and the far right we must assemble the broadest possible coalition of social forces on an anti racist basis. This will involve working with people from a wide political spectrum, even those in the ‘extreme centre’ who tried to destroy Corbyn and the left during the summer coup (and who wish to do the same thing again). We should not drop our criticism of such people, but we must now argue for a meaningful unity with them for the specific task of fighting back the fascists.

We have already seen this process take place in the movement against Donald Trump.

The situation is at its sharpest in America of course. When the new president imposed a racist travel ban on all citizens from seven majority Muslim countries, and an indefinite ban on Syrian refugees, a huge wave of united protest and opposition followed. This eventually resulted in the plan being shelved. On March 8th, International Women’s day, a women’s strike took place across America and the world. Its politics were notably socialist, militant and internationalist. Writing before the strike, the organisers laid out their position:

Lean-in feminism and other variants of corporate feminism have failed the overwhelming majority of us, who do not have access to individual self-promotion and advancement and whose conditions of life can be improved only through policies that defend social reproduction, secure reproductive justice and guarantee labor rights. As we see it, the new wave of women’s mobilization must address *all* these concerns in a frontal way. It must be a feminism for the 99%.¹⁷

The women’s strike also received write ups in *The Washington Post*, *CNN*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue*. This gets across how broad the resistance to Trump can be.

In Britain, Theresa May’s invitation for Trump to attend a state visit, moments before he introduced the travel ban, sparked an enormous backlash. Just a few days after the PM’s trip, the call to withdraw the invitation reached a level of national exposure rarely witnessed for such a demand.

On the Sunday morning following May’s visit and with outrage mounting, Jeremy Corbyn said the visit should be pulled. The next day, hundreds of thousands took part in spontaneous demonstrations across the UK (a clear and rapid advancement from the anti-Trump women’s marches that had taken place a week earlier). The online petition calling for the visit to be cancelled rapidly amassed nearly two million signatures and was headline news.

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/06/women-strike-trump-resistance-power>

The London Mayor, Sadiq Khan, joined calls for the visit to be pulled. Even at the top levels of respectable bourgeois society, there are now rumblings about Trump. John Bercow, the Tory commons speaker, said he would not allow Trump to speak in parliament on account of his racism and sexism. Even some local councils, such as Gateshead, are declaring their cities 'no Trump zones'.

The government is clearly getting nervous and now plans to hold a scaled down state visit to avoid huge protests. But when they mooted Birmingham as a possible location for Trump to attend (apparently on account of it having voted to leave the EU), the local MP Liam Byrne immediately launched a petition against the plans. It is important to see this timeline for what it is: a demand levelled by a mass movement and a figure of the left that finds purchase amongst a much wider layer of society.

The size of opposition being directed towards a new US president and Britain's relationship with them is remarkable. This opposition doesn't always go so far as to call for the state visit to be cancelled, but it does increase May's isolation and lead to a general 'anti-Trump' sentiment that feeds into the movement against the state visit.

When the state visit does go ahead we could see a demonstration akin to the huge anti-Bush demonstration that took place at the height of the anti-Iraq war movement. This is unity in action; where the widest possible layer of people come together around a single demand and action that both intensifies the pressure on its enemies and propels the movement forward.

Within this large group of people mobilised against Trump however, there will be divisions both over the general political outlook and over what the movement should do next. This is to be expected, as any mass movement will be full of the competing ideas in society more generally. Our first task is to keep this fighting unity together and argue against people who try to split the movement. This involves encouraging the largest number of people to join the movement and meet its demands regardless of the political tradition they are coming from. Initially, there is only one criterion to join: do you want to resist Trumpism?

Laying the basis for maximum unity like this is essential in order to face down our enemies. It is through the mass coordinated actions against Trump's travel ban that his administration started to feel the heat. And it will be via a continuation of this unity that the movement will be able to exploit the huge tensions now on display within the US administration which have spilled over to the U.K.

Equally, the size and political direction of anti-Trumpism in this country will be a determining factor in how successful we are in tackling racism in Britain. The demonstrations we've seen have been anti-racist and pro-refugee. The growth of these combined with constant appeals for unity can shift the ideological terrain in our favour. We can win the argument over immigration and refugees with huge numbers of people via this anti-racist movement which also spilled into the demonstrations on UN anti racism day.

Here we see the real potential in what has happened at the beginning of 2017. Of course, the protests directed against Trump in Britain have died down, but their capacity to shoot back up exists as long as he is in the White House and the thirst for anti racist activity is striking. But the threat we face does not only come from Trump, even if it has been the US president who has sparked the enormous backlash. Islamophobic racism especially is also visible in sections of the ruling class who are ostensibly 'anti-Trump'. Take, for example, the ratcheting up of

racism by pro EU leaders in Germany, Holland and France ahead of national elections. Resistance to the racism embodied by Trump must be translated into fighting other forms of racism, too.

Having a clear analysis of both Trump and the EU is important at this stage. The movement will come under pressure and differences will emerge. There will be those who want to take opposition to Trump in a distinctly pro-EU and/or anti-Russian direction, something that reflects the wider belief that the EU is a central bulwark against Trump and Putin. Such moves must be resisted because it not only involves blindness to EU racism, but threatens the necessary unity to tackle racism.

If the movement was taken in this direction it would encourage its members to articulate opposition to Trump (and his supporters in Britain) around a Leave / Remain split. This is of course the line of division preferred by the Trumps in this country, because they understand that it would benefit them if anti-Trumpism and anti racism becomes synonymous with being pro-EU or worse, 'anti-Brexit'.

To go down this route would seriously weaken the movement. After all, polling shows an overwhelming majority of the UK population has an unfavourable view of Trump. We should be aiming to pull that majority around us and generalise it to resist racism in general, something that becomes much harder if the dividing line over the referendum becomes the basis for joining the movement. It is also the case that anti-Trump sentiment touches on a number of issues which provides the basis for a much broader offensive than can be offered by whether or not you voted in favour of the EU.

Of course, the movement will be full of those who did back Remain and who do identify with the EU. But crucially, there is little evidence to show that such people are spontaneously turning up to demonstrations with EU flags or focussing solely on Brexit. Instead, they are concentrating on the racism and sexism (among other things) that define Trump and the Tories. In other words, people understand that the situation is more complicated than simply declaring that Brexit equals Trump. We must argue against any manufactured attempt to funnel anti-Trumpism in Britain into a pro-EU movement that on one hand excludes millions of people who don't want to go in this direction, but which also curtails the political radicalism of the movement into liberal EU reformism.

It is only possible to effectively argue against this tendency, however, if we first have a clear understanding of the EU and why it cannot be looked to as an institution that protects us from the right. Without this, we can quickly find ourselves being led by those forces that represent the failed liberal centre and the neoliberal EU.

Resisting attempts to turn anti-Trumpism in Britain into a movement against Brexit is also important if we are to tackle the other immediate challenges: austerity, the attack on the NHS, wage suppression, housing and a whole range of economic and social issues associated with decades of capitalist assault referred to as neoliberalism.

Much of the rhetoric used by the racist right focuses on these issues within a racial framework in an attempt to build support amongst a section of the working class who are rightly frustrated. For reactionary forces to be successful they need to build support in this group and we should take that threat seriously.

Neoliberal failure

If we are to stop the right from growing, we not only have to resist them directly, we also have to take away their potential to recruit. But more than that, we have to try and utilise the anger that exists amongst a section of the working class to overthrow our rotten system. In this sense, we are in a time of great threat but also one of opportunity.

In order to put that opportunity to the test however, we must be able to offer a break from the system that has failed people so miserably. The right are attempting to seize the agenda and make out that they are the ones most serious about change, albeit through a nationalist framework predicated on anti-immigrationism and racism. If we are to stop them from recruiting people to their nightmare vision, we must be able to offer a credible alternative both to the status quo and the right.

This means first and foremost making working class unity a central part of fighting back. This might sound simple but it involves practically overcoming the class divides that were exposed during the EU referendum, particularly over the question of immigration. We must not only tackle racist ideas about immigration, however, but also resist the false line of division between Leave and Remain. Fostering a class commonality that overcomes these problems whilst also fighting for a break with the system can take on the right.

In the work that has been done since the referendum, and including some of my own work, there has been evidence of strong class antagonisms among a very decisive section of the Leave vote that is sometimes, although not always, mixed in with reactionary ideas around immigration.¹⁸

It is often the case that immigration is used as a way in which to express genuine concerns over issues such as jobs or housing. Usually, only the people who are driven primarily by racism show consistent opposition to immigration.

For a lot of people who speak against immigration however, while they can express a feeling that immigrants are taking resources from on the one hand, there is also an understanding of the fact that migrants help run essential services such as the NHS on the other. It is the latter element of this contradiction that can be used to achieve a sense of commonality in struggle. I.e it is in all our interests to save the NHS but to do that we must fight together.

Here also lies the basis upon which reactionary ideas can be taken on. We cannot do this however if we make out that the current economic arrangement is good, or dismiss concerns over jobs, wages, housing and services. Instead, we should be the ones demanding the most radical degree of change and rupture from the pro-capitalist consensus whilst also not conceding any ground over immigration. On top of this, we should provide a mechanism by which people can effectively fight over these issues. To take health as an example again, the 250,000 strong march for the NHS in London showed a way to do this.

In the summer of 2016, shortly after the referendum, this process of building class unity was also tested during Jeremy Corbyn's second leadership contest. Throughout the summer,

¹⁸ https://medium.com/@sebcooke55/class-and-immigration-an-interview-with-leave-voter-deeee68499d0?source=user_profile-----7-----

Corbyn held large rallies across towns and cities in the UK as part of his leadership campaign. Some of these places hadn't seen political activity of this kind in years. One of these rallies was held in Merthyr Tydfil, a town in South Wales which voted heavily to leave the EU. Corbyn managed to pull in a crowd of nearly one thousand on a Friday lunchtime and instead of focussing on the divisions of the vote, he sought to unify people against the Tories. Speaking at the rally to huge applause was Shavanah Taj, the Wales secretary of PCS union whose members had just held a successful strike in museums across Wales. Here we saw a glimpse of how a left-wing movement that offers a real and credible alternative can go down.

It has now been put out there that the rallies we saw with Corbyn over the summer could be repeated by in the coming months. Speaking as they were announced, one of the organisers explained the thinking behind them:

Instead of letting our vote define us and divide us, we have to recognise the large amount of common ground the majority of people in this country share – worries about housing, pay and the loss of community, aspirations for a future better than that of our parents, the sense that our lives are always at the whim of somebody else. The Brexit negotiations mean a radically altered future for Britain, they mean a time of instability and change. Now is when the future will be born, now is the moment we must fight for something better.¹⁹

These events have the potential to be big and provide a real chance for the left to organise and agitate in these areas. The politics will be contested to an extent but instead of standing back, we should be seeking to influence and use them as an opportunity to build a level of organisation where possible.

But we can't wait for Corbyn and co. to come to all of these places or rely on the local Labour Party to deliver. And equally, we should not be confining activity of this nature to places that voted to leave. If we are arguing for class unity then we should be looking to agitate everywhere we can over the NHS, housing, benefit cuts, lack of jobs, low pay etc whilst also taking on racism and anti-immigrationism in the clearest terms. Here too, it is worth mentioning the One Million Climate Jobs campaign as a way of both tackling economic issues and climate change.

There has been a tendency to do down the viability of the radical left in the current period, done mainly through continuous attacks on Corbyn. But we should be clear that the fostering resentment in large parts of our society as a result of endless attacks can be turned against the government by an organised left force. It cannot be done, however, if we simply offer an improved version of the current set up. We must be the ones prepared to tear the head off the system.

Conclusion

We are in a time of huge upheaval. The dominant political consensus is suffering a crisis of legitimacy of a kind not seen in the post-45 world order. In this situation, where the liberal capitalist orthodoxy appears weaker than before, an ideological and political space has opened for something else to emerge. The right are trying to fill that space by promising a

¹⁹ <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/jeremy-corbyn-supporters-reveal-take-9817744>

break from past failure but one predicated on racism and reaction. But there is also the space for socialists to offer genuine radical change that can transform society and people's lives. Far from being an abstract claim, it is rooted in the struggles required and made possible by the situation we are in. We must fight to bring these struggles together, across borders and over the false divisions which are built by our rulers.

But this necessity to bring together different struggles is also recognition of the interconnectedness of the capitalist crisis.

In Britain, a mass mobilisation over Trump's state visit will come at a moment when there are so many other fronts where the ruling class is in trouble. The crisis in the NHS is at its worst since its creation, the pain from years of Osborne's austerity has caused bitterness and anger, education is under attack and the unprecedented levels of wage suppression will only intensify. On all these fronts, we have witnessed varying degrees of resistance in the last year, notably the junior doctor's strikes, action over Southern Rail and the recent high votes for industrial action on pay.

The ruling class are finding it increasingly difficult to keep a lid on the crisis. Serious divisions are emerging within their own ranks and they are all too aware of the potential for meaningful resistance to exploit those tensions. The emphatic victory of Jeremy Corbyn in Britain and Bernie Sander's campaign in America terrified our leaders not because of the individuals involved, but because they showed the possibility for a united movement of the radical left to suddenly take off.

It's our job to do as much as we can to build on these moments through the coming struggles. As well as developing resistance to Trump, this situation also requires us to demand a much different economic and social arrangement that benefits working class people as a whole. This means saying that governments should be free to take industries into public control for the social good, that the free market should not be allowed to tear through people's lives and leave them insecure, poor and jobless, that refugees should not be left to drown on the shores of Europe, that western military intervention must stop and that we need a million climate jobs to tackle climate change now.

Yes, all of these ambitions are totally unrealistic within our economic and social framework. But that framework itself is living in a fantasy version of the world, where it ignores the consequences of the misery and failure it has created. It has made the toxic conditions where reactionary forces can develop. Its legitimacy is at an all time low, its adherents are in trouble and now it makes such sense to demand something radically different.

But we also must go further than demands to radically reform the system, important as they are. We have to argue that in order to live in world that is free from the horrors of our times, we have get rid of the capitalist system altogether and replace it with a truly democratic version of society.

The times we are in call for such a response.