

Workers' Liberty

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Should socialists try to save the pound?

THOSE who complain that Britain scrapping the pound and joining the euro would mark a fundamental “surrender” of British sovereignty, are correct. It would. The single currency is a giant step in the direction of European unity. Europe has already achieved an large though uneven and incomplete level of economic integration and unity, irreversible except in economic and social catastrophe. “Europe” already determines much of what happens within the member states of the European Union. *The question is not whether there will be a united Europe, but, what sort of European unity?*

The creation of a properly democratic European state would be a great step forward, even under capitalism. But the development of Europe-wide democratic institutions lags far behind the development of European economic unity.

The European Parliament has very limited powers. Europe is governed by haggling in the Council of Ministers.

Europe today is what it is because its unification is historically belated and because it is being united by the bourgeoisie and not by the working class. During the decades in which the European bourgeoisie has been integrating Europe to the point where a European state is the next logical step, opposition to European unity, “under capitalism”, has been one of the pillars of much of the left.

Yet as early as the beginning of the 20th century Europe needed unity because the existing big nation states were too small for the enormous economic dynamic which had developed within the borders of the bigger ones.

Most of the big and little early 19th century German states had been drawn together inside a customs union (17 states

Marxism 2003 • the fringe

Iraq: workers' solidarity or just “anti-imperialism”?

Speakers: Clive Bradley (Workers' Liberty) and Nadia Mahmood (Worker-communist Party of Iraq)

7.30pm Tuesday 8 July, at the Exmouth Arms, Starcross Street, near Euston.

in all), the Zollverein, from 1834. The basis was thereby laid over decades for the unification of most of Germany, under Prussian predominance, in 1871. After 1945, prodded by the US and afraid of the antagonistic USSR, the bourgeoisie of Western Europe resolved on a “Zollverein” strategy for uniting Western

Europe. Work to create a common market — and eventually the rest would follow. And so it is following, slowly, unevenly.

Half-united Europe is run by a bureaucracy responsive to the needs of the bourgeoisie. It is a great cartel, confronting the underdeveloped countries as

a predator and confronting migrant workers from outside its walls as “Fortress Europe”. Many things about it outrage the spirit even of serious liberal democracy, not to speak of the spirit of international socialism. It is stamped in the image of the bourgeoisie which has achieved it. The fact that the European working class, which would have unified Europe and created a fully-democratic Socialist United States of Europe, was defeated in the decades before World War Two determined that.

There is a great deal to object to in this quasi-united bourgeois Europe. But it is where we are. What policy will best serve working class interests within this EU of the bourgeoisie?

There are two basic lines of possible policy. One is to build on what the bourgeoisie has built; to unite the working class across the EU to fight the bourgeoisie for democratic and social reforms; by doing that, to build towards working-class revolution on a European scale. That means:

- Fight to democratise the EU by way of scrapping existing bureaucratic structures and replacing them with a sovereign elected European Parliament;
- Fight to level up working class living standards, and for a plan to eliminate unemployment and social exclusion (cut the working week, expand public services);
- Fight to rebuild a European international socialist movement.

Such an approach does not commit socialists to support, or forbid us to oppose, any specific bourgeois measures. Support for European unity does not have to imply backing what the dominant capitalists and their servants do, or the way that they do it — for example the Maastricht Treaty. It does not commit us to vote yes in the referendum that the British bourgeoisie may hold on the question of a single currency. It does commit us to European unity and to opposing politically all those who advocate the break up of the European Union and the restoration of the old, long-bankrupt, European bourgeois national-state system. It does commit us to counterpose working class measures on a European scale to the bourgeois system. It does commit us to making our answer to the regime of the unelected European Central Bank one of cross-Europe workers’ unity, not of keeping the pound.

The alternative is to respond to the bourgeois character of the existing process of European unification by advocating regression to an outlived earlier stage of bourgeois rule — the era of com-

peting and sometimes warring European national states. It is to want to go back to a decades-past stage on the road and start again. It is not desirable; and it is not possible either. Despite its advocates’ sometime concern with working class self-defence, this is a reactionary policy. It is a break with the best traditions of the working class movement and of Marxism.

The unification of Europe was a policy of the working class left long before any sort of union became the policy of the ruling bourgeoisie.

Trotsky raised the call for a United States of Europe in the middle of the First World War. In 1923 the Communist International adopted the slogan for the Socialist United States of Europe.

Because of the successive series of defeats the working class movement suffered at the hands of fascism, Stalinism and plutocratic “democracy” we have not the Socialist United States of Europe advocated by revolutionary socialists, but the quasi-democratic bureaucratic European Union of the bourgeoisies. That is the way that history has answered the objective need to unite the European economy. Socialists now start from that. We cannot start from anywhere else!

Fundamentally the same issues arose at the start of the 20th century. Imperialism bestrode the world. Great trusts and cartels united with powerful states to fight other states and their industries for markets and colonies. In response, there arose a movement against these “unacceptable” manifestations of capitalist development.

Proposals were made to break up the giant industries, to unscramble and undo what the organic evolution of capitalism was doing. In America, such ideas were made law, and Standard Oil was broken into parts — most of which then developed into giant corporations... It was, even if desirable, simply not possible to roll the film of capitalist development backwards.

Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky and that whole generation of revolutionary Marxists mocked at the ideas of the “trust-busters” and denounced their programme as a petty-bourgeois utopian aspiration to “devolve” capitalism back to a stage it had long passed, never to return to.

Lenin saw the gigantism of capitalist organisation as a potentially progressive work of social integration and organisation: the answer to its exploitative and brutally capitalist character was for the working class to win political power, and by expropriating the bourgeoisie take over

the economy and put it under humane, rational working class control.

Historically the knitting-together of peoples and states is one of the great progressive works of capitalism. But, as with “globalisation” now, it proceeds universally, inhumanely, destructively — in short, in a bourgeois way.

To say, as some do, that because socialism is now possible, therefore capitalism is completely reactionary and must be opposed when it tries to unite Europe, is both foolish and sectarian. Who says? Who knows that? Who decides and how? Capitalism does not come to a dead end: for example, the microchip revolution over the last two decades is a tremendous capitalist-era addition to humankind’s power over nature and potentially over its own social affairs. These and other contemporary technological advances will be taken over by the working class, which develops and redevelops with and within capitalism and its constantly changing technologies. Capitalism develops and, in its own bourgeois way, continues to socialise production. It continues to create the material basis for socialism.

Though it will always remain itself, capitalism will go on developing until the working class, led by the socialist movement, overthrows it.

It is nonsense to sloganise: “No to Europe”, “No to Maastricht”, “No to the euro”, or whatever, and link such slogans with “Yes to the Socialist United States of Europe”. The road to the Socialist United States of Europe has to be the road of building European working-class unity, the road of class struggle, the road of fighting one’s own bourgeoisie and one’s own nationalism and chauvinism, in the spirit of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, who raised the cry in 1914: “The main enemy is at home.” Anybody who thinks that “Britain out of the euro” means the Socialist United States of Europe or can be part of the struggle for the Socialist United States of Europe is a fool or a liar, or both. The notion that these British nationalist ideas can play any positive role in rousing British workers against either the British or the European bourgeoisie has been shown by decades of bitter and shameful experience to be utter nonsense. The right, and the forces of working-class disunity, gain from such nationalism, not the left.