

GERMINAL

INTERNATIONAL BRANCH OF THE BRITISH LABOUR PARTY

October 2015



Brighton Conference
Refugee Crisis
TTIP

Conference: New Leadership takes first steps



Jeremy Corbyn and Tom Watson

Jeremy Corbyn had just been elected leader of the Labour party 10 days earlier so we had a very exciting conference this year indeed! His first speech as Leader was indeed a thrilling performance. The style was different, as expected. He made very strong statements on human rights and austerity and made a few good jokes about the media attention he had been receiving. On the EU he clearly stood up for a Social Europe and will not let Cameron take away worker's rights.

The main difference in the atmosphere at Conference was the number of new members, many of whom took the floor. This is really positive and there was a lot of energy and enthusiasm. There was also some tension and, unfortunately, some name-calling between 'Corbynistas' and 'arrogant Blairites', however after the main speech I would say there was a majority that thought Corbyn's speech hit the right notes.

For us, the 'Euro' crowd, the mood was settled. The leader had recently clearly announced that Labour would be campaigning to 'remain in Europe'. Alan Johnson, leading Labour's EU referendum campaign

and other pro-Europeans were very present at a lot of the fringe meeting discussions.

As Brussels Labour Vice-Chair, I gave our group a plug at the "Labour Movement for Europe rally for yes" on the Sunday afternoon at a packed Odeon cinema. This was alongside a whole host of very well-known politicians, including Hillary Benn, Chuka Umunna, Glenis Willmott, Alan Johnson, Emma Reynolds, Ruari Quinn and many more...

"Yes! the EU we want!" was the title of Labour International's first-ever fringe. Together with LME, speakers were Jan Royall, Richard Corbett, Jude Kirton-Darling, Griane Healy, Blair McDougall, Will Straw and Ania Skrzypek. The aim was to give LI members a louder voice within the party and it certainly fulfilled its objective.

Both debates were very encouraging and full of lessons, especially from the referendum campaigns in Ireland and Scotland. The 'I'm voting yes, ask me why' strategy of the Irish in the recent equal marriage referendum is something we can really learn from.

Brussels Labour had Esther Kelly as one of the four delegates representing Labour International CLP during conference. Labour International also held a Harry Schindler lecture where Roger Casale (former MP for Wimbledon and founder of New Europeans) spoke very fondly about our most active campaigner (93 and kicking !) on repealing the 15-year rule on voting rights.

All-in-all a very packed annual conference where Brussels Labour was able to participate in the important debates leading up to the EU referendum and get our message out there.

Charlotte Billingham

BRANCH MEETING // PETER NIEDERMULLER MEP

Hungarian Left calls on EU to take stand



The xenophobic policy of the Orbán government towards the refugee crisis was no surprise to Péter Niedermüller, because it was the culmination of a longstanding policy. First, at the time of the Charlie Hebdo attacks PM Orbán proclaimed there was a strong link between migrants and terrorists. Second, he launched a public questionnaire with the tendentious title, “Migration and Terrorism”, sending it to 8 million people. Third, he launched a billboard and media campaign against migrants. Throughout, the word “refugee” was never used and the images always avoided showing women and children.

Now the Hungarian Fidesz government has built a 175 km fence on the border between Hungary and Serbia, and who can say if it will be extended across Austria and Romania. The government has declared a state of emergency with wide police

powers. Asylum has been made practically impossible by using Hungarian only documents and expediting asylum procedures at the border – which are only ever negative.

It is indeed true that there is a refugee crisis as asylum applications have risen from 15,000 to 46,000 in recent months. But Hungary has refused to request EU help. Now Orbán is saying that people are dying because of Brussels. In fact he has some support in the European Parliament and the Council is divided. Instead we need an inclusive policy with burden sharing across Europe.

In the discussion, Péter emphasised that the Orbán government should not be confused with Hungarian society. There is a progressive, open part of Hungarian society and it needs support from other European progressives. However, traditionally Hungary has had a closed society. Today, it is a sad reality that many people, including the young, do not trust the Left. Half a million migrants have already left Hungary, often the most dynamic and talented. Instead the country is in the grip of populists, with Fidesz in competition with the far right Jobbik party.

The Hungarian progressives call on the EU to stand up to Orbán. Yet it is against EU values and law to turn back asylum seekers. The EPP in particular seems to be sheltering him and the European Parliament should do more.

Martin Dawson

BRITAIN & THE REFUGEE CRISIS // ANNELIESE DODDS MEP



Anneliese Dodds in Calais

Cameron has done too little too late

The current refugee crisis is the worst we have seen since the Second World War. Sadly, it has revealed many of the same impulses that rocked our continent back in the 1930s: nationalism, petty self-interest and xenophobia. Yet the crisis has also shown Europe at its best, whether it be the people of Munich providing toys to refugee children, or some of the huge rallies in support of refugees in Britain.

As conflict continues to rage in Syria, and repression continues in Libya and Eritrea, many thousands of people are still desperately trying to enter the EU and, to a lesser extent, the UK, with often desperate consequences. Indeed, just as I write this article it has emerged that yet another refugee has died at Calais; this time a 20-year old Eritrean, run over by a freight train and the fourth refugee to die at the Channel port in a fortnight.

It is a national disgrace that the UK government took so long to react to the refugee crisis. When I visited the Calais refugee camp in mid-August, more security was – finally- being put into place; yet the crisis had begun many months earlier. UK Ministers only began to talk to their French opposite numbers once the situation had spiralled totally out of control.

As Labour's lead on this issue in the European Parliament, Claude Moraes MEP, keeps underlining, the Conservative government is still failing to work with other countries to resolve the crisis. Just as they rejected the Italian leader Matteo Renzi's call to action at the start of the summer, so the Tories have

rejected this September's EU plan to help deal with the crisis in Italy, Greece and Hungary, preferring to go it alone.

Of course I support the UK government's spending on humanitarian aid in Syria. But helping some refugees in Syria, and taking a comparatively small number of the most vulnerable people from Syrian camps to the UK, does not absolve us of responsibility for the hundreds of thousands of refugees already in Europe. Conservative politician after Conservative politician has suggested that the UK is prioritising helping refugees rather than economic migrants, with the implication that the EU scheme does not differentiate between the two. This is wrong; as part of the EU scheme refugees would be assessed against the Geneva Convention. Worse, it shows how low the Conservatives will stoop to pander to Eurosceptic sentiment, by painting those refugees already in Europe as somehow 'scamming' the rest of us.

The compassion of the British people forced David Cameron to think again about his opposition to taking any more than a handful of refugees. I hope that it will force him to reconsider his little Englander approach to the European refugee scheme, too.

Anneliese Dodds MEP

REFUGEE CRISIS // BRUSSELS



What was going on in the Maximilien Park?

The images of the tent camp in the Maximilien Park shocked the inhabitants of Brussels. The situation was hard to grasp: how is it possible that Belgium is not able to provide decent shelter for its refugees? A few days ago the tent camp was removed. But tough questions remain. In this article I try to explain what has been happening in recent weeks and how the situation got out of hand.

What is the normal procedure? When a refugee arrives in Belgium, he or she can ask for asylum. The first step is to register at the Office of Foreign Affairs, which is situated in close proximity to the Maximilien Park. In Belgium asylum seekers don't get financial aid, but they are housed as long their asylum application is active. The housing is organized in open asylum centres. Once registered, the refugees are assigned to one of the refugee centres, located in Belgium and managed by Fedasil.

What went wrong? Just like the other EU Member States, Belgium is confronted with an increase in refugees. The federal government, and more precisely Theo Francken, Secretary of State for asylum and migration, have dealt with this humanitarian crisis in a deeply irresponsible way.

The Office of Foreign Affairs was ordered not to register more than 250 refugees a day. In practice an even lower number were helped. Registration was closed at weekends, but people kept arriving. As a consequence, an increasing number of refugees had to spend the night in front of the premises of the

Foreign Affairs Office. They soon moved to the nearby Maximilien Park. The refugee crisis has led to an enormous solidarity movement: many inhabitants brought goods and foodstuffs to the camp or helped out as volunteers in the park. Organisations such as the Samu Social, Doctors without Borders, the Red Cross and others provided care on the spot.

As for the federal government, it stayed silent and inactive for weeks. Under great pressure, they finally started to organise housing in the World Trade Centre building. In the beginning there were only beds, no showers or toilets. As a result, most refugees stayed in the camp. When sanitary facilities were finally installed, the families started to move over. The WTC building is now giving shelter to some 500 people. Then the camp was emptied. It had become a popular gathering place not only for recently arrived refugees, but also for homeless people or 'sans papiers' who have been in Belgium for a while. The tents that remain in the park aim to provide shelter to refugees that arrive in the middle of the night.

What's next? The 'who needs to do what' discussion is still going on. The City of Brussels has asked all cities and municipalities, including in Flanders and Wallonia, to take their responsibility and share the burden. Once more, solidarity is needed. The capital cannot deal with this alone, only by gathering our forces will we manage to offer all refugees a decent shelter during their asylum application.

Ans Persoons, Brussels Councillor

Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership // JUDE KIRTON-DARLING MEP

Global trade should serve people and planet



A demonstration against TTIP

It could unleash a cataclysm of biblical proportions or prove to be the best thing since the invention of sliced bread. TTIP - the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership - has spawned many vibrant and colourful arguments. One thing it is yet to produce is a balanced and sensible debate, and this is exactly the terms on which our Labour Party can best contribute.

The questions raised by TTIP are not whether we want to trade or not. It is about setting the parameters of trade and the balance between private interests and the public interest.

Globalisation has had a massive, paradoxical impact, lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty in some parts of the world while putting a strain on welfare states and wages in others. In my region, the North East, we praise the export-led industrial revival of Teesside and the thousands of jobs it has created. But we also lament the state of industrial relations and the gradual erosion of labour rights that unchecked global competition has led to.

Because shutting down borders can never be the right solution, we must think of ways to tame global trade to make it the servant rather than the master of the people and the planet. To do so we need new common rules and establishing common rules is precisely the point of trade treaties. The imbalances

of global trade long predate TTIP and ruling out an agreement with the US before it is even drafted can only be motivated by plain anti-Americanism.

Labour MEPs have therefore engaged fully in the TTIP debate. We have set out clearly what we want to see in the final agreement: reciprocal access for EU businesses, large and small, to the US markets; establishing a common social and labour floor; mutual recognition of technical standards where they are compatible; the full exclusion of all public services, regardless of how they are funded or organised. We have also exposed in detail what we reject: any kind of separate justice for foreign investors; any bypassing of democratic processes; any weakening of protective standards, whether in terms of food, health or safety at work. In making our principles known we set a basis for influencing the outcome of the negotiations, something that all other UK parties are not interested in achieving either because they have already signed a blank cheque (Conservatives, Lib-Dems) or rejected any deal outright (Greens, UKIP, SNP).

We have a crucial role to play in this process - but we must first understand what the play is about.

Jude Kirton-Darling MEP

OPINION // UK & EU

A progressive UK in a progressive EU



Germinal reprints here a letter sent by some comrades across Europe to The Guardian newspaper, in reply to an article by Owen Jones.

Dear Owen,

We strongly disagree with your article 'The left must now campaign for Britain to leave the UK' (Guardian 15 July).

The EU has brought peaceful cooperation to countries that have been enemies for centuries. It assured democracy and social progress for working people living under former right-wing dictatorships in southern Europe and former communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe.

The EU single market is a huge economic benefit. Manufacturing jobs in the UK depend on companies' access to that single market. Millions of British people have taken up the right to live in other EU countries whether to retire in sunnier climes, study in another language (with the hugely popular Erasmus programme) or to work. Important social rights, such as paid holidays, parental leave and equality legislation come from the EU. Why give up all that?

Because today's EU is dominated by conservative and right-wing Governments? The UK has exactly the same problem. You don't call for Labour-dominated regions like the North-East to declare independence because they could be more socialist on their own. So why should the UK leave the EU? With the recent Tory election victory the prospects for a more progressive society in the UK outside the EU is a delusion. Just like it was in the 1980s under Thatcher.

Indeed those celebrating the intense difficulties in Europe and hoping to see the end of European Union and all it has brought are the parties most opposed to social progress in Europe namely the extreme right wing in Europe and UKIP in UK. Calling for withdrawal

plays directly into their hands and reinforces their appalling social and political agenda.

Why not seize the opportunity to improve the lot of a continent of working people through European cooperation, institutions, law and policy rather than just aiming to ameliorate the condition of British people by implementing our own programme nationally?

In addition, there are a range of international issues which the British Government would be powerless to tackle on its own such as ending roaming charges; challenging market domination by companies such as Microsoft and Google; world trade rules; global climate negotiations; net neutrality; corporate reporting; conflict minerals; safe medicines, food and chemicals; regulating tobacco, banning the use of hormones in farming and banning the use of GMOs. It is only by being part of a globally important market of over 500 million citizens – with political institutions that set social and environmental rules – that Britain can influence these sorts of vital issues.

Just as we need to argue for an progressive alternative in the UK, so we need to make the case for a more progressive Europe and, as things get tough for citizens throughout Europe, why should British progressives turn their back on the common struggle.

Come on Owen, engage with progressives across the EU – don't retreat into your little English corner. Argue against Cameron's 'renegotiation' undermining workers' rights, not against the EU!

Peter Wragg, Nicola Bedlington, Simon Burton, Heather Clarke, Daphne Davies, David Earnshaw, Kate Holman, Greg Perry, Julian Scola, Ellen Townsend, Jo Wood

NOTICEBOARD

Diary

*Wednesday 18 November –
Brussels Labour Annual Pub
Quiz*

*Wednesday 9 December –
Brussels Labour Winter social*

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