

# Left- Horizons

## Euro-elections and the lessons learnt

Now that the dust has settled on the Euro-elections and Theresa May has less than a week left in office, it is time to take stock of where the Euro-elections have left us and the lessons we need to learn from the vote on May 23<sup>rd</sup>.

Across Europe, a significant feature has been a further growth of right-wing nationalist parties, notably an increased vote for The League in Italy, National Rally (formerly the National Front) in France and the Brexit Party in Britain, as well as even more right-wing parties like Vox in Spain. We have to put the responsibility for the growth of these right-wing 'populist' parties squarely where it belongs: with the leadership, past and present, of the traditional parties of the working class.

With the exception of Britain, where Brexit has complicated the picture immeasurably, the traditional workers' parties of Europe have miserably failed to answer the needs of the working class. Faced with an unprecedented period of austerity, including the longest post-war freeze or decline in living standards, the traditional 'socialist' and 'communist' parties have not put forward policies or programmes that would motivate youth or workers to vote for them. Many of these parties are even in coalitions with other parties and carrying out austerity policies and cuts in workers' living standards.

With the exception of Spain and Portugal, nowhere in any of the larger states of Europe did a 'socialist' or social-democratic party win more than a quarter of the popular vote. In France, the combined Socialist Party and Communist Party vote failed even to reach double figures; even adding Mélenchon's *France Insoumise*, brought the left's vote to only 16 per cent. In Germany, the once-mighty SPD continues to pay a heavy price for seven years in coalition with Angela Merkel's CDU, this time getting under 16 per cent, of the vote, its lowest figure for generations. Without a revolt from within the membership of these parties the future seems to offer only greater decay and decline. In Italy, where once the Communist Party was the strongest in Western Europe, there was no labour movement party at all, leaving aside the Democratic Party, which makes even Tony Blair's 'New Labour' look radical by comparison.

### Reaction in a democratic form

The collapse of the traditional workers' parties is directly linked to the rise in the votes for the Green Parties across large parts of northern Europe, including the UK. Their vote, giving them their largest-ever block in the new European parliament, is overwhelmingly a vote of younger people. But it is not only a reflection of the determination of youth to fight for a sustainable future from in terms of energy policy and looming climate change. It

is also a response to the complete absences of anything remotely radical on offer from the parties of the labour movement.

The rise of these nationalist right across the whole of Europe is a warning – and in the longer term a *threat* – to the labour movement. The populist right in Italy, Poland, Hungary, France and elsewhere (as also in Turkey, the USA) represents at this stage *reaction in a 'democratic' form*. We are not yet at the stage where the leaders of the trades unions and the labour movement are being systematically rounded up and incarcerated, as they were in the early weeks of Mussolini's fascist regime in Italy or the Nazi government in Germany. There have been no decisive defeats for the working class in any of these countries and the *electoral* gains of the right can yet be rolled back with a big swing in votes to the left or by big movements of workers and youth on the streets or in the workplace.

In the coming months and years there will be many movements to the left and to the right on the electoral plain as the big majority of the population – the working class – seek a way out of the *impasse* of capitalism. But even at this early stage we can see the outline of nascent fascist movements of the future: movements that would be promoted by business and the state to prepare for a decisive settling of accounts with the organised working class.

### Farage: snake-oil salesman and proto-fascist

It is no accident that Farage is given millions of pounds-worth of backing. He gets even more in terms of free publicity: he only has to sneeze and he has another interview on the BBC; he has more appearances on Question Time than any other politician. For all the 'folksy' mannerisms he cultivates as photo-opportunities, he is at great pains to hide his policies on every single issue that directly affects the lives of working people – wages, pensions, education, housing, the NHS, and so on. He hides them for a reason – because in all these areas he is far to the right of even the Tory Party. Farage is only the British equivalent of similar charlatans and snake-oil salesmen all over Europe – appearing to offer easy answers on the basis of ignorant nationalism, racism and xenophobia.

In Britain, the dominant feature of the euro-elections has been the collapse of the Tory vote and the sudden rise, from a standing start, of Farage's Brexit Party, although it has to be said that the vote for UKIP in the last election went almost entirely to this new party.

It is an indication of how we are living through unprecedented times that so many new historic precedents have been set. The Euro elections were the first time in history that the Liberal Party (in their new guise as Lib-Dems) beat both the Labour Party and the Tory

Party. It remains to be seen how well their vote is maintained in a more 'normal' general election scenario, given their record in coalition with the Tories between 2010 and 2015. Away from a Brexit 'protest' vote, we doubt very much that the Lib-Dems will be able to hold onto much more than half their vote, if that.

### **Tories face an existential crisis**

A more significant record broken is the miserably low level of support for the Tories. Their vote, below 9 per cent, was the lowest vote in the whole of their history, putting the final nail in Theresa May's political coffin. The Conservative Party faces an existential crisis that will not be simply resolved by a new leader. The overwhelming majority of the Tory party membership back Boris Johnson – and there would be an outcry if he wasn't one of the two final candidates on the ballot paper – but that is not true of their parliamentarians. Johnson, and other candidates seeking to out-do him on Brexit, might huff and puff about 'walking away' from the EU without a deal, but that is not something with which Labour MPs even most Tory MPs would agree.

It is not clear what would be the result of a no-deal Brexit, but those with detailed knowledge about the mechanism of imports and exports have warned for years about the dangers of having any kind of tariff or customs barriers across the Channel. Up to 12,000 lorries pass through Dover each day and many industries, including key sectors like cars, depend on hundreds of juggernauts delivering parts and accessories on a daily basis. Disruption of the Channel ports would mean lorry queues from Dover to the M25 and that doesn't take into account the problems of other sea links, air travel, financial dealing with Europe or the border between the Republic of Ireland and the North.

It is not an accident that all the main business organisations – the Confederation of British Industry, the Engineering Employers Federation, the Institute of Directors, the Federation of Small Businesses – oppose a no-deal Brexit and favour an agreement that leaves the UK as close as possible to membership, if not actual membership, of the customs union. Nevertheless, even if it seems completely illogical from the point of view of the best interests of British capitalism, it cannot be ruled out, given the impetus that there is already in the Tory Party, looking over its shoulders at the Brexit Party, that the UK might crash out of the EU without a deal at the end of October.

One thing that seems even less likely now after the Euro-elections is a general election. The Tories are desperately afraid that Farage is gearing up to put candidates forward in a general election and if that happens this side of a Brexit, the Tories face annihilation. As one correspondent in the *Financial Times* put it, "For Mr Johnson and the hard Brexit candidates for the Tory leadership, a second election is their Achilles heel. After the wipe-out of the European elections, no Tory MP would willingly submit to such a contest."

Ironically, despite Johnson's likely elevation to the premiership, the political balance in parliament is likely to have increased, not decreased the possibility of a second referendum, because, other than a no-deal Brexit and the other unpleasant scenario, a general election, the strategists of British capitalism can see no other way out. A second referendum would be a bitter, divisive and uncompromising political battle. As it was after the first in 2016, it

would signal a significant uptick in racist attacks, both verbal and physical. If the Euro-election was a 'proxy' for a second referendum, it should be noted, the Brexit Party and UKIP together won under 35 per cent of the vote but the anti-Brexit parties combined – Lib-Dems, Greens, SNP, Plaid Cymru and Change UK – won over 40 per cent. But even if there was another referendum and even if it produced a 'Remain' majority – and neither is a foregone conclusion – it would not remove the Brexit issue from the forefront of British politics, but only sharpen it.

### **Labour must take the result as a warning**

Theresa May's resignation, therefore, and the accession to office of Boris Johnson, solves nothing. If anything, it makes the crisis of the Tory Party and even deeper. British capitalism has driven itself into a *cul-de-sac* and changing the driver doesn't alter a thing.

The 32 per cent vote for the Brexit Party has decimated the Tory vote, but it is also a warning to the Labour Party. The Labour Party has clearly lost the votes of EU 'leavers' to the Brexit Party and EU 'remainers' to the Lib-Dems, SNP and Greens. Labour's rather feeble slogan of 'uniting the nation' cut no ice with many traditional Labour voters.

We should be wary of drawing broad conclusions from such a poor turn-out on what was a single-issue poll. At 37 per cent, the turn-out is around half what we might expect if there was a general election. But Labour's failure to motivate and inspire its natural supporters shows a serious weakness in the Party and in the leadership around Jeremy Corbyn. It is a warning. Even in Corbyn's own constituency of North Islington, Labour was out-pollled by the Lib-Dems. As we have argued, Brexit *per se* is not and has never been the key issue facing working class people. Even in those areas of the North and the Midlands which have voted to leave the EU and have now voted for the Brexit Party. The key issue is *austerity* and the drive to the bottom in wages, working conditions, living standards, pensions, welfare, housing, homelessness, education and the NHS. Despite its very popular radical programme, exemplified by the slogan 'For the Many not the Few', Labour failed to get across *a clear class message* in the Euro campaign and it will need to do so to make up the ground it has lost. Labour's electoral prospects have been hindered by the relentless undermining by the right-wing old-guard. But here again, the right-wing sabotage has only succeeded in so far as the Party leadership has allowed them to get away with it, instead of *vigorously defending* the radical policies and party democracy which members so fervently wish for.

We live in a period characterised by volatility and political swings unprecedented in generations. The one conclusion that we can definitely draw from the Euro-elections is that they are yet another indication that millions of people are developing political consciousness for the first time. Where in the past there were no discussions at all, at least now *everyone is talking politics*, even if it isn't the politics of the left. In that very limited sense the Euro-elections represent another huge stride forward. It is the responsibility and role of the labour movement to offer answers for working people; to participate in the discussions that are going on and to point to an alternative programme and way forward: to workers' unity, internationalism and socialist policies.

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