

The Second Julian Priestley Memorial Lecture

Brexit – what next for workers?

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Thanks to Joyce Quin, the European Movement, and former MEPs Fiona Hall, Stephen Hughes and Gordon Adam for kindly sponsoring this event along with Beth and the Northern TUC.

I'm sure we'd all like to give our thanks to Richard Corbett - newly re-elected and, as far as I'm concerned, well on the road to becoming a national treasure.

Richard was once voted one of the most influential Britons on EU policy, ahead of the then prime minister. Nowadays, sadly, not such a high bar to beat.

And thanks everyone for coming.

It's an honour to be asked to give this lecture in memory of Julian Priestley.

And what a time to be doing so.

As the Conservative Party sees Brexit claim its second Prime Ministerial casualty.

As Labour grapples with coming up with a bolder position on Brexit - as it must.

And as London prepares for a visit from President Trump. The 'stable genius' who is profoundly hostile to the best of everything that the European Union stands for.

No doubt he'll get a traditional cockney welcome.

As a country, we are also preparing to commemorate the 75th anniversary of D-Day and the liberation of Europe.

That should make us reflect on the origins of the European Union; the aftermath of the Second World War; and the cooperation that led to regulation of coal and steel: materials that were essential for the manufacture of weapons.

The Treaty of Paris was signed in 1951. In the words of one of the architects, to “make war not only unthinkable but materially impossible”.

The struggle between nationalism and internationalism is a long one, including on the Left. For me, if nothing else, it is the cause of peace that makes the case for internationalism unanswerable.

I want to talk about how the lessons of Julian’s beliefs can guide us through the Brexit mire.

And regardless of how – or if – we leave the EU, the new deal for working people we need.

But first, I want to pay tribute to Julian himself.

While I never knew him personally, I certainly knew *of* him.

By all accounts, he was a man of many talents.

An orator. An administrator. A political visionary.

And, last but not least, a leading authority on EastEnders.

Julian was a Labour member and activist for 50 years. A great ally of trade unions and working people. And someone who devoted his life to building a more democratic, more equal, more social Europe.

A Labour member for 50 years, he was so disillusioned with the 2016 Brexit referendum result that he promptly joined the Socialist Workers Party.

Albeit the one in Luxembourg.

Julian had a stellar career: Secretary-general of the European Parliament for 10 years, the highest-ranking EU civil servant.

But he had his feet firmly on the ground.

And he practiced what he preached.

At one point, Julian chaired the staff committee at the European Parliament.

When new working hours were imposed without consultation – he led staff out on strike.

It was that passionate commitment to justice that inspired Julian.

Not for him a Europe of diplomats, technocrats and bankers. His cause was a Europe fit for democrats, citizens and workers.

As secretary-general of the Socialist Group in the European Parliament, Julian was instrumental in ensuring social protections were at the heart of the EU's agenda.

Most memorably, by helping to hold up the legislation creating the Single Market until the Commission agreed to balance it with strong social rights.

As a result, the Single Market was built not just on the four freedoms - goods, services, capital and labour.

But on a common set of rules delivering decent minimum standards for workers, consumers and our environment.

It was thanks to Julian, and others like him, that these ideas shaped the policy, philosophy and practice of the EU.

Julian understood that only by giving ordinary people a stake in the EU, would we win popular support for the European ideal.

Times may have changed, but these principles guide us still.

And let's not beat around the bush, it is one hell of a Brexit mess.

The government is in meltdown, and the Tory Party civil war is going nuclear.

Last Friday, the prime minister announced her resignation.

Or June the 7th, to be precise – so Mrs May's invitation for the US President to visit can go ahead as planned.

As ever, Donald Trump wants to offer a helping hand. An offer I would advise any woman to treat with extreme caution

I don't know about you, but given the choice, I'd have taken the chance to kick that particular can down the road.

Especially given the self-styled don is likely to use his visit to anoint Boris and Farage as his blood brothers.

And, from big pharma to chlorinated chicken, give us many reasons why, from outside the single market, alternative trade deals don't look so good after all.

Meanwhile the Conservative Party leadership race has more runners and riders than the Grand National.

So far one has admitted to puffing an opium pipe in Iran. Another has admitted to drinking a cannabis lassi in India. And Boris has already admitted to taking cocaine in Oxford.

No wonder this contest feels psychedelic.

On top of that, our national destiny is ultimately in the hands of around 100,000 Conservative members who are older, whiter and somewhat more reactionary than the population as a whole.

Two-thirds of them want to leave the EU without a deal.

So we now face a no deal Brexit beauty parade. With contestants shuffling further and further to the right of the stage.

If the past three years has shown us anything, then it's the idea of a "cake and eat it" Brexit is fantasy.

That you can somehow leave the club, refuse to play by the rules – and yet still enjoy the same benefits.

But a no deal Brexit is equally a fantasy.

It would mean economic chaos; shortages and delays in fuel, food and medicines; and a plunging currency.

Not to mention demands for a second Scottish independence referendum. And a greater risk to peace in Ireland.

Emboldened by its showing in the European elections – and by a resurgent nationalist right across Europe – the Brexit Party is now framing the dynamics of that Tory leadership contest.

Deregulation, attacks on our rights, tax cuts for the rich – we know that some of the runners and riders to replace her see Britain's future as a Singapore off the coast of Europe.

A free-market free-for-all that would hit the poor and the vulnerable hardest.

And Nigel Farage revels in the publicity.

You could almost say he's milking it.

And what of the Labour Party, to which Julian gave so much?

While the Conservatives scored their worst ever result in the European elections, Labour barely fared better.

Polls show that, yes, Labour's vote was squeezed by the Brexit Party. But it was stop Brexit parties that did the major damage. And that should be a wake-up call.

I believe that Labour's attempt to find a compromise was honourable.

And that Labour is right that the real division in Britain is between the haves and have nots.

But Labour's 'constructive ambiguity' has run out of road.

You cannot compromise with a political project that history teaches us is designed to divide working people.

That whips up fear and prejudice against Muslims and migrants to keep all working-class people down.

That is not only prepared to risk economic chaos but thrives on it.

That wraps itself in the Union Jack but exists to serve the interests of a global wealthy elite.

Let me be clear. I am not saying that everyone who voted Brexit is a signed-up member of the Farage fan club. But I am saying that the likes of Farage and Steve Bannon are in the driving seat.

The Conservative Party may have rolled over and become their playthings.

But the duty of the labour movement is to stand up and fight.

Because, as I found at the ETUC Congress in Vienna last week, whatever passport we hold, workers will always have more in common with each other than we will

ever have with the likes of Boris Johnson, Michael Gove and Nigel Farage.

And what is clear is that while the Prime Minister may change, the maths in Parliament doesn't.

We are due to leave the EU exactly five months from today.

As any middle ground hollows out, the choice increasingly becomes no deal or no Brexit.

Any new PM prepared to risk the country's future with no deal risks a no confidence vote.

That leaves the new prime minister with two choices: a second referendum or a snap election.

The deadline is tight and patience on the other side of the table is wearing thin.

But in the ETUC's regular meetings, M Barnier has been consistent in saying that a general election or a second referendum could be grounds for an extension - as could a significant shift towards a Norway Plus style deal.

For working people, the stakes are sky high. We've seen that at Honda, Nissan, British Steel and retail companies too many to mention.

What happens in the coming weeks and months will shape our jobs, living standards and public services for a generation.

But this is not just about economic prosperity; it's also about what kind of society we become.

Since that referendum, we've seen a big spike in racism, nationalism, hate crime and violence from the far right.

Modern Britain is more divided than ever before: by wealth, opportunity, region, class and age. And now, of course, by leave and remain.

Two weeks ago, the IFS warned the UK is at risk of extreme inequalities of wealth, pay and health.

With devastating consequences not just for our economy, but our democracy.

And the poorest driven to what the author, Nobel laureate Angus Deaton, describes as "deaths of despair".

Just last Wednesday, the UN rapporteur on extreme poverty compared Conservative welfare policies to the creation of nineteenth-century workhouses.

And accused ministers of being guilty of the “systemic immiseration of a significant part of the British population”.

Last month I spoke at an event just down the road in Hartlepool.

A solid working-class, Labour town, it’s been used as a laboratory for Universal Credit.

And it voted 70 per cent to leave the EU.

Making it one of the most pro-Brexit places in the country.

Frankly it wasn’t difficult to see why.

First Margaret Thatcher's economic vandalism destroyed traditional industries and skilled jobs.

Then workers forced to compete for low-paid jobs on zero hours contracts.

And then, after years of austerity and welfare cuts, David Cameron called that referendum.

Many people I speak to who voted Leave know migrants aren't to blame for low pay. Greedy bosses are. They agree bringing back the rate for the job would ease worries about undercutting and immigration. But they've lost faith in the government to do that.

From Hartlepool to communities right across the country, it was the same story.

When asked to give their verdict on the status quo, millions of people gave the establishment a traditional two-fingered salute.

Not such much a judgement on Brussels, as on Westminster itself.

So I believe we will never resolve Brexit without tackling the root causes of people's concerns.

The TUC's priorities are simple: Brexit; tackling the Far Right and a new deal for workers.

On Brexit, we've always said that any deal must meet our tests: defending jobs, a level playing field on workers' rights and peace in Northern Ireland.

We argued that the only realistic way we could see of achieving that outside of the EU was being inside the single market and customs union.

And that, whichever way we voted in that referendum three years ago, we need a deal for working people.

By the time Mrs May finally got around to seeking to build a national consensus with Labour, it was too little, too late.

Even during the talks, there was precious little movement from her side.

There probably would have been the numbers in Parliament to support a deal crafted around Labour's position.

But Mrs May couldn't countenance that. She would have had to be prepared to split her own party.

The TUC has also always said we believe that the British people should have the final say – either in a second vote or a general election.

Because we're trade unionists. When we negotiate deals, we go back to our members for a ballot.

And another thing: when trade unionists negotiate terms and conditions, warm words are not enough. We demand guarantees.

When I met Mrs May, she effectively asked me to trust her on workers' rights.

This from the government that introduced employment tribunal fees; refuses to ban zero hours; and tried to clobber us with its Trade Union Act.

And we knew Mrs May's promises were worthless because it was only a matter of time before her own party showed her the door.

And that those vying to replace Mrs May are no more friends of working people than she is.

Boris Johnson and Michael Gove are on public record as believing that Brexit is a great opportunity to rip up workers' rights.

Starting with safe limits on long working hours and equal rights for agency workers.

Dominic Raab believes that British workers are among the worst idlers in the world.

And Sajid Javid? Well, let's just say, as the sister of a former miner, I wouldn't trust anyone who proudly adorns his office wall with a poster of Margaret Thatcher.

It was because of what happened in the 1980s that British unions pooled our power with trade unionists across Europe. With the help of Julian and fair minded MEPs – we fought hard to win that safety net of rights as a condition of Single Market membership.

Maternity rights. Equal pay for work of equal value. Paid holidays. TUPE. Collective consultation rights on redundancy.

And we will not sell out the next generation by letting the Tories take them away from us.

Domestic legislation on workers' rights just isn't good enough.

It could be ripped up by any future government – or any future prime minister.

Amidst such huge political volatility, and with the Brexit outcome simply too difficult to call, the trade union movement will continue to do what we've always done.

And that's fight for decency and dignity for workers.

Because whatever happens with Brexit, workers need change.

A decisive break from the free-market fundamentalism that has enriched too few and failed far too many.

And a radical agenda to redistribute power, as well as wealth and opportunity in modern Britain.

So we're stepping up our campaign for great jobs and higher wages.

For a bold industrial strategy to create those good, skilled jobs in the regions that need them most.

For investment in our NHS, schools and other public services.

And for stronger rights for working people and their unions.

The right to bargain. To organise. To a democratic voice at work. And the repeal of that vindictive, anti-democratic, anti-trade union law.

Above all, our New Deal demands that working-class communities in held-back Britain get a fair chance.

Not just for those in towns failed by austerity, globalisation and political neglect.

Including people in Scunthorpe now facing grave uncertainty after the collapse of British Steel, with many thousands of jobs at risk in the plant and down the supply chain.

But those people in our great metropolitan cities who also face low pay, insecure work and expensive housing.

Think about the reality here in Newcastle.

More people rent their homes from social landlords than virtually anywhere else in the country.

Young people saddled with wage discrimination and a lifetime of student debt.

And in the city's most deprived neighbourhoods, life expectancy for men is 14 years lower than in the richest suburbs.

Yet the local Labour council has been hit by almost a decade of austerity.

Meaning civic leaders have had to do more, with less, for longer.

Faced with impossible choices about priorities.

And in many of Newcastle's communities, the strain is showing.

We know that this region has the highest number of young people with far-right sympathies.

That it accounts for one in five far right referrals to the government's Prevent scheme.

That groups like National Action and Pegida keep trying to organise here.

The choice is clear.

Either we win our vision of future.

Or we allow a chance for the far right to win theirs.

As Julian wrote shortly before his death: “In the wreckage that is Brexit, I believe that British Europeans must now organise and campaign”.

And he was right: we’ve got to fight for our future.

Fairer, more equal, more just – firmly rooted in European social democracy.

Not just winning the political battle of ideas.

But inspiring working people to join the campaign for change.

Decent jobs and security.

A more compassionate society.

The right to a voice and the final say.

The right to choose a better Britain, still at the heart of Europe.

And that's got to be an ideal worth fighting for.