



# **GERMINAL**

**Brussels Labour: International  
Branch of the British Labour Party**

**February 2019**



# January Branch Meeting



Our January meeting was a joint meeting with the GMB Brussels Branch to talk about British workers post-Brexit, and, more broadly, workers' rights in the EU.

We were lucky to be joined by Dave Clements, who sits on the GMB Brexit working group for the southern region, and Andy Newman, branch secretary of Wiltshire and Swindon GMB and Labour parliamentary candidate for Chippenham.

The speakers shared their experience of working with the ETUC on workers' rights, as well as their views on the political situation in the UK, including how voters feel towards a public vote.

For Brussels Labour, it was heartening to hear GMB's backing for a final say on the Withdrawal Agreement, particularly as we creep ever closer to the cliff-edge of March 29th.

Jude Kirton-Darling, MEP for the North East of England, also addressed the meeting. Before becoming an MEP, Jude was a Confederal Secretary of the ETUC, and she is currently working to strengthen links between trade unions and the European Parliamentary Labour Party. Jude gave us insight into the work she's been doing, and offered her own thoughts about a People's Vote, the Withdrawal Agreement, and where we go from here.

After hearing from the speakers, we held a question and answer session. Many members were eager to hear more about the prospect of a People's Vote, but we also discussed other topics. This included the impact of the UK leaving the EU on different policies; in some areas, Brexit may well be seen as an opportunity for the EU to push forward in areas where UK reluctance has hindered progress.

We also considered what other, more palatable deals could be an option to the UK, and in doing so were reminded that even if the 'Norway option' was supported by the UK, it would not necessarily be supported by Norway. The conclusion from this, of course, is that the deal we have now is the best that we can get.

## People's Vote Action



On Thursday 7th February, members of Brussels Labour joined with the People's Vote campaign to call on Theresa May to rule out a blindfold Brexit and extend Article 50.

The action was organised to coincide with May's visit to Brussels after the House of Commons called on her to renegotiate the Irish backstop (despite the EU's insistence they will not change their position).

In any case, backstop or not, it's clear at the very least we need to extend Article 50 to avoid the cliff edge of March 29th.

# FEPS-Fabians New Year Conference



On the 19th January the Fabians Society joined with FEPS to host their annual New Year Conference.

This year there was a strong focus on Brexit and its implications for the future of the left in the UK and Europe. Keynote speakers included Sir Keir Starmer, Tom Watson and Emily Thornberry, all of whom reiterated Labour's conference motion to back a People's Vote if we cannot secure a general election, much to the joy of the audience.

In the morning plenary session, 'The future of the left in the UK and Europe', attendees heard from Ania Skryzpek from FEPS, Stella Creasy MP, Richard Corbett MEP, and Stephen Bush, Political Editor at the New Statesman. The consensus among all the speakers was that we need to be offering something more positive to voters rather than continuing to highlight the failings of our opponents and complaining about the current situation. Stella Creasy made a strong case for citizens' assemblies not only as a way of breaking the deadlock on Brexit but also as a solution to other divisive topics facing society.

In the afternoon, Wes Streeting MP, Mary Honeyball MEP, Anand Menon, Director of UK in a changing Europe, and Sophia Gaston from the Henry Jackson Society spoke on a panel concerning the rise of European popular nationalism. This is a phenomenon that, rather than reaching its peak at the 2014 European elections, has continued to grow and we now face EU elections like no other.

The panellists discussed the reasons for the rise in popular nationalism, including the financial crisis, austerity, and the 'hollowing out of towns and cities'. These topics were expanded by Emily Thornberry in her keynote speech, as she defined the similarities between now and the 1930s; economic malaise, societal division through the demonization of minority groups, rejection of the status quo, a belief that violence is not only acceptable but a default way to resolve disputes, and a resurgence of those willing to exploit all these factors.

Nevertheless, the panellists and Thornberry offered some comfort to attendees as they considered way to counter this rise. One suggestion was to bring decision-making closer to the people, reflecting the suggestion by Stella Creasy to initiate citizens assemblies. Panellists also suggested the need for a new socio-economic settlement, which was echoed in Thornberry's statement that as populists divide and conquer, we will build a society and an economy that works for all.

Of course, discussions did go beyond Brexit; other panels included protecting policing and defending communities, bridging the geographic, cultural and generational divide and mental health in the workplace. Meanwhile, Tom Watson, another keynote speaker, addressed the pressing issue of the fourth industrial revolution, and the decline in civil liberties and political rights around the world.

Overall, this was a great event and I thoroughly recommend Brussels Labour members to keep an eye out for the next Fabians conference.



# PES Congress



Last weekend socialists from across Europe gathered in Madrid for the PES Election Congress. Held shortly after Prime Minister of Spain Pedro Sanchez called a snap general election, there was an air of anticipation not just in the conference, but all around the city.

The first day was filled with speeches on different areas of the manifesto. It was great to be able to hear from a range of politicians, although some participants lamented that they did not have an opportunity to share their views or ask questions. Of course, this varied

by nationality, and it was interesting to see how this reflected differences in how national conferences are run.

On the second day, there were some morning panels, including one on going from hashtags to activism, where delegates heard from campaigners including Zua Mendes, creator of feminist organisation Towanda Rebels, Merijn Tinga, who is fighting plastic waste, and Andres Conde, CEO of Save the Children in Spain. One highlight for many at the conference was the debate on Europe at a local level, featuring Robert Biedron, former mayor of Słupsk, LGBTI activist, and leader of a new Polish political party, *Wiosna* (Spring), who are on track to win 6 seats in May's elections.

The Congress ended on a high note, with the adoption of the manifesto and two fantastic closing speeches from our official Common Candidate, Frans Timmermans, and the current, and hopefully future, Prime Minister of Spain, Pedro Sanchez.

## Brexit: What's going on and what can we do?

At the time of publication there are 29 days until Brexit. Yet we don't know much more than we did two years ago, when Theresa May triggered Article 50.

Theresa May has negotiated a deal but it is one so bad that not even those responsible for negotiating it could support it. May continues to kick the can down the road in hope that fear of no deal will mean her deal passes.

After May's deal was rejected in January, Labour tabled a motion of no confidence, but this was voted down, leaving both parties in a strange stale mate. However, true to the motion passed at Conference, Labour is planning to either table or support an amendment calling for a public vote. Both Emily Thornberry and Keir Starmer have said Remain should be an option on the ballot paper.

Of course, parliamentary arithmetic does not favour a People's Vote at present, so we urge you all to write to MPs in the UK asking them to back the amendment, and if you can, join us on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March to call for a final say.

# Defending a Public Vote

As soon as Labour announced that it would be tabling an amendment calling for a People's Vote, and that there should be the option to Remain, many people took to Twitter to critique this decision.

Here a few of their arguments, and a few responses

## 1. Leave would win a second referendum

This isn't an argument against having another vote, and it's a very defeatist approach. Imagine saying this about a general election!

## 2. A pro-European said something to annoy me on Twitter

Again, imagine saying this about a general election. If one Labour voter or member made a statement you disagree you wouldn't then go and support the Conservatives.

## 3. The Remain campaign was rubbish last time

This isn't an argument against another vote. If you think the first campaign was bad, and you want to Remain, tell people what can be done better.

## 4. It's a betrayal of the will of the people

A public vote would allow us act on what the will of the people is today, not what it was over two and a half years ago. Moreover, there are over 1.4 million young people who are now eligible to vote and deserve a say in their future.

## 5. Brexit isn't about party politics

The whole reason there was a referendum was because of party politics, or, more specifically, the internal politics of the Tory Party. It has remained so ever since as Theresa May continues to placate various factions of the party rather than focus on what's good for the country.

## 6. Labour will lose millions of leave voters

This is impossible to prove, especially given that MPs such as Geraint Davies, who came out in favour of a public vote before the 2017 general election, increased his 2015 majority by over 7,000 votes. Moreover, it ignores the millions of Remain voters across the country.

## 7. It's not democratic

An investigation by the Electoral Commission showed that Vote Leave broke electoral, so it's arguable the 2016 referendum was the undemocratic one.

# GMB Brussels Branch–The Future

*Alice Reynolds, Branch President*



*GMB Southern Region Regional Committee with Alice of GMB Brussels Branch and Theresa Griffin MEP*

Employed, but very precarious... that is what it feels like for our members in Belgium. Some of us have already moved on, some are holding on until the end, and for a lot of us the future is unclear. Meanwhile, what started as an angry remain for the GMB in 2016 has transformed into a loud call for a People's Vote in 2018.

Tim Roache, the general secretary of the GMB, is a strong advocate of a People's Vote and he is strengthened by the members that stand with him. We are those members. That is why Paul Maloney came to visit us recently, to see how the mainland Europe branch are faring.

To be frank, we are not faring exceedingly well. Brexit is not a joke anymore. It may feel far off for people watching the Tory party play with our future from the UK, but in Brussels there is an increasing atmosphere of dread, dismay and disenchantment. That is why it was a privilege to be part of the last Brussels Labour meeting with leading members of GMB on Brexit from Southern Region speaking and presenting both sides of the argument. Hopefully, they took our concerns back with them.

Unfortunately, the future is not clear for our branch. We will lose many members from the Parliament on 29th March and that will dramatically change the make-up of the branch and committee. The decision to leave the EU will also affect our other members from across Brussels, but do not forget that our workplace organisers are still here to give advice and help. Alternatively, Unionline - the trade union law firm owned by GMB - are always there to pick up the phone as well to help you or our workplace organisers.

Over the coming weeks we will be holding several branch meetings and we encourage members and non-members to attend. If you are thinking about joining our branch, do not let the Brexit chaos put you off. The more of us there are in the union, the stronger we are, and I suspect we will be drawing on all our strengths in the coming weeks.

If you need to get in touch with the GMB Brussels Branch, you can reach us by email at [peter.roberts@gmbactivist.org.uk](mailto:peter.roberts@gmbactivist.org.uk) or [alicereynolds01@gmail.com](mailto:alicereynolds01@gmail.com)

# Executive Committee: Brussels Labour

David Earnshaw – Chair

Jo Wood

Imogen Tyreman – Vice-Chair

Tom Fillis

Rosemary Hindle – Secretary

Simon Budden

Jos Gallacher —Treasurer

Isobel Findlay

Keir Fitch

Charlotte Billingham

## Upcoming Events

20<sup>th</sup> March- AGM with Wajid Khan MEP

23<sup>rd</sup> March- People's Vote March, London. Please get in touch if you are planning to attend

## Membership payments

To confirm your membership of Brussels Labour as well as to the Labour Party, you need to pay a small additional subscription.

Unlike constituency Labour parties in the UK, Brussels Labour is entirely self-funding, so to help support our activities members are asked to pay an annual fee of 25 euro (waged) or 5 euro (unwaged/stagiaires).

It's easy to forget if you've paid or not—if you are unsure get in contact with us at [membership@brusselslabour.eu](mailto:membership@brusselslabour.eu)

## Online

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