

## Peace is an Ecosocialist Issue: Some Experiences from Local UK Politics and Suggestions for Global Action

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It is difficult to comprehend why the world should be in a state of conflict more than 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and hard not to conclude that armed conflict is intrinsic to capitalism. There is a problem with the post-war settlement, forged at Potsdam and Yalta, yet it is the only settlement that we have. The United Nations is hardly succeeding, yet we cannot admit its failures without suggesting that we dissolve the community of nations and elect another one. It seems, as Noam Chomsky has long pointed out, that the USA in particular needs to have a bogeyman; if not communism then resurgent Islam.

The ecosocialist implications of permanent warfare are almost too simple to state in an academic journal.

- War can be caused by environmental damage. The Syrian conflict seems to have been exacerbated by the drought of 2007 to 2010. The uprising started in March 2011.
- War is an environmental disaster in its own right.
- War divides people when they should be united, and is an obstacle to building the necessary counter-hegemony for a transition to socialism and to a low-carbon economy.

There is also the question of the armaments industry itself, a lucrative, though not essential, component of the industrial base of some capitalist states.

I would like to argue that building a strong international peace movement is an important task for the ecosocialist movement, even as it is building up its own strength. It brings out internal contradictions for ecosocialism. We have often repeated the mantra “think global, act local”. This is no longer good enough. We need to start thinking and acting at all geographical scales from the individual and household to the planet and indeed to keep an eye on what is being planned for outer space. I am trying to reflect on these questions from some experiences of political activity in my hometown, Brighton & Hove on the south coast of England. It’s in the nature of the local to be particular. Sometimes we can generalise from it, sometimes not. Perhaps these experiences can inspire reflection, even in very different parts of the world, about how we construct a global peace movement.

I should first note that Brighton (and neighbouring Hove) is not a typical part of Britain. It’s a part of the relatively affluent, and increasingly unaffordable, South East region, a seaside resort with two universities, with a labour market very much affected by its proximity to London. It also has outlying housing estates that count among the most deprived areas in the region. The political life is atypical too. The People’s Republic of Brighton & Hove was proclaimed after the May 2015 elections in the United Kingdom. (People’s Republic of Brighton and Hove) It has an active Facebook page and has issued passports and attractive Tao symbol badges in red and green. There is of course something light-hearted about this, but there is also a

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reality to it. It describes itself as “The soon to be independent Republic of Brighton & Hove; An Isle of Sanity in a Sea of Blue!” (People’s Republic of Brighton & Hove) In the United Kingdom the Right-wing Conservative Party uses the blue colour while Labour is the traditional socialist red, even when its policies are of the palest pink. The Green Party is of course green. The city elected a Labour candidate, Peter Kyle in Hove, to the west of the city and the country’s only Green MP, Caroline Lucas, in Brighton Pavilion constituency which covers the city centre and northern suburbs. A Conservative, Simon Kirby, was elected in the third constituency, Brighton Kemptown. This includes the eastern edge of the city, where I live, and outlying suburbs and villages along the coast and into the countryside.

There would almost certainly be more red and more green were it not for the United Kingdom’s deeply flawed voting system. Democracy is impeded by the monarchy, and by the House of Lords, the higher legislative chamber, originally comprised of those whose ancestors had been ennobled through their service as warlords or through patronage. At a snail’s pace the House of Lords has been reformed, until, in one of the ironies that happen from time to time in British politics, the House of Lords in October 2015 rejected welfare cuts that would have particularly hit the “hard working families” that Conservative discourse privileges (Goldman 2015). This led Cameron to promise to curb the powers of the House of Lords. Not to abolish it of course, or even to reform it completely to look more like upper legislative chambers in other Western countries. The House of Lords has very limited powers anyway; it is the voting system for the House of Commons that is the main problem. In each constituency a single candidate is elected, the one with the highest number of votes, whether or not they have an absolute majority. This system has always favoured the large parties. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was a two-party system of Conservatives and Liberals, then from the 1920s Labour and Conservatives alternating in government. Small parties on Left, Right, or Centre find it nearly impossible to break through to victory even in just one area.

Locally, the system meant that in May in my own constituency of Brighton Kemptown, an excellent Green candidate, Davy Jones, was standing against a relatively good Labour candidate, Nancy Platts. There is no way of expressing a preference for both; it is either-or. This split the left vote. If everyone who voted for Davy had instead voted for Nancy she would have been elected – if and only if the right had not also been split. If everyone who voted for the far right anti-European UKIP party had voted for the Conservative, he would still have got in. Small parties like the Greens are passionate supporters of voting reform and proportional representation. Labour views are mixed. Many in Labour still believe that they can win an overall majority and that they are better off without the minor parties.

Constitutional reform is not normally what brings masses of young people out on the streets, but what has changed the whole game is Scotland. In 2014 was the referendum on Scottish independence. It was less the final victory that mattered, but the bringing into the debate of large numbers of young people. It was because of the voting system that a turn to the Left in Scotland delivered victory of the Conservatives in the May 2015 general election. Labour had always been strong in Scotland, but it was Left-leaning voters who went over to the Scottish National Party, allowing Cameron’s Conservatives to win power with the votes of only 24 percent of the electorate. Like elsewhere in Europe, voters have lost confidence in all the

mainstream parties. Caroline Lucas' increased Green majority in Brighton & Hove, despite a voting system weighted against small parties, is part of that rejection. The huge losses for Labour in Scotland, and the corresponding wins for the Scottish National Party, are a rejection of the austerity strategy of the Conservatives and the previous conservative New Labour.

Jeremy Corbyn was elected as leader of the Labour Party in September 2015 not just by the new members, some of whom were able to join for only £3, but also by the established members and by the constituency parties. He was in the lead in all three categories of membership. Despite that clear mandate from his party's membership, it is remarkable that he has hung on to the leadership at all, still more so that he seems to be gaining in support. When the internal election was still going on, right wing MPs in the Labour Party were pointing out that although the membership might elect him (using rules that they had themselves advocated) there was no formal obligation for them to accept the result. In the end they did not dare to reject his appointment. They have preferred attrition, openly briefing against him, and writing articles in the Tory press. During the election and afterwards, there has been a huge increase in membership. Many people who had joined the Green Party rejoined Labour.

In September 2015 my partner and I were lucky enough to get tickets to hear Caroline Lucas formally welcome the Trades Union Congress to Brighton for their annual gathering. With Labour Left stalwart John McDonnell and Greek former finance minister Yanis Varoufakis also on the platform, it was an inspirational event. Later that same evening that we heard that Corbyn had chosen McDonnell as his Chancellor of the Exchequer (finance minister) and effective right-hand man, as well as, for the first time, a majority of women in his Shadow Cabinet team. This is what *Guardian* columnist and co-founder of the Women's Equality Party Suzanne Moore called "brocialism" (a socialism of brothers, a laddish socialism). It hardly felt like that when a woman Green MP, Caroline Lucas, welcomed a Trades Union Congress led by its first female general secretary, Frances O'Grady.

Since Corbyn's election, commentators are asserting that Left voices are just resounding in the "echo-chamber" of Twitter. There may be some truth in that. It is easy to retweet and share posts that one agrees with. However, the possibility of a Corbyn-led Labour victory in 2020 should by no means be written off. The "new politics" of Corbyn's first Question Time worked well. Instead of a two-and-fro childish point scoring, he read out questions from members of the public. This took the wind out of David Cameron's sails. He could no longer make snide points against the Labour leader but had to respond to the questions. The papers hate the idea of the new politics, and constantly accuse Corbynites of hypocritical bullying tactics. The Daily Mail for example (3 December 2015)

Neil Coyle, 36, who is on a 'traitor list' of 66 MPs threatened with deselection by left-wingers, has called in the Met [the London police] after a troll sent him a sinister message with pictures of knives.

This is clearly just a troll of the kind that is sadly prevalent on the Internet, and the MP was quite right to bring in the police. As the Mail goes on to report, Corbyn and his deputy Tom Watson, instructed Labour members not to bully MPs who voted for the war. There is no "traitor list" and not even any threat of deselection. "Deselection" is a bogeyman from the 1970s Left-Right splits in Labour, meaning that local party members should have the right to choose the Labour

candidate in an election for Parliament. Many Labour members say “not in my name” to the war in Syria and would wish to be represented by someone other than a pro-war Blairite. However, some areas will have a chance to reselect their MP, not least because of Tory boundary changes, but others won't. Labour may be saddled with MPs on the right of their party, imposed on localities during the Blair years.

Corbyn is, of course, capable of making mistakes. His appointment of *Guardian* columnist Seumas Milne as his head of communications is disappointing. Milne is an outspoken critic of government but his analysis of international politics is superficial, and he is arguably an apologist for Putin. *Momentum*, the current in Labour established by Jeremy Corbyn supporters to “keep up the momentum” of his election is also being demonised. A Facebook contact of mine, a veteran Trotskyist, worried that most *Momentum* organisers were ‘old, male and pale.’ This made me laugh as our local *Momentum* organiser, is a self-styled loudmouth with a working-class south eastern accent. *Momentum* at least has the possibility of reaching out beyond the staid boundaries of social-democratic Labour Party politics, into the trade union movement and other radical forces. *Momentum* activists recently bothered to come into the university with leaflets encouraging students to register to vote and informing them of the dangers of the Conservative redrawing of election boundaries. The redrawing in Brighton & Hove will give us only two constituencies in the place of three and risks wiping out the ‘People’s Republic’ Green and Labour presence entirely. I talked to one of the Momentum people about whether the Green Party and Labour could work together on Brighton & Hove Council, after Labour regained control of it from the Greens in May 2015. He apologised to me that most of the Labour Councillors were on the Right of the party. I pointed out that the Green councillors were on the Right of their party too. It is not surprising that many of the young people who are getting more interested in politics still reject the mainstream parties, even the Greens.

While in England and Wales the Green Party is not only a voice on the Left but has been at times what seems like the only voice on the Left, there are specifically ecological issues that need addressing, especially after an underwhelming COP 21 agreement that may not be implemented anyway. We will know when governments are serious about opposing climate change when they start elaborating plans to discourage aviation. In Britain, the idea is still promulgated that the London economy is dependent on more flight capacity. There was a transition in the 1990s when the normal development strategies for a capital city were thrown out of the window. No longer was the desirable pattern head offices, light manufacturing, arts and culture etc. Economists took not only Conservative but also Labour politicians aside, and informed them that London was entirely dependent on financial services. Nothing else counted at all. The only thing that mattered was to keep buttering up the City financiers and persuade them to stay in London rather than going off to Frankfurt. London, as well as being since the 16<sup>th</sup> century a major financial capital, is also in the fortunate position of having a time zone midway between the eastern USA and eastern Asia. The financial markets, with three bases, can keep going through 24 hours. But Frankfurt is in a similar position.

Cameron initially promised his would be the “greenest government ever”. That is a hollow joke now. His party is hell-bent on fracking, even under national parks, and promotes airport expansion at the very moment when the country is suffering from climate-change

induced floods. Towns and cities in northern England were flooded in December, causing many people to be homeless over Christmas. The BBC and the Met Office are explicitly blaming climate change for the floods. A recent documentary showed how global warming causes the jet stream to weaken and meander, thus making British weather less predictable, causing winters to be particularly cold, or on the other hand, mild. On the south coast it often means the high winds that have twice dislodged solar panels from our roof.

The relatively left-wing 'People's Republic' nature of Brighton & Hove goes back some decades. In 2003 with the start of the war in Iraq, we protestors stopped the city for an entire day. The next day the local newspaper had a front cover photo of my partner and our then 11 year-old daughter, among others, sitting down in the road in front of a Number 22 bus, the bus that on a normal day we would have caught home from a shopping trip. Many school children came out on strike that day and it was particularly memorable seeing a contingent of teenagers arrive in their school uniforms, from a demonised school on a demonised council estate (housing project). Some people, presumably school children, that afternoon took down the United States flag from the American Express office building.

That protest was organised by Sussex Action for Peace, a group that predated the national Stop the War Coalition. It had many anarchists in membership, in the leadership in fact, prone to taking groups of people off around the city to march on destinations that seemed random until you learned of their connection with imperialism or war. For a long time these tireless activists kept up regular noisy protests outside an armaments factory on an industrial estate near the university campus where I work. That factory is EDO-MBM, now owned by the US corporation ITT Exelis. Students and staff from the university joined in the protests. The arms firm tried to set up a cordon around their factory, so that any member of the campaign could be arrested when going within hundreds of metres. This would have included part of the university campus. I made a legal statement that I was part of the campaign and did not wish to be prevented moving freely around my own workplace. The court refused the application for the cordon. Then in 2010 activists who had caused damage to the factory estimated at a value of £180,000 were acquitted by a court that accepted the argument that they had been trying to prevent war crimes in Gaza.

We set up a satellite peace group at the university where I work, involving both staff and students, and I acted as co-ordinator. We campaigned for the release of Omar Deghayes, a Guantanamo detainee. He had come to live in Saltdean, a coastal village near Brighton, as a child when his parents were refugees from the Gadaffi regime. He was captured by bounty hunters while visiting Pakistan, sold to the American forces in Afghanistan, and taken to the Baghram air base and then to Guantanamo Bay, where he was held until his release without charge in 2007. In Guantanamo, he suffered multiple types of torture and was blinded in one eye. (Center for the Study of Human Rights in the Americas 2007) All the Sussex Members of Parliament, Conservatives included, joined in the campaign to free him.

Our university peace group held meetings to help educate both staff and students of the wider causes and consequences of war. I remember inviting Walt Sheasby, a veteran ecosocialist, to come and speak to us about the then new topic of Peak Oil. He was in Britain researching

Karl Marx's interest in the natural environment. He visited the Brighton Sealife Centre, just as Marx himself had when it was one of the world's first aquariums, and wrote up the results of his investigations in an article in *Capitalism Nature Socialism*. A young student of Environmental Science from the university had done some volunteer work in Laos. Was that what Walt meant by socialism? "No!" Walt slapped him down. "That is a Stalinist regime. It is the opposite of socialism." The student continued to mutter about the slower pace of life and lack of consumerism in Laos. People started taking notes. It seemed that the apolitical student life of the 1980s and 1990s was finally coming to an end, although many of the tensions on the Left were unresolved, and remain unresolved today.

The campaign against the massive increase in university fees engaged many students, both within Brighton and in contingents going up to London for national demonstrations. A group of art students from Brighton perplexed the armed police outside Parliament by leaping up and down singing "Cameron's got a shiny face. It's so shiny." The staff trade union brought its banner with the slogan "Knowledge is Power" to those demonstrations. As a union – I am currently branch chair – we represented staff in bread and butter issues like pay, but also organised against casualization and precarity in academic employment, and demanded 'Free Education.'

So, in December 2015, six assorted activists sat upstairs in a pub discussing how we could mobilise against the bombing of Syria. We had decided to call an action on the day of the crucial vote in Parliament expected in the next two or three days. The last question was important but we had to be careful. We needed to have a consensus on what we were calling the revived group. Sussex Action for Peace had been very visible during the campaign against the war in Iraq, but we reformed as Stop the War, as it linked us in to the national coalition. That evening I created the Facebook page.

Using social media it was relatively easy to get a flashmob together. Contacts in the trade union movement really helped as well. We assembled on a December evening, mild for the season but still chilly when you were standing around. A couple of us were interviewed on our mobile phones by a local radio reporter. Enough people turned up to make a march through town feasible. We went to the offices of the Hove Labour MP, Peter Kyle, who we thought would support the bombing. He wasn't there, of course, he was in Parliament, but we stood outside the offices and chanted. He definitely knew that there were people in the city who voted for him who wanted him to oppose the bombing. That evening, Peter Kyle was indeed one of those Labour MPs who voted with the Tories. The Conservative Simon Kirby not only voted with his own party, but was one of their "whips" pushing Tory MPs to vote for the government's policy.

Peter Kyle is an enthusiastic user of social media. He had had some angry comments on his Facebook page about his pro-war vote but not from anyone associated with Stop the War Brighton & Hove. He agreed to meet us. I crossed the city by bus in unseasonably warm early morning sunshine. We introduced ourselves: someone from the Quakers, a local trade union leader who is also a Green Party member, myself, a couple others from the group, and someone who had just read the invitation on our Facebook page. Mr Kyle was very polite. He talked a lot

about how difficult his decision had been. He talked about how gay people are being thrown off buildings in ISIS-controlled areas. (He is gay himself, and Brighton & Hove has many LGBT voters.) We came away wondering if he was sorer for himself, shouldering all the burdens that come with being an MP, than sorry for Syrians. He was an aid worker in Bosnia and seemed to be projecting that experience onto the Syrian conflict. David Cameron had deliberately played on that fact, and had invited him to speak to generals – that seemed to have overawed him and he seemed excited by the potential of the technology they had told him about and reassured by their promises that civilian casualties could be avoided. Worryingly, he had a lot of confidence in the ability of talks to solve things. It seemed to us that having Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Russia “around the table” did not necessarily mean a positive outcome for Syrians. Kyle wrote on his Facebook page:

So what has been proposed? Basically it is an extension of our current operations in Iraq into Syria because there is no longer a boarder [sic] between them it is one Daesh held territory. Britain has been asked by the other allies to provide use of specialist equipment that only we have in order to limit the cost in civilian lives.

He also said that the vast majority of Syrian refugees had come from Daesh-held territory. That surely depends on when you count from. Before ISIS/Daesh even existed, Assad was using chemical weapons on his own population, and David Cameron cited that as a reason to bomb Assad. Bombing kills civilians. The generals told Peter Kyle that Britain has miraculous high tech equipment that even the Americans don't have, that will ensure that no civilians are ever expended as collateral damage. Hurrah for Britain! A Britain that seems not to have managed to market its military equipment in the USA, while an American company can manufacture in our own city. We are keeping up the pressure on Peter Kyle, holding stalls in the town centres of Brighton and of Hove, with petitions to all three of the local Members of Parliament.

It was only Caroline Lucas, though we had invited all three MPs, who agreed to come and speak to our public meeting “Stop Bombing Syria”, held in January 2016 at the Friends' Meeting House. We had some other speakers too. John Newsinger is author of *The Blood Never Dried: A People's History of the British Empire*. Phil Clarke is in the national leadership of the main schoolteachers' union and also chairs the local Trade Union Congress. And we had a Syrian speaker: Abdulaziz Almashi, co-founder of the Syrian Solidarity Movement. We were put in touch with Abdulaziz by someone who challenged us as we were standing in the town centre handing out leaflets. “Why would Stop the War not have Syrian speakers?” We were vaguely aware that there had been an issue about Syrians being allowed to speak at Stop the War events, but because the mainstream press is trying to portray Stop the War as mindless extremist, and the left-wing press was vague on what had happened, no-one was sure exactly what the problem was. It didn't seem necessary to let these national-level disagreements interfere with a local meeting. In the end Abdulaziz spoke very clearly against the bombing. The Syrian Solidarity Movement has in the past advocated a “no fly zone”, which many in the peace movement regarded as an invitation to NATO to establish their military supremacy over the country, as happened in Libya. It is inevitable that there will be disagreements. There is a civil war in Syria, after all, as well as a proxy war. This is precisely why the asymmetric war strategy pursued by the Western powers is so dangerous and cruel.

Caroline Lucas explained at our public meeting why she had decided to step down as a patron of Stop the War. There had been issues on which she could not fully agree with the national policy, but she remained committed to its main aims. She was very upset that her stepping down was used in the press to portray Stop the War as an extremist organisation. This is all part of the attempt by the press to destroy Jeremy Corbyn.

The anti-war movement in Brighton & Hove, as everywhere, is tied in to the refugee question. The question tends to split the Labour Party Left to Right, with those most concerned about working-class communities arguing that Labour should have more about domestic policy. The “jungle” camp in Calais has been extensively shown on British television. This is where refugees camp out, with the hope of hitching a ride in a truck or on a train taking them through the Channel Tunnel to Britain. When it is obvious that some people there are absolutely desperate to get into Britain, TV viewers have been told that it is because of our relatively generous benefits system. The pro-austerity Tories then announce ever more stringent measures to restrict benefits to immigrants. This ignores other factors. For one thing the asylum seekers, even having got as far as France, may not be permitted to stay there, or may not be certain that they will. France, for example, does not so easily recognise the asylum claims of people in danger because of their LGBT status. Another factor is many of the refugees already speak English. Most important of all, there is the fact that the labour market in Britain has been deregulated to the extent that people can simply disappear. When there was a big fanfare about letting in the Bulgarians and Romanians, the *Guardian* pointed out that they were already in Britain, were working as supposedly self-employed taxi drivers and construction industry workers. British working-class people are portrayed as lazy because they do not take up work for example picking and packing fruit and vegetables, but those jobs are done by gangs from Eastern or Southern Europe, who can be crowded by farmers and gang-masters into caravans (trailers) and paid much less than the national minimum wage.

Issues like this deregulation, amounting to “social dumping” can only be resolved at European level. The proposed “Brexit”, or British exit from the European Union will be tested some time in 2016 or 2017. David Cameron is going to find it difficult to unite his own party. Meanwhile, the Left has seen victory then disappointment in Greece, and the extent to which Greece has been dependent on Germany has been made clear. Now the Left has made electoral gains in both Portugal and Spain. While the Left has shown it can get mass support in southern Europe, the far right is on the march not just in Eastern Europe but now also in France and Germany. In Britain, most socialists and Greens will probably vote to stay in a European Union where it is still possible to talk of the “European social model”, a social-democratic welfarism that has brought advances for working people, and the enshrinement of human rights in UK law. However, the institutions of the European Union are fundamentally elitist and undemocratic, and there is little shared vision of what a democratic and egalitarian Europe would look like. Greens and Socialists are in different blocs in the European Parliament:

- Social democrats including the United Kingdom Labour Party are in the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats.
- The main Green parties, with some regionalist parties, are in The Greens – European Free Alliance



- Then there is The European United Left – Nordic Green Left

All together these represent less than 40 percent of the members of the European Parliament, with the rest made up of Centre, Right and Far-Right parties. Ecosocialists are uniquely placed to bring these groups together in a vision for Europe that deepens democracy, respects local difference and prepares for transition to a workable postcapitalist and post-consumerist ecosystem.

In Europe, as in North America and elsewhere in the world, we seem to be reaching a socialism-or-barbarism crisis. If the model of capitalism called “Fordism” lasted in the richer countries until about 1968 to 1972 (Lipietz), after that Western transnational corporations then followed an outsourcing model, until not only most manufacturing but a great deal of back office functions have been transferred to “developing countries”. These countries are now industrialising and urbanising at a phenomenal rate, and some are themselves outsourcing to countries where labour is even cheaper. That model of capitalism collapsed in 2008, and, with a slowdown in growth in China, there still seems to be no way out of the crisis. A global economic meltdown is possible.

Paul Mason’s recent book *Postcapitalism* proposed that capitalism is incompatible with the learning society. It is true that the information technology revolution seems to be unstoppable. 30 million people in Vietnam of a population of 90 million are regular Facebook users, most commonly on mobile devices. (*Tuoi Tre News* 17 June 2015) At the time of writing, the newspapers are full of dire predictions of economic crash. But if capitalism is unworkable, that does not guarantee that a viable alternative will emerge to replace it. We have to build that alternative, which that is something that Mason, despite his references to Marx’s and falling rates of profit, leaves unsaid.

One thing we sorely are lacking is a global peace movement. There are local groups like the one in Brighton & Hove; there are national organisations, like the Stop the War Coalition in the UK, and older ones like the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, but no organisation that speaks out for peace with a single voice around the world. However effective we are locally, that is not enough to bring about international co-operation.

Just after the Paris attacks I started a Facebook group Global Action for Peace. It is still only a Facebook group, now has members from a dozen or more countries. In the group I proposed a five-point International Peace Charter:

- The United Nations Security Council must set a target date for the end of armed conflict
- Ban aerial bombardment alongside chemical and biological weapons
- The United Nations must facilitate strategic arms limitation talks, involving all the nuclear powers, until complete nuclear disarmament is achieved
- Waging proxy war to be illegal under international law
- The United Nations to develop a procedure under which regions may request secession

If peace is an ecosocialist issue, we need all to work together at a global as well as a local level to achieve these aims. It may well be that they cannot be achieved under capitalism. But who says that capitalism needs to continue, anyway?

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